

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

# The Contradictions of Postmodernism

a feminist critique of the postmodern

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# Introduction

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. . . every postmodern discourse on difference involves a discourse on *sexual* difference, no matter how allegorical, no matter how much this discourse remains below the surface as part of the discourse's 'political unconscious'.

E Ann Kaplan, *Postmodernism and its Discontents*<sup>1</sup>

Ever since Irving Howe's pronouncement in 1959, that with the cessation of modernism, it had become necessary to speak of postmodernist literature, the weight of literary critical history has compressed the canon of postmodernist writers into a mere handful, namely John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, Steve Katz, Thomas Pynchon, Ron Sukenick and Raymond Federman, thereby shedding the richness and diversity offered by other writers and their postmodernist fiction. The precise grouping of postmodernist writers does vary a little depending on a particular critic's purpose, in that one critic discussing postmodernism in the United States may exclude Federman, but include Richard Brautigan. Another critic, examining Anglo-American postmodernist authors may add John Fowles and Alisdair Gray to the canon. Whilst yet another might include Vladimir Nabokov, Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, in exploring the international nature of postmodernism.

However, this type of approach is not the only one from which postmodernist literature can be analysed. Other standpoints which operate from different perspectives will offer additional dimensions to conceptualisations of postmodernism. The critical analysis of postmodernist



fiction by women writers is one dimension in particular which has been relatively neglected throughout the evolving literary history of postmodernism. Women writers such as Brigid Brophy, Muriel Spark, Christine Brooke-Rose, Joyce Carol Oates, Angela Carter, Maggie Gee, Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison, Kathy Acker, Christa Wolf, Joanna Russ and Marilynne Robinson amongst many others have produced fictional texts which have yet to be given the attention they merit in the context of debates about the nature of postmodernism. Despite three decades of debate, the majority of critics have disregarded the fictional and theoretical work of women writers and feminist scholars in their discussions of postmodernism, thus constructing arguments about the nature of postmodernist literature from a particularly narrow arena.

A somewhat different interpretation of postmodernism becomes available when women writers are not excluded from the debate. In their novels and short stories, authors such as Brigid Brophy, Christine Brooke-Rose, Angela Carter, Joyce Carol Oates and Muriel Spark write at an oblique angle to the standard reading of postmodernism as predominantly nihilistic or merely fatuous games-playing. Their work suggests a strategic engagement with social, political and literary issues, which they achieve without retreating into realism or taking on male postmodernist fictional models. The aim of this thesis is to analyse the strategies and techniques of

postmodernist fiction by contemporary Anglo-American women writers thereby opening out the boundaries of critical discussion of postmodernist literature and making it more receptive to writers considered marginal.

The concept of postmodernism has featured in literary criticism for over thirty years, yet a consensus as to its precise definition and its significance has still to be reached. The stance taken in such works as Frank Kermode's *Continuities* (1968), Gerald Graff's *Literature Against Itself* (1979), and Charles Newman's *The Post-Modern Aura* (1985) can be seen as representing a rejection of the significance of postmodernist literature, viewing postmodernism merely as a continuation of trends inherent in modernism and romanticism. Whereas works such as Christopher Butler's *After the Wake* (1980), Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), Larry McCaffery's *Postmodern Fiction* (1986), and Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) are based on a view which not only identifies postmodernism as a period concept, in that postmodernist literature emerged after the 1950s, but also seeks to establish models which distinguish postmodernist literary techniques from those of modernism.

As the term has been used gradually to cover developments in the other arts such as architecture, art, dance, film, music, photography and theatre, it has begun to function as an umbrella term to designate a postmodernist culture. The essays contained in such collections as Hal

Foster's *Postmodern Culture* (1985), and Stanley Trachtenberg's *The Postmodern Moment* (1985), together with Silvio Gaggi's study *Modern/Postmodern* (1989) and Steven Connor's introductory survey *Postmodernist Culture* (1989), epitomise this broader cultural approach and demonstrate the wide range of postmodernist practices.

Indeed, the deferral of an agreed definition of postmodernism has allowed the term to expand so widely that it embraces a series of debates extending beyond the boundaries of the arts to questions of a postmodern society and theories of a postmodernity. Such debates have attracted the attention of anthropologists, economists, historians, linguists, philosophers, psychoanalysts, and sociologists, amongst others, so that discussions of the issue of postmodernist literature are embedded now within a complex web of interdisciplinary approaches and modes of conceptualisation. These debates, which turn upon issues emerging from the restructuring of the social, economic and cultural orders since the second World War, their significance and political implications, have had the effect not only of providing an important intellectual context for debates within postmodernist literary criticism, but also revealing some of its contradictions.

Many critics use the terms modern, modernism, and modernity, on the one hand, and postmodern, postmodernism and postmodernity on the other, almost interchangeably, thereby diffusing any remnants of clarity these

concepts may hold. Jochen Schulte-Sasse offers a useful model in his article, 'Modernity and Modernism, Postmodernity and Postmodernism: Framing the Issue', which helps clarify these amorphous terms:

Modernity . . . would mean a form of society or social organization characterized by industrialization, so-called high capitalism, etc. . . . The *cultural* precipitates of this socio-historical period should be called modernism. . . . In an analogous manner, the term postmodernity should designate a mode of material reproduction of society that has succeeded the period of modernity; whereas postmodernism should refer solely to the mode of cultural reproduction of that socio-historical period.<sup>2</sup>

For the purposes of my study, such a formulation contributes towards distinguishing between modernism and postmodernism, in that I feel this model helps limit the spiralling potential of these closely related terms. The concepts of modernism and postmodernism may then be understood to function as aesthetic terms which have particular historical contexts. Modernism is very much a retrospective concept which has been constructed by critics to account for the perceived fading of an historical international movement in the arts, that identified itself as 'modern', and which spanned the years from the 1880s to the late 1930s; whilst postmodernism has a contemporary significance in that critics began to use the term postmodernism in the late 1950s-early 1960s to discuss emergent cultural forms, especially that of literature.

My work is constructed around a primarily aesthetic and cultural



discourse on the nature of modernism and postmodernism, and not around the debate between social and political theorists on the nature of modernity and postmodernity, although since these debates overlap, I have drawn upon the work of writers outside my immediate sphere of interest where appropriate. Therefore, in order to give some specificity to the term postmodernism, this study is largely confined to critical issues arising from the concept of postmodernist literature, particularly in relation to the novel and the short story, rather than poetry or drama.

As postmodernist literary criticism has evolved over the past thirty years there has been an on-going search for theoretical frameworks appropriate to the fictional conventions of the texts themselves. Despite many rhetorical claims for the sharp distinction between modernism and postmodernism, postmodernist literary texts have assimilated many of the techniques of modernist literature, and it has proved difficult to develop a literary critical model capable of differentiating clearly between the two. Thus, there are a wide variety of methodological approaches to postmodernist literature based on quite disparate theoretical positions. For example, the literary texts which Linda Hutcheon examines in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* are identified as postmodernist by using a model drawn from postmodern architecture, where it is generally considered to be the case that the break with high modernism is easier to distinguish, perhaps because

postmodern architecture identifies so clearly the elements of modernism it rejects.

Christopher Butler's analysis of postmodern literature in his study *After the Wake* is set within a broad framework of avant-garde art, where he compares and contrasts developments in music, painting and literature, and suggests that postmodernism continues the programme of the earlier avant-garde movements, but with significant differences. Brian McHale's conceptualisation of postmodernism in *Postmodernist Fiction* is philosophically based on the notion that the dominant mode of modernism is epistemological, in that it raises questions of how true knowledge is attainable, whilst that of postmodernism is ontological, and is designed to raise questions such as what kinds of knowledge are possible. These diverse approaches have not only helped to differentiate postmodernism from modernism, but in their treatment of literary texts they have also counteracted the notion that postmodernism is merely a nihilistic end-game of schizophrenic wanderers in a de-historicized Western world.

However, despite the contributions made by these particular critics, for the purposes of my study I find that the most productive method of identifying fictional texts as postmodernist is by analysing the formal strategies and techniques of the narrative discourse within their particular cultural contexts. This method is one that I shall use in my reading of

postmodernist fiction since it not only offers the potential to explore the affinities and differences, continuities and discontinuities with modernist literature, but also does not preclude wider concerns, such as issues of theme and subject matter, which can be drawn from close analysis of the literary texts.

My approach therefore operates from the basis that texts can be defined as postmodernist by the use of certain strategies, devices and techniques that appear as recurrent structural and stylistic conventions, even though between individual texts there may be wide differences. Definitions of postmodernist literature vary widely, but for the purposes of my study the concept of postmodernism proves most useful not only when it locates specific textual practices that may be considered to constitute new discursive spaces within the Anglo-American literary tradition, but also to show how its many different manifestations have been shaped by its relation to the contemporary cultural context.

Whilst I have attempted to place the works of a number of women writers from the late 1950s to the mid 1980s within a literary map of postmodernism, the novels and short stories I have chosen to examine in most detail are those of Brigid Brophy, Muriel Spark, Joyce Carol Oates, Christine Brooke-Rose and Angela Carter. My interest in these writers lies in the way their works would seem to provide missing elements in debates

about the supposed postmodernist rupture from modernism and at the same time they offer an alternative to the notion that postmodernist fiction is merely superficial and incapable of dealing with serious social and cultural issues. In this latter sense, the works under discussion also contribute to feminist literary history, where innovative fiction is largely seen to have ended with Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein. By bringing together debates about postmodernist literature and its position in relation to modernism, and debates about women's writing and its position in relation to postmodernism, this thesis attempts to reveal the problems of constructing a rigidly linear literary history, and instead tries to tease out the complexities and nuances involved in literary canon making.

In Anglo-American cultural criticism and literary practice, there is substantial agreement that modernism belongs to the past, for as Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson Jr., in their critical compendium *The Modern Tradition: Backgrounds of Modern Literature* (1965) point out "the great age of the century's literature, the age of Yeats, Joyce, Eliot and Lawrence, of Proust, Valéry, and Gide, of Mann, Rilke, and Kafka, has already passed into history".<sup>3</sup> The critical works which probably have had the most significant impact and have consequently most strongly influenced current notions of modernism, although often in quite competing directions, are Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle* (1931), Stephen Spender's *The Struggle of*



*the Modern* (1963), Ellmann and Feidelson's collection of key modernist texts cited above, Frank Kermode's *Puzzles and Epiphanies* (1962) and *Continuities* (1968), Irving Howe's *The Decline of the New* (1970), Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane's *Modernism* (1976) and the collected essays and primary documents in Peter Faulkner's *Modernism* (1977) and *A Modernist Reader* (1986).

Despite the differences between these studies, there is a broad consensus that the concept of modernism operates as an analytical category for particular literary works that have a special relationship to the circumstances and events of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The prose texts most frequently cited as paradigmatic are Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913-27), Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* (1927), Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1920), and Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), yet the contrasts between these writers and their texts are probably as great, if not greater, than the similarities.

The early discussions and labelling of fiction as postmodernist, began to emerge in critical studies mainly in the United States after the late 1950s, more or less simultaneously with the frequent posing of the question, what is or what was modernism? By the mid 1960s critics such as Irving Howe, Harry Levin, Gerald Graff, Maurice Beebe and Leslie Fiedler amongst others perceived a distinct reaction to modernism in a number of novels written at

that time, and chose to denote this shift by using the term postmodern.

As with the critical debate on modernism, there are a number of studies that are generally acknowledged to have a formative role in shaping the concept of postmodernism. Amongst such studies are Ihab Hassan's works, which include *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: toward a Postmodern Literature* (1971), *Paracriticisms: Seven Speculations of the Times* (1975) and *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (1987), Raymond Federman's *Surfiction: Fiction Now and Tomorrow* (1975), David Lodge's *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature* (1977), Charles Caramello's *Silverless Mirrors: Book, Self and Postmodern American Fiction* (1983) and Allen Thither's *Words in Reflection: Modern Language Theory and Postmodern Fiction* (1984).

Despite the different orientations of these studies it would nevertheless seem that, as Robert Hewison has suggested, "The fact that the words Modern and Modernism acquired a prefix, rather than were abandoned altogether",<sup>4</sup> signifies to some degree how postmodernist debates continue to revolve around the issues and problems that modernists explored in the early part of the twentieth century. Postmodernist literary texts are necessarily situated within social, cultural and historical contexts and their positioning not only in relation to modernist texts but also to other literary

forms does need to be taken into account.

Part of the problem involved in defining postmodernism as an aesthetic category derives from its relationship to the term modernism, and the question of the continuities and discontinuities, similarities and differences between the practices which the two concepts designate. The problem is compounded by the fact that there is not one form of modernism but many. Many modernist writers shared an interest, for example, in exploring how states of inner consciousness and perception could be represented in literature. Proust's techniques in *Remembrance of Things Past* may share similarities with Dorothy Richardson's 13-volume work *Pilgrimage* (1915-38), but both these works appear to be very different to the language experiments of repetition and accumulation to be found in Gertrude Stein's work, just as Stein's prose style in *The Making of Americans* (1925) is quite unlike that of James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916).

Similarly, and predictably therefore, there is considerable debate about the precise nature of postmodernist literary characteristics, indicating that postmodernism is as heterogeneous as modernism. The fictional device of incorporating elements from nursery stories and fairy tales is apparent in works like Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* (1968) and Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), but does not feature in the works of Christine

Brooke-Rose or Raymond Federman. Science fiction, or speculative writing as it now more often termed, is a device used to serious purpose by Kurt Vonnegut, in *Slaughter-House Five* (1969), Ursula LeGuin in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and Joanna Russ in *The Female Man* (1975). But whereas in Vonnegut's novels this device is accompanied by passivity, resignation and pessimism at the sense of helplessness life engenders, in LeGuin and Russ, the device of speculative fiction operates to explore cultural notions of gender difference and to contest social conventions with radical politics. The fictional strategies of Joyce Carol Oates in such novels as *Expensive People* (1968), *Cybele* (1979), *A Bloodsmoor Romance* (1983), *Mysteries of Winterthurn* (1984), and the collected stories in *Marriages and Infidelities* (1974) demonstrate so many different characteristics that they problematise any clearcut distinctions between the categories of high culture/popular culture, serious literature and pulp fiction, and the conventions of postmodernism, modernism and realism.

I shall attempt to deal with this problem of distinguishing between the heterogeneous nature of modernist and postmodernist literature by drawing upon a model of change which allows for the blurred boundaries between different modes of writing. A number of literary and cultural critics have recently turned to a historically contextualised model based on the notion of restructuration in their efforts not to oversimplify the complexities of change.



This is a significant development within the postmodernist debate, especially if, as Bradbury and McFarlane suggest, modernism has become "an invisibly communal style"<sup>5</sup> which has now been so thoroughly assimilated into our culture generally, that absolute models are no longer possible anyway.

Pertinent examples of such an approach are the works of Raymond Williams in his study entitled *Culture* (1981) and those of Fredric Jameson, which he first sketched out in his articles 'Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' (1984) and 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society' (1985). Both Williams and Jameson are interested in the way in which culture can be understood to have particular significance as a site of struggle in which different interest groups each have a stake in contesting issues of power. Whilst I recognize that the model in both Williams' and Jameson's work is used to denote a more widespread cultural and social change than I am dealing with here, and is also illustrative of their own political interests, nevertheless it does offer the potential to differentiate between postmodernist and modernist literature and to register the complex relationship of women's writing within these literary categories.

In Jameson's analysis of social and cultural change, he argues that "radical breaks between periods do not generally involve complete changes of content but rather the restructuration of a certain number of elements already given: features that in an earlier period or system were subordinate

now become dominant, and features that had been dominant again become secondary".<sup>6</sup> This notion of restructuring helps to differentiate between certain stable elements and others which are dynamic in form. Thus when the secondary, minor or marginal aspects of one system shift into becoming the central or dominant features of another, a new cultural form may be identified. This model can be applied to literary systems too, in that it not only allows features of literary texts to be identified as dominant, secondary or subordinate characteristics, but it also allows the recognition of writers who may be considered marginal in one system to be placed in a more central position in another.

Raymond Williams' notion of dominant, emergent and residual forms of cultural expression similarly allows for the uneven process of change. Williams suggests that "in cultural production both the *residual* - work made in earlier and often different societies and times, yet still available and significant - and the *emergent* - work of various new kinds - are often equally available *as practices*. Certainly the dominant can absorb or attempt to absorb both".<sup>7</sup> Thus, drawing upon Williams' model, it is again possible to view writers and their literary texts in a more complex relation to each other. In this instance, from the standpoint of such writers as Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence and James Joyce, nineteenth century realism could be taken as the dominant form, naturalism as the

residual form and modernism as the emergent form. Whereas for writers such as Joyce Carol Oates, Christine Brooke-Rose, and Angela Carter or John Barth, Ron Sukenick and Donald Barthelme, it could be argued that modernism becomes the residual form, realism continues to be the dominant form, and postmodernism is the emergent form.

A similiar treatment of change in the context of modernist and postmodernist fiction is appropriate, especially since much of the rhetoric in which discussions of postmodernism are formulated tends to claim a radical rupture from modernism. Joyce Carol Oates' novel *Unholy Loves* (1979) highlights the limitations of such views, and the need for a more subtle approach to the issue of modernist and postmodernist literature. This novel, which focuses upon the English Department of an upstate New York college, does not display the overtly innovative techniques associated with postmodernism which generally characterise her work, so much as make an ironic commentary on the dogma associated with postmodernism.

Oates' character Lewis Seidel, in *Unholy Loves*, epitomises certain opinions which could well be taken as symptomatic of the contemporary American literary critical scene. At a faculty party held in honour of a visiting English poet who is reputed to be the last living modernist writer, Seidel uses the occasion to air his views on literature:

Now he has an excuse to launch into a fifteen-minute lecture,

a noisy swaggering harangue, sweeping all "consciously wrought," "aristocratic" art into the abyss, naming names with the zest of a triumphant guerrilla leader: Proust and Valéry and Nabokov and Mann, and of course Virginia Woolf, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, Yeats and Eliot and Pound and Auden and Lowell and Stevens and Faulkner and Hemingway and-- Modernism is dead, faith in literature itself is dead, absolutely dead, even *Finnegans Wake* came too late, for hadn't Joyce realized--as Lewis had himself realized, irrevocably--that literature ended with the publication of *Ulysses*, with the publication of--nay, the very conception of--such episodes as "Wandering Rocks" and "Cyclops"--? No, no, it does no good to argue, no good at all! Literature is dead. Exhausted. We have now a kind of meta-literature, shoulder shrugs and vaudeville routines and grimaces, schoolboy stuff, but honest just the same, willing to acknowledge its fatuity, its futility.<sup>8</sup>

Juxtaposed against John Barth's well-known article 'The Literature of Exhaustion'(1967), Leslie Fiedler's 'Cross the Border-Close that Gap:Postmodernism'(1975), Ron Sukenick's short story 'The Death of the Novel' and Gerald Graff's 'The Myth of the Postmodernist Breakthrough' (1973), Oates gentle mocking is as much self-orientated as other-directed, for she is only too aware of the dilemmas facing both postmodernist critics and authors in their relation to modernism.

Indeed, *Unholy Loves* may also be interpreted as a paradigm for the tensions between postmodernism, modernism and feminism, as perceived by a woman writer, with its triangular structure articulated through the characters of an ageing modernist poet, Albert St. Dennis, who dies whilst a guest of Woodslee's English Department; English lecturer and novelist



Brigit Stott; and the Lewis Seidel figure. Oates commentary shows how such formulations over-simplify the complexities of both modernism and postmodernism as concepts, in that they do not allow for the uneven nature of change.

As Oates' parody indicates, it is surely over-simplistic to suggest that any one set of literary practices is totally replaced by another at a stroke. For instance, Virginia Woolf's critical essays 'Modern Fiction' (1919) and 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' (1924) demonstrate how modernist writers developed their literary strategies at the same time as other writers such as H.G. Wells, Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy continued to be firmly entrenched within the conventions of realism. Woolf argued that:

Our quarrel, then, is not with the classics, and if we speak of quarrelling with Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennett, and Mr. Galsworthy, it is partly that by the mere fact of their existence in the flesh their work has a living, breathing, everyday imperfection which bids us take what liberties with it we choose. . . . It is because they are concerned not with the spirit but with the body that they have disappointed us, and left us with the feeling that the sooner English fiction turns its back upon them, as politely as may be, and marches, if only into the desert, the better for its soul. . . . If we fasten, then, one label on all these books, on which is one word, materialists, we mean by it that they write of unimportant things; that they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and enduring.<sup>9</sup>

Yet Woolf's desire, along with other modernists, to precipitate the demise of realism was to prove only partially successful, as she no doubt would

have known and expected. Not only did writers such as Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy ignore the innovations of Woolf, Richardson, Proust and Joyce, but even in the modernists' own works the traces of realism linger on. As, for example, in Joyce's *Ulysses*, where realist sections coexist alongside the deeply experimental, and in Gide's *The Counterfeiters*, Kafka's *The Trial*, and Mann's *The Man Without Qualities*, which Gerald Graff suggests "contain more than a residue of social realism: they present the rich and ponderous intricacy of a bourgeois society seen in process of disintegration but nevertheless solid and specific enough to furnish the material of drama".<sup>10</sup>

In the case of postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon has similarly insisted that it is inappropriate to consider postmodernist fiction, its strategies, devices and techniques, without also taking into account how such conventions necessarily have some degree of relation to modernism. Hence, Hutcheon adopts a somewhat similar stance in her critical writings to the position Joyce Carol Oates articulates in the novel *Unholy Loves*, when she argues that:

It is all too easy to reject, as does John Barth, all notions of postmodernism based on its being an extension, intensification, subversion, or repudiation of modernism (1980, 69). But modernism literally and physically haunts postmodernism, and their interrelations should not be ignored.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the heterogeneous nature of modernism and postmodernism, I want

to suggest that there are certain features which could be considered sufficiently characteristic to allow a literary analysis within the type of framework provided by Williams and Jameson that I detailed earlier. This restructuration model allows for the shifting of literary conventions not only from modernism to postmodernism, but between realism and formulaic subgenres too. Of course, there will always be exceptions that do not fit into this model, which is provisional by its very nature, but the potential offered by this method does at least allow for some specific textual analysis rather than sweeping generalisations. Here I shall briefly sketch how certain 'distinctions' which have been asserted as central to the difference between modernism and postmodernism fail to account for the complex cultural situations which attend both the emergence of modernist and postmodernist fictions.

Both modernism and postmodernism share a similar self-conscious concern for what may be termed 'the condition of the novel', its possibilities and its limitations, a self-consciousness which arguably was not present in so acute a form in earlier literary periods. Indeed, the debates about the significance and value of postmodernism exemplify the extent to which such issues continue to be hotly contested, especially when postmodernist literary practices are viewed in negative terms compared with those of the modernists.

In the case of modernism, Joyce's literary technique in *Ulysses* may be taken as key point in examining how modernist and postmodernist preoccupations differ. David Lodge, for example, clarifies the relevance of this technique, when he suggests that an episode of *Ulysses* can be read:

. . . as a narrative of modern life which alludes to a prior myth that is in some sense a key to its meaning, and in which a superficially gratuitous sequence of banal events is guided towards a final thematic epiphany by discreetly planted *leitmotifs*.<sup>12</sup>

T S Eliot's review of the novel at the time it was first published highlights how significant he considered Joyce's *Ulysses* to be when he stated that "I hold this book to be the most important expression which the present age has found; it is a book to which we are all indebted, and from which none of us can escape".<sup>13</sup> The modernist concern with formal innovation is widely considered to have reached a peak in *Ulysses* because of Joyce's strategy of drawing upon Greek myth as a structural device to order an otherwise largely naturalistic narrative.

For Eliot, and many subsequent critics, *Ulysses* represents a profound moment in the modernist literature by providing a sense of meaning that transcends the banal and everyday:

In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. They will not be imitators, any more than the scientist who uses the discoveries of an Einstein in pursuing his own, independent,



further investigations. It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.<sup>14</sup>

Eliot's privileging of Joyce's device of drawing upon the Greek classics over and above other modernist literary techniques has, arguably, contributed to the rarefied and rather awesome frame of reference in which *Ulysses* and James Joyce have been discussed. Effectively, this form of valorisation, along with critical attempts to elucidate other esoteric works, most obviously Eliot's own 'The Waste Land', has led inevitably to modernism, as a movement, in itself being held up as an intellectual phenomenon attainable only by an initiated, classically informed, select few. Thus, both modernist fictional and critical works participate in a joint project of reverence for the classics which becomes one of the key elements in the cultural élitism associated with modernism, and in this sense can be seen as one of its dominant aspects.

D H Lawrence's reflections on the state of the novel in his essay 'Surgery for the Novel - or a Bomb?' (1923) have some bearing on this point. Lawrence considered that the future direction of the novel was problematic, in that he maintained that the work of other modernists such as Proust, Richardson, and Joyce was ultimately self-defeating, thus he felt that he was forced to ask:

The future of the novel? Poor old novel, it's in a rather dirty, messy tight corner. And it's either got to get over the wall or knock a hole through it.<sup>15</sup>

The wall in question was one that the modernists themselves constructed, brick by brick, in an attempt to preserve their faith in 'high art' and to keep out the impurities of mass culture, as Lawrence's description of the state of the novel indicates:

There he is, the monster with many faces, many branches to him, like a tree: the modern novel. And he is almost dual, like Siamese twins. On the one hand, the pale-faced, high-browed, earnest novel, which you have to take seriously; on the other, that smirking, rather plausible hussy, the popular novel.<sup>16</sup>

Lawrence's description of the state of the novel is significant here, since although he initially recognises the heterogeneity of the novel and suggests its multiplicity, he then sets up a binary opposition between Joyce, Dorothy Richardson and Proust on 'the earnest side' and mass culture on the other side, referring in particular to, *The Sheik*, a popular romantic novel by Edith Hull, together with Zane Grey, a writer of Westerns, and a writer of historical romances named Robert Chambers. Lawrence fulminates against both the 'serious' and the 'popular' novel, disliking what he saw as the sterile self-consciousness of the modernists as much as the popular novelists' peddling of illusions.

It is within this context that postmodernist fiction seeks to move towards collapsing the hierarchical distinction between high and popular

culture. If the recycling of Homer by James Joyce is taken as a primary feature of modernism, then the work of a writer such as Steve Katz, who is often considered one of the most typical figures of postmodernism, might provide a way of differentiating postmodernism from modernism.

Katz appears to reject modernist techniques of Joyce, since his interests lie in the direction of recycling elements of popular culture such as comic books, cartoons and advertising slogans, as his following comment suggests:

Captain Marvel is a fantasy more competent to deal with the cities in my life than Odysseus would be, though some of his tricks are handy to know. I admire the purity and simplicity of the Greek stories, but I know them as something I learned when I began to read 'literature.' Batman, however, and Wonder Woman, and Nancy and Sluggo, and the Three Stooges, and Laurel and Hardy, and the New York Yankees, and Veronica Lake, and the Camel cigarette package, are all working in the marrow of my experience, an American experience, which is the experience I'm here to testify for. I love Gilgamesh and many other ancient texts, but I don't need them to maintain the sense of continuity with my own culture.<sup>17</sup>

Instead of using Greek myths with their classical associations as an ordering principle, Katz accepts and makes use of any cultural phenomena to structure his work. In the work of a postmodernist such as Katz, there is a less reverent approach to the materials of literature, and a deflating of the solemnity of Eliot's standpoint.

Nevertheless, the way mass culture is used in postmodernist works

can paradoxically reforge cultural edifices that stand as fortresses of art. Apparently rejecting high art, postmodernism uses mass culture, as in Katz's collection of stories in *Creamy and Delicious* (1970) where Captain Marvel replaces Odysseus, or in Donald Barthelme's story collection *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* (1961) where Batman and Robin try to foil their archenemy the Joker. However, these figures are nevertheless part of a popular contemporary mythology, and in the works of postmodernist writers like Katz and Barthelme, such myths are used to dramatise the male character as anti-hero whose agonized self-consciousness is expressed in a pastiche of comic book clichés.

It could be argued that the use made of these materials scarcely makes more concessions to a potential popular readership than many of the modernist novels, as in Barthelme's case, where the significance of incorporating Batman, or King Kong, or Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs into his fictions, is dependent upon the reader's ability to share with Barthelme a knowledge of sociology, psychology and existential philosophy. Similarly, the material Thomas Pynchon or John Barth use may be familiar, but their novels are constructed on the same formidable and seemingly inaccessible scale as *Ulysses*; and whilst their works are considered to epitomise postmodernist playfulness, such games-playing is so elaborately structured that, arguably, only intellectuals could expect to have a fair



chance of joining in with the game. Indeed, Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* has been described as a "vastly overdone work [which] might be regarded as a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* . . . a fantasy in which the entire universe is imagined as a university campus, the inhabitants of which are mostly self-conscious, troubled intellectuals".<sup>18</sup>

Popular culture appears as much in *Ulysses* as in Pynchon's *V* or Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy*, and as Louis Menand has pointed out in relation to Joyce and Eliot, "Making capital out of the worn-out quality of received literary form is, of course, one of the techniques of modernism generally".<sup>19</sup> It is surely the use made of the material by the novelist and perhaps more importantly the response to the finished work of art with its incorporation of either popular or classical myth that determines the place of the novel and novelist, whether modernist or postmodernist, in contemporary society. In that sense, it would seem unlikely that Joyce's *Ulysses*, or Pynchon's *V*, or Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* would have been received by radically different types of public, namely fairly exclusive groups of intellectuals, imbued with prodigious quantities of perseverance.

In contrast, however, the postmodernist fictional texts of Angela Carter, which share with the writers discussed above an interest in blurring the boundaries between high art and popular culture, explore how such a strategy can be used to make a political critique of contemporary society.

Carter does not simply accept elements of popular culture and totally reject high art, but seeks to make subversive use of both. Thus she writes that:

. . . I feel free to loot and rummage in an official past, specifically a literary past, but I like paintings and sculptures and the movies and folklore and heresies, too. This past, for me, has important decorative, ornamental functions; further, it is a vast repository of outmoded lies, where you can check out what lies used to be à la mode and find the old lies on which new lies have been based.<sup>20</sup>

Carter makes use of folklore, fairy tales and myths in such works as *The Magic Toyshop* (1967) and her collection of short stories *Black Venus* (1985), to criticize the fictions which underpin social reality, particularly the social and cultural construction of femininity, because she believes that "all myths are products of the human mind and reflect only aspects of material human practice. I'm in the demythologising business".<sup>21</sup>

Angela Carter's fictional practice is therefore of crucial significance in exploring the relations between postmodernism and feminism because she argues that:

. . . it is so enormously important for women to write fiction as women - it is part of the slow process of decolonialising our language and our basic habits of thought. . . . it is to do with the creation of a means of expression for an infinitely greater variety of experience than has been possible heretofore, to say things for which no language previously existed.<sup>22</sup>

Although Carter's work has been published since the 1960s, a key period in debates about the nature of postmodernism, and despite considerable critical

acclaim, her novels and short story collections have rarely been afforded the extended discussion as postmodernist texts that they deserve.

As indicated earlier, a key point which emerges from Jameson's restructuring model, is the importance of situating modernism and postmodernism in their respective cultural and social contexts. One of the main problems with many accounts of postmodernism is the tendency to discuss features of postmodernist literature as though they exist in a literary vacuum. Jameson points out, for example, that if modernism and postmodernism are not situated within their respective historical contexts, then what tends to be overlooked is modernism's "passionate repudiation by an older Victorian and post-Victorian bourgeoisie, for whom its forms and ethos are received as being variously ugly, dissonant, obscure, scandalous, immoral, subversive and generally 'anti-social'".<sup>23</sup> Yet since the works of Joyce, Lawrence, Woolf, Proust, amongst others, have become part of the established canon of literature since the 1950s, Jameson argues that not only are they no longer shocking but they appear rather conventional, even realistic.

Jameson's model offers the potential to account more satisfactorily than many others for a fifties novel such as *The Comforters*, which would seem to defy characterisation either as modernist or postmodernist. Thus when Muriel Sparks' novel *The Comforters* was first published in 1957, it



was within a context where the aesthetic principles of modernism had failed to dislodge realism as the dominant mode. Alan Bold, in his recent book on Muriel Spark, points out that:

Spark's fictions are subject to an immense literary cunning. And in the broadly realistic climate of British fiction in the 1950s, *The Comforters* was a strikingly radical book, a flamboyant start to a teasing and powerful fictional career.<sup>24</sup>

The novels of Muriel Spark, provide an interesting example of works which do not fit completely satisfactorily into the categories of modernism, realism or postmodernism, since they display elements of all three. *The Comforters* for example, is a self-conscious fiction, which deals with a novelist writing a novel. This character, Caroline Rose, is working on a study of the twentieth-century novel entitled *Form in the Modern Novel*, but she announces that she is "having difficulty with the chapter on realism".<sup>25</sup> There are key points throughout the novel which demonstrate Spark's rejection of both realism and modernism, although this novel, perhaps more than any of her others, sits uneasily between modernist and postmodernist conventions.

Paradoxically, however, the notion that modernist innovations are now seen to retain strong links with realism is apparent in the stance of many critics who argue that postmodernism has made a sharp break with modernism. I would like to suggest that when critics take this view, it is

because modernist literature has, in a sense, been recuperated through its institutionalisation in the academy. Larry McCaffery, for instance, tends to flatten out the specific innovations of modernist writers in his appraisal of postmodernist literature, which has the effect of placing modernism on a continuum with realism. McCaffery argues that:

The period of 1900 until 1930 was, of course, a period of growth and experimentation in fiction, but with a few important exceptions (Gide and, above all, Gertrude Stein) most of the really significant experiments tended to be largely extensions of realistic methods, especially the attempts of writers to develop methods of delving deeply into the psychological aspects of man. Thus the great writers of the modernist period - Faulkner, the early Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Sherwood Anderson - were still operating primarily in the traditions of realism. From 1930 until 1950 the dominant mode, particularly in America, was still realism, although significant exceptions were emerging: Becket, Gombrowicz, Anaïs Nin, Djuna Barnes, Nathanael West, Celine, and the two writers who were perhaps to have the most significant impact on the metafictionists of the 1960's - Vladimir Nabokov and J.L. Borges.<sup>26</sup>

If, as McCaffery suggests, postmodernism can be distinguished from modernism on the grounds that the modernists were still working predominantly within the conventions of realism, then the basis of postmodernism's claim to break from modernism becomes considerably clearer.

I would argue against McCaffery's method of assimilating the innovations of Woolf and Joyce unproblematically with realism, especially

if the aim is to free postmodernism from its relations to modernism. Both Williams' and Jameson's models of change, which stress the restructuring of elements already present into new configurations, avoid the problem of imposing a uniformity upon both modernism and postmodernism which they do not possess, and enables a more subtle comparison of their inter-relationship, and of the points where they do differ.

One way of considering the connection between modernism and postmodernism might be to adopt Louis Menand's proposition that modernism can be seen as an expression of how certain "cultural solutions of the nineteenth century can be observed becoming the cultural problems"<sup>27</sup> of the early twentieth century, and thus the focus for literary explorations which attempted to solve these problems. This notion offers a fruitful way of positioning postmodernism in relation to modernism, for if Menand's framework is extended, then postmodernism can be seen as a late twentieth century attempt at dealing with the implications and consequences of such modernist explorations, especially in the instance of literature. Ihab Hassan has argued that "Modernism does not suddenly cease so that Postmodernism may begin: they now *coexist*".<sup>28</sup> It may well be that postmodernism can be differentiated from modernism perhaps more in the way it frames its answers, than in the questions it poses.

Thus, both modernism and postmodernism share an interest in the



problem of characterisation, and both seek to explore alternative options to the conventions of realism. One example of the perceived difference between them lies in the dissimilar approaches to characterisation adopted by modernist and postmodernist writers. This may be most clearly illustrated by comparing the approach taken by Virginia Woolf with that of Ron Sukenick, a writer generally considered to be central to the postmodernist canon. Both writers devote serious attention to the issue of characterisation but the strategies employed in dealing with this problem differ.

A key characteristic of modernism may be the use of the stream-of-consciousness technique to explore notions of a literary character's inner reality, as exemplified in Proust, Richardson and Woolf. Woolf's quarrel with the realists or 'materialists' as she called them, in particular Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy was based on her insistence that the conventions of nineteenth century realism which structured their novels were inappropriate to the task of rendering 'reality'. Woolf argued that:

. . . the problem before the novelist at present, as we suppose it to have been in the past, is to contrive means of being free to set down what he chooses. He has to have the courage to say that what interests him is no longer 'this' but 'that': out of 'that' alone must he construct his work. For the moderns 'that', the point of interest, lies very likely in the dark places of psychology. At once, therefore, the accent falls a little differently; the emphasis is upon something hitherto ignored; at once a different outline of form becomes necessary, difficult

for us to grasp, incomprehensible to our predecessors.<sup>29</sup>

If Woolf's work is taken as representing a dominant feature in modernism, then Ronald Sukenick's work may be taken as representative of a primary aspect of postmodernism.

Sukenick's stance towards portraying inner consciousness would seem to reject modernist explorations of individual subjective experience through the stream-of-consciousness technique. Sukenick's fictional interests are quite unlike those of the modernist writer, for whom as Woolf said, "the point of interest, lies very likely in the dark places of psychology".<sup>30</sup> In response to a question during an interview about the nature of his writing in relation to characterisation, Sukenick replied:

. . . for a whole lot of reasons the notion of depth psychology and Freudian motivation doesn't interest me much. Furthermore, these concepts have very much become attached to a doctrine, so for that reason it's not of interest for a writer. . . . If we create rounded characters, motivated by depth psychology, we are just furthering the illusionism that we're trying to get rid of. . . . things related to character and personality are more mysterious than we thought. We don't understand them as well as we once thought we did. Perhaps we can never understand them on the grounds that the mind may not be able to understand itself. So pretending to fully understand a character is not one of the things that can be fruitfully done through fiction. We sure don't in life, so there's no reason why we should pretend to in fiction.<sup>31</sup>

Attention to characterisation continues in postmodernism, as does the concern with representation of reality, but postmodernist fiction, if



Sukenick's comments may be taken as typical, tends to avoid in-depth psychological explorations, in favour of a lack of emotional depth and display of surface characteristics. Yet such a strategy is apparent in modernism too, for it is a prominent feature in the work of Gertrude Stein.

However, when these particular approaches to characterisation are viewed within Jameson's restructuring framework, then if the interest in depicting characterisation through extended explorations of the process of inner consciousness is taken to be a primary feature of modernism, rather than insisting that it disappears altogether in postmodernism, I would argue that it has become a subsidiary or minor feature. Similarly, if the avoidance of psychological depth is viewed as a subsidiary feature of modernism, then it would seem to have become a dominant feature of postmodernism.

A further key feature of modernism that would seem to offer a point of departure from which to distinguish postmodernism is the way in which the position of the writer is understood. In modernism, for example, writers such as Proust and Joyce are often characterised in the following manner:

The modern artist, . . . takes on shape as a spirit, a voyager into the unknown arts, and an embodiment of the difficulties in the form which surrounds him, taking his place in the complex perspectives of the writing itself.<sup>32</sup>

The modernist notion of the artist engaged upon a serious individual quest of heroic dimensions, where the writer/hero descends into the labyrinthine

complexities of inner consciousness, in the same manner that other heroes face physical combat may be taken as a dominant belief of modernism. Donald Barthelme's view of his own work and his role as a writer illustrates how postmodernist writers seem to be far removed from such heroic exploits. Barthelme was asked if he felt that modernist techniques offered him scope in his own writing:

If you mean doing psychological studies of some kind, no. I'm not so interested. "Going beneath the surface" has all sorts of . . . associations, as if you were a Cousteau of the heart. I'm not sure there's not just as much to be seen if you remain a student of the surfaces.<sup>33</sup>

Barthelme's interest in the artifice of fiction and the constructed nature of writing leads him in an apparently different direction to modernist writers. His rejection of the role of a "Cousteau of the heart" seems to form a sharp contrast with the modernist writers' preoccupations with artistic consciousness, which, underpinned by the psychoanalytical systems of Freud and Jung, helped to bring about, "a new concept of the hero, not as a man of action, but as a man - much less often, a woman - with a sensitive and heightened consciousness".<sup>34</sup>

Taken to extremes, the position of writers such as Barth, Katz, Barthelme and Sukenick would seem to indicate a somewhat arid intellectual territory; a landscape in which Patricia Waugh finds "the deeply split, alienated, nostalgia-ridden, decentred subject of much postmodernist

fiction".<sup>35</sup> Waugh's statement points to one of the key problems in the way in which postmodernism has been conceptualised, and in her own study *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* (1989), she explores the ambivalent relations between the work of women writers, feminism and postmodernism through psychoanalytic theory. Waugh is correct in identifying that postmodernism may seem to be problematic for feminism, or, more specifically, certain tendencies in feminism, especially those feminist standpoints that are linked to liberal humanism. Yet just as feminism is not a monolithic movement, but rather is composed of diverse and often mutually incompatible standpoints, so postmodernism, as discussed earlier, is equally heterogeneous.

It is the intention of this thesis to demonstrate that there are a number of misleading notions about postmodernism, which derive from the absence of critical appraisal about women's postmodernist fiction and its relative exclusion from the dominant model of postmodernism. In particular, it is my view that the inclusion of the work of women postmodernists, especially those with feminist commitments, has a number of effects upon prevailing accounts of postmodernism. Thus, through analysing their work in addition to the work of male postmodernists, the conceptualisation of postmodernism may be seen to shift away from an arid, apolitical, nostalgia ridden, literature of exhaustion towards a literary practice which can, and does, have a strong



sense of social and political engagement that is articulated through a series of revitalised and life-enhancing aesthetic strategies.

My survey of postmodernist literary criticism reveals that the majority of book-length studies, at least until the late 1980s, concentrate on fictional texts by male authors. The effect of this rather partial analysis of available literature has created a situation which Dorothy Smith, in a now classic study, has called "a peculiar eclipsing" of the work of women:

Men have title of entry to the circle of those who count for one another. Women do not. The minus factor attached to what women say, write or image is another way of seeing how what they say, write or image is not a 'natural' part of the discourse.<sup>36</sup>

The eclipsing of women writers from the discourse of literary traditions was documented long ago by Elaine Showalter, in her seminal study *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), who found that "In the atlas of the English novel, women's territory is usually depicted as desert bounded by mountains on four sides: the Austen peaks, the Brontë cliffs, the Eliot range, and the Woolf hills".<sup>37</sup> Showalter's project of remapping the literary tradition to include other women writers and placing them in relation to each other within their cultural contexts has helped to provide one type of feminist approach to the issue of women's writing.

My study differs from Showalter's in that whilst my focus is also on women novelists, I do not seek to establish a separate tradition of Anglo-

American postmodernist women writers. There is value in the strategy of constructing accounts of women's writing as a specific tradition, in the sense that it not only reveals very clearly the similarities and differences between such writing, but also allows a centrality previously denied by mainstream critics. Nevertheless, there remains the problem that such a strategy removes women's writing even further from the contexts in which they exist, creating something of literary vacuum. *A Literature of Their Own*, as the title suggests, points to Showalter's successfully realised political strategem of carving out a literary space exclusive to women, but also, inevitably, leaves open to mainstream literary critics and historians the possibility of perpetuating a further and now self-induced marginalisation. At a political level that separateness has indeed been welcomed and exulted in by certain sectors of feminism, but such a strategy is not followed here since it seems an inappropriate direction in that the intention of this thesis is to explore the conjunction of women writers and postmodernism.

The historical approach taken by Showalter does not extend in any depth much beyond the high point of modernism and the work of Virginia Woolf. Whilst her final chapter in *A Literature of Their Own* sketches in some of the issues confronting women writers after the Second World War, her text concludes with writers in the early 1970s. My study begins, in a sense, where Showalter's ends, for debates about contemporary women's



experimental writing and debates about postmodernist fiction both began to emerge in the post-War period, though they have evolved somewhat asymmetrically. Because the concept of postmodernism remains so open and unfixed, it is just this lack of definition which offers the potential for situating innovative fiction by women writers in a specific historical and cultural context, rather than marginalising such work in what could be argued to be a female ghetto.

More recently, feminist critics have undertaken considerable work in the area of innovative work by women writers. Studies such as *Writing beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (1985) by Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Molly Hite's *The Other Side of the Story: Structures and Strategies of Contemporary Feminist Narrative* (1989) and the collected essays in *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction* (1989) edited by Ellen Friedman and Miriam Fuchs, explore the extent to which many women writers find that the conventions of realism are inappropriate vehicles for their fictional concerns. These works make a significant contribution to feminist literary history, for their combined effect is to elucidate the experimental nature of a considerable body of women writers, thereby providing a sense of continuity which extends from the works of Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, Anäis Nin, through to contemporary writers, amongst

whom are the novelists discussed in this thesis.

Studies which explore the conjunction of postmodernism and feminism more specifically are Meaghan Morris' *The Pirate's Fiancée: Feminism, Reading, Postmodernism* (1988), the collection of essays in Helen Carr's *From My Guy to Sci-Fi: Genre and Women's Writing in the Postmodern World* (1989), and the works of Linda Hutcheon and Patricia Waugh mentioned above. Despite their differing feminist standpoints, these works make a significant intervention into the predominantly male oriented postmodernist debate, yet their work is so recent that, with the exception of Linda Hutcheon's prolific publications, such an intervention has still to be widely recognised.

The approach taken in this thesis on the issue of the alignment of feminism and postmodernism, is closer to that of Meaghan Morris, Linda Hutcheon and Helen Carr than to Patricia Waugh. Waugh suggests that although feminism and postmodernism share similar interests, the strategies and techniques of postmodernism are largely unsuitable for the concerns of contemporary women writers. She argues that:

During the 1960s, as Vonnegut waves a fond goodbye to character in fiction, women writers are beginning, *for the first time in history*, to construct an identity out of the recognition that women need to discover, and must fight for, a sense of unified selfhood, a rational, coherent, effective identity. As male writers lament its demise, women writers have not yet experienced that subjectivity which will give them a sense of

personal autonomy, continuous identity, a history and agency in the world.<sup>38</sup>

In my view there are a number of problems with Waugh's stance on the relations between postmodernism and feminism, which I feel stem from her reluctance to acknowledge the limitations of feminist critical practice based on the assumptions of liberal humanism. There are a growing number of feminist critics who argue that retaining links with liberal humanism is more problematic for feminism than acknowledging the potential of postmodernism and developing strategies for its incorporation within feminism, and this is an argument with which I would agree.

For example, in the work of feminist critics such as Helen Carr, Toril Moi, Catherine Belsey, Carolyn Allen, Leslie Dick, Carolyn Brown, Linda Hutcheon, Alison Light and Meaghan Morris there is a tendency to move away from the position epitomised by Waugh's view on the notion of female selfhood, towards a critical analysis of the construction of gendered subjectivity. As Carolyn Allen argues:

What used to be feminist literary criticism, with its emphasis on canon reformation and women's literary tradition, is for some feminists becoming cultural criticism, which integrates a revisionist postmodern discourse with feminist social and political theory. In so doing, feminist criticism is returning to its birthplace, keeping its commitment to change. . . . feminist cultural criticism intersects with postmodernism in considering the construction of "the subject".<sup>39</sup>

This would seem to mark an important and significant shift in feminism, for



I would argue that it is precisely the notion of a rational, unified self as constructed by the dominant signifying practices of Western culture that many feminist critics and women writers seek to question. Such a notion of the self rests upon patriarchal assumptions and practices which these feminist critics identify as problematic for women.

I would suggest that postmodernist strategies and techniques, as deployed in the work of the women writers under discussion in this thesis, do have significant potential for exploring issues of concern to feminism. For example, one aspect of Brigid Brophy's *In Transit* examines the complexities of the issue of pornography and lesbianism through the responses of a sexually ambivalent character named Evelyn. Brophy's utilisation of the postmodernist techniques of parody and pastiche to incorporate a pseudo-pornographic subtext, raises issues of stereotyped notions of male and female sexuality unencumbered by, for example, the 'religious' overtones within the discussions of sexuality in D H Lawrence's fiction. Equally it evades the assumptions of unproblematic heterosexuality such as are perhaps implied by Patricia Waugh's notion of a unified selfhood in *Feminine Fictions*.

Similarly, the postmodernist strategy of blurring the boundaries between high art and popular culture is used by Margaret Atwood in her novel *Lady Oracle*, in which she incorporates the mode of costume

gothic/historical romance to explore the impact of society's fictions about the nature of 'woman'. The use of this technique enables Atwood to probe the issue of eating disorders and female body image, which is of interest to feminists such as Susie Orbach, by calling into question mass media depictions of the ideal woman.

In the works of Joyce Carol Oates, the postmodernist technique of incorporating formulaic sub-genres such as the detective novel and the ghost story is used in *The Mysteries of Winterthurn* to deal with such issues as incest and sexual abuse within the nuclear family, and violence against women ranging from wife-battering to ritual murder, which are of grave concern to feminists. Whilst in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, the postmodernist tactic of reappraising the conventions of characterisation to the extent of developing freak figures, is utilised to create Fevvers, a winged woman, who defies rational belief, but at the same time makes a strong political critique of male dominance and hypocrisy, especially in terms of the power relations involved in sexuality and prostitution.

In my view, it is important to develop a feminist critical practice which is responsive to the strategies and techniques of postmodernist women writers, rather than ignoring the existence of postmodernism because of the apparent male bias in prevailing mainstream accounts. Whilst such a development may at first seem to be somewhat problematic, I would suggest



that given the diversity of the various standpoints within feminism, this is not necessarily the case. Since women writers are not a homogenous group, their work raises issues of race, class, ethnicity, religion and sexual preference. Similarly, women's writing does not fall into a single category, but is composed of different modes and genres.

Thus, in order to consider the multiplicity of women's writing, different feminist standpoints are necessary for different aspects. If, for the purposes of convenience, Anglo-American feminist literary criticism is divided into positions which represent different interpretive strategies for critical analysis, then a working model for approaching postmodernist literature could be constructed. The somewhat schematic framework which follows is intended merely to denote my own position in relation to an alignment of feminism and postmodernism, and to suggest an outline of how I intend to pursue such a feminist critical practice; these issues will be developed more substantially in Chapter One.

One highly celebrated position of feminist criticism might be epitomised by the work of Kate Millett. This position is based upon making a critique of male models of literature, and in particular the way in which such models carry out a misrepresentation of women in literature. An approach to postmodernist literary criticism on this basis would be appropriate. I draw upon a similar mode of analysis throughout this thesis,

since as I have already highlighted, there is a major problem with male models of postmodernism because of the exclusion of women writers and feminist critics.

Whereas Millett focuses on male writers in *Sexual Politics* (1969), Elaine Showalter offers a further development by shifting the focus from male to female writers, and attempting to build a literary tradition of women writers. Such an approach to postmodernism would again not be incompatible since women writers have played a considerable part in shaping the nature of postmodernist literature. To concentrate on their work surely would be a positive move for feminism in that it denotes women writers of significance in the contemporary period. Thus, this feminist strategy influences my approach to postmodernism and my focus on women writers.

A similar position to Showalter's in its concentration upon the woman writer, but one which is more deeply involved in establishing a female aesthetic, may be identified in the work of Adrienne Rich and Susan Griffin. There are substantial elements of their work which focus on how women's active participation in culture has been marginalised, and therefore for my purposes such a standpoint is useful in analysing how postmodern culture continues to exclude women.

These aspects of feminist criticism offer the potential to focus on

gender issues which provide one rationale for creating a sense of cohesion amongst a group of diverse women writers. However, for the purpose of this thesis there also needs to be dimensions which can account for the differences between these writers, especially in terms of race, class, sexual preference, religion, and politics. The recent work of critics such as Cheryl Wall, Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, Maria Lugones, Meaghan Morris, Helen Carr, Carolyn Brown, Linda Hutcheon and Alison Light, amongst others, provides a basis from which to explore these other dimensions. The stance taken by these critics permits a consideration of the similarities and differences between the women writers under discussion in relation to feminism and to postmodernism. My own position is strongly influenced by the standpoint of feminist multiplicity which the work of these critics epitomise.

The basic feminist methodology that underpins my approach to the possibilities of an alignment between feminism and postmodernism, is drawn from the positions that I have outlined here and will be developed more fully in the following chapters. I will argue that such an eclectic approach is necessary in order to respond to the complexities of women's postmodernist writing. My thesis begins, then, with an investigation of how the work of women writers and virtually the entire feminist critical enterprise of the past thirty years has been largely neglected by mainstream critics, and more



specifically in relation to accounts of postmodernism. In developing this approach to postmodernist literature, Chapter One suggests that the exclusion of the work of women from contemporary debates is related to a form of unanalysed sexual/textual power politics which still seeps through the otherwise largely innovative work of postmodernist male authors and their critics.

Following this analysis of the relation of feminism to postmodernism, Chapter Two focusses on Anglo-American postmodernist literary criticism in an attempt to establish the extent to which the techniques of postmodernist fiction may be differentiated from modernist literature. In effect, this chapter traces the evolution of the concept of postmodernism, from the late 1950s to the present, and it therefore largely represents a mainstream account of postmodernist literature.

In Chapter Three, this account of postmodernist fiction is extended by mapping in the work of a wide range of women writers and feminist critics over the same time period. Amongst the works discussed are Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, Marilynne Robinson's *Good Housekeeping*, Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, Maggie Gee's *Dying, In Other Words* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. By exploring the points at which the interests of women's postmodernist fiction overlap or differ from the postmodernist canon of male authors, this chapter sets the stage for the more



in-depth textual analysis that features in the following two chapters.

Chapter Four focuses specifically on the work of Joyce Carol Oates, whose fiction has been published regularly since the late 1960s to the present. Oates is regarded as a major literary figure on both sides of the Atlantic, yet there is a curious ambiguity which surrounds the reception of her work. Mainstream critics object that her novels and short stories are virtually impossible to categorise, and both feminist and postmodernist critics have largely ignored her work altogether. This chapter attempts to show how a close reading of a number of Oates' texts not only provides a way of differentiating postmodernist from modernist literature, but also demonstrates how her works can be seen to be situated at the interface of postmodernism and feminism.

Finally, Chapter Five continues the discussion of the alignments between postmodernism and feminism, by evaluating the work of Brigid Brophy, Muriel Spark, Christine Brooke-Rose and Angela Carter, whose works span the last three decades. This chapter demonstrates that the postmodernist fiction of Joyce Carol Oates is not an isolated instance but is part of a wider tradition in Anglo-American women's writing. The detailed textual analysis of the work of these writers reveals that there is not just one mode of postmodernist writing, but many. In the hands of these women writers a more politically informed and culturally critical aspect of

postmodernism emerges than prevailing accounts of postmodernist fiction would suggest. My thesis concludes with a reflection on the potential limitations of postmodernism, and the implications of a critical conjuncture of postmodernism and feminism. It suggests that the approach taken throughout the study to the concept of postmodernism, does not preclude the possibility that postmodernist literature may be re-viewed as a site of resistance to the dominant forces of late consumer capitalist society.

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# Chapter One

## Postmodern Culture: a Feminist Critique

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The feminist revolution is not just a novel phenomenon of western culture, *it is a watershed in all hitherto existing cultures.*

Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér,  
*The Postmodern Political Condition*<sup>1</sup>

What is curious as the nature of the postmodern debate unfolds, and what I hope to demonstrate as my own argument proceeds, is how mainstream critics have created a model of postmodernism in which certain works are legitimised and others are not. The relatively narrow canon of postmodernism would seem to suggest that there are issues of power and politics inscribed within critical discourse which reveal how postmodern literary theorists operate at a contradictory level. In many ways prevailing notions of modernism and postmodernism appear to preserve the ideology of the dominant culture by apparently consisting of an homogeneous group of writers whilst simultaneously pointing to the heterogeneous nature of both movements.

The context for my discussion of postmodernist literary criticism, postmodernist literature and feminism, is grounded in wider issues relating to the concept of postmodern culture. Although subsequent chapters will clarify some of the complexities and nuances of the tensions that arise from



the overlapping theoretical issues involved in this discussion, in this chapter I shall attempt to consider how postmodernism operates in relation to feminism, specifically the politics and practice of a diversity of feminisms.

Some feminist and postmodernist critics such as Linda Hutcheon, Carolyn Allen, Craig Owens, and Hal Foster suggest that there are certain points at which the interests of feminism and postmodernism intersect. In particular, they point to a shared concern with the notion that cultural practice has a particular significance in society and marks a site of struggle for meaning in which society may be subject to a critique from within; cultural practices may construct, maintain or subvert the status quo. Yet in defining the concept of culture and the practices by which it is constituted, mainstream cultural critics have pursued a method of analysis that virtually excludes the diversity of contributions made by those who are not considered culturally central, thereby neglecting works by women, amongst others.

Since it is only by recognising that any point of departure for the purposes of critical analysis is but one point among many, the predominant view of culture can be understood, not as a fact, but as a reflection of the views of mainstream critics. In general, the methods of analysis used by feminist critics seek to contest mainstream viewpoints, especially on issues



of sex/gender relations, sexual preference, race and class. The work of feminist cultural critics, therefore, sets out to question mainstream cultural systems, to examine the hidden ideological assumptions upon which these systems are based, and to redefine and redraw the boundaries of cultural theory and practice.

It is argued here that all constructions of cultural models have a purpose, and that the current debate on the nature of postmodernist culture is no exception. The concept of postmodernism has become the focus of discussion in which different conceptual models and competing accounts vie for the privilege of establishing the ultimate explanation. Yet at the same time, despite the number of studies currently being published on the topic, this debate has become increasingly sterile. It is, as Dana Polan argues:

. . . almost as if the current forms of the postmodernist discussion simultaneously establish a certain number of terms or basic elements and set the procedures by which one can operate with these terms. One is constrained in advance to refer to certain figures, certain key texts . . . and constrained to do no more than take up any one of a number of pre-set positions on them. The postmodernist effect intensely frames critical discourse as a kind of mechanistic *combinatoire* in which everything is given in advance, in which there can be no practice but the endless recombination of fixed pieces from the generative machine.<sup>2</sup>

This is true to the extent that all theoretical discourse necessarily operates from the basis of certain key issues.

However, in the case of postmodernism, this process has resulted in a mechanistic recombination of theories which have begun to ossify into dogma. Thus, as Carolyn Allen remarks in her article 'Feminist Criticism and Postmodernism'(1987), "Seen from one angle, feminism, with its commitment to material change, has nothing in common with postmodernism and its preoccupation with language and the free play of signifiers. Indeed, many feminist critics view such a connection on a scale ranging somewhere from distracting to pernicious".<sup>3</sup> In particular this notion of constant reference to certain figures and certain key texts has, as I suggested earlier, created a somewhat misleading notion of postmodernism as an arid, apolitical set of fatuous literary games. Carolyn Allen similarly acknowledges that there are problems with the prevailing concept of postmodernism, and yet as she goes on to point out, "If feminist criticism is to continue as a vehicle for social change as well as a variety of cultural analysis, it must not limit itself either in audience or in the kind of signifying practices it investigates".<sup>4</sup>

As I suggested in my Introduction, a dominant model of postmodernism has evolved since the 1950s, largely in Anglo-American critical studies, and it is this model, or variations of it, which have shaped

the critical debate. Within these critical studies, a major trend has emerged in which it is possible to identify some significant contradictions in the concept of postmodernism that have arisen from a mismatch between theory and practice. It is this disjuncture which has drawn the attention of feminist critics to the inconsistency of theoretical propositions of postmodernism.

In many discussions of postmodernism, the terms and procedures of the debate are narrow and restrictive, and tend to refer to a cultural model which relatively excludes the varied and diverse contributions made by many different women. The position of women within the pluralistic postmodern condition is a fundamental characteristic of postmodernism. Yet, there is a dominant trend to characterise women's participation in the postmodern arena as something which does not need addressing in the context of the postmodern debate. As Carolyn Brown argues in her essay 'Feminist Literary Strategies in the Postmodern Condition' (1989), "the plurality and diversity of narratives of women's existences, the articulation of their hopes and desires in a multiplicity of practices"<sup>5</sup> is impossible to ignore within the context of attempts to define postmodernism.

The field of postmodern theory and postmodern criticism has rapidly become institutionalised, and as such, has become the site of power politics.



It is important to recognise that the discourse of the postmodern, as with all discursive practices, does not merely express some already existing state of affairs, and describe its meaning. Since discourse itself is a form of social practice in which meaning is determined and constructed, then postmodern discourse similarly both determines and constructs the nature and meaning of the postmodern. As Linda Hutcheon argues in her article 'Feminism and Postmodernism' (1989):

. . . postmodernist literature and art put into question a whole series of inter-connected concepts that have come to be generally associated with what we conveniently label as "liberal humanism"; autonomy, transcendence, certainty, authority, units, totalization, system, universalization, center, continuity, teleology, closure, hierarchy, homogeneity, uniqueness, origin . . . To put these concepts into question, however, is not to deny them - only to interrogate their relation to experience.<sup>6</sup>

Hutcheon notes the paradoxical nature of postmodernism, and suggests that despite the apparent rejection of rationalist modes of thought, postmodern theories dominate and control the debate by defining the boundaries within which postmodernism can be said to exist. There is a ready made method for this process: it exists in the dominant ideology of our culture which consists of a conceptual mapping based on the notion of centre and periphery, dominant and marginal. Those who are not considered to be at the centre in terms of gender, race, class, sexual preference or religion, are thus posited as Other. Hutcheon suggests that it is this process, which



retains the forms of binary oppositional thought, that constitutes one of the major contradictions of postmodern theory.

In this sense, issues of power are already incorporated within postmodern discourse, as Richard Terdiman maintains in his discussion of how marginalised groups develop discursive strategies of resistance:

. . . engaged with the realities of power, human communities use words not in contemplation but in *competition*. Such struggles are never equal ones. The facts of domination, of control, are inscribed in the signs available for use by all members of a social formation.<sup>7</sup>

The work of mainstream critics constitutes the prevailing postmodern discourse which has set up another, very plausible 'master discourse'.

Whilst the postmodern debate appears to allow for fierce discussion and impassioned critical positions within its own terms, such as the opposing positions typified by Charles Newman and Raymond Federman, it cannot recognise and does not seem to tolerate dissent.

Postmodern theory is fundamentally contradictory in that it has set up the terms for a plurality of discourses and yet conducts itself as a self-justifying and self-perpetuating debate which evades and denies the very conditions which it celebrates. Linda Hutcheon maintains in her text *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) that "while much of the actual criticism of postmodern fiction is still premised on a humanist belief in the universal human urge to generate systems to order experience . . . the fiction itself

challenges such critical assumptions".<sup>8</sup> The contradictory nature of postmodern discourse will, I hope, become more evident through my exposition in Chapters Two and Three of the way in which there appears to be a significant gap between the work of mainstream critics and the actual practice of postmodernism in the novels and short stories of the women writers I have chosen to discuss.

Steven Connor's text *Postmodernist Culture* (1989) may be seen as a representative example of how many critics working in the area of postmodernism have responded to the issues raised by the notion of Otherness, and in particular, by the diversity of feminisms. Connor suggests that postmodern discourse repeatedly "names and correspondingly closes off the very world of cultural difference and plurality which it allegedly brings to visibility".<sup>9</sup> Yet Connor also notes how "We are in and of the moment that we are attempting to analyse, in and of the structures we employ to analyse it".<sup>10</sup> However despite Connor's claim to self-reflexivity, his notion of a critical community within literary criticism relatively excludes the work of feminist critics, and the fictions he cites as examples of postmodernism do not include any novels by women writers.

It would seem that the 'we' of Connor's discourse is less extensive than he might care to admit, and that in 'our' culture, postmodernist novels are only written by men. Perhaps in order to remedy this oversight, Connor

allocates two pages in his chapter 'Postmodernism and Cultural Politics' to feminism. Yet such a gesture is precisely what a number of feminist critics object to in the proposition that there may be an alignment between postmodernism and feminism. The political strategy of Elaine Showalter, for example, in establishing the notion of a women's literary tradition which has a value in its own right, has arguably arisen out of a cultural situation that Connor's work typifies.

A more perceptive approach to feminism adopted by certain postmodernist critics has been indicated by Craig Owens. Owens' response to this problem is to suggest that the issue of assimilation is crucial to understanding how this process operates at a critical level and the ideological nature of its activities:

The feminist voice is usually regarded as one among many, its insistence on difference as testimony to the pluralism of the times. Thus feminism is rapidly assimilated to a whole string of liberation or self-determination groups. . . . Moreover, men appear unwilling to address the issues placed on the critical agenda by women unless those issues have first been neut(e)ralized - although this, too, is a problem of assimilation: to the already known, the already written.<sup>11</sup>

To disarm a dissenting voice by the process of assimilation is a well known and widely practised technique of power politics. The patriarchal discourse contained within the ideology of the dominant male culture has been highlighted by a number of feminist critics as one of the major aspects



contributing to women's subordinate position within culture.

To intervene in this process is to find the lacuna of the postmodern, for such an intervention disturbs the balance of power. It could be argued that there is a parallel between the way in which the 'feminist voice,' or to be more accurate 'feminist voices' may be assimilated into postmodernism, and how other marginal or peripheral voices are absorbed by society generally. Terry Eagleton's analysis of the way in which power systems are structured within critical discourse demonstrates the nature of this issue:

Regional dialects of the discourse, so to speak, are acknowledged and sometimes tolerated, but you must not sound as though you are speaking another language altogether. To do so is to realise in the sharpest possible way that critical discourse is power. To be on the inside of the discourse itself is to be blind to this power, for what is more natural and non-dominative than to speak one's own language.<sup>12</sup>

In Eagleton's terms then it would seem that if feminism is viewed as a 'regional dialect', then it may be tolerated within the dominant discourse. However, it would appear that the diversity of feminist voices and the multiplicity of women's postmodernist fiction do represent 'another language' to those who are inside the dominant critical discourse.

The majority of studies engaged in constructing theories of the postmodern and analyzing the nature of postmodernism create a critical arena in which a plurality of tensions, disagreements, opinions, views, arguments and positions are articulated. In introducing other discourses into



the plurality of 'language games' within postmodern theory, the work of feminist critics such as Linda Hutcheon, Meaghan Morris, Helen Carr and Carolyn Allen discloses that even postmodern discursive practice is not neutral and value free. It is still part of the dominant Western culture and partakes in its systems of beliefs, values and attitudes, in its ideologies, and in its cultural assumptions.

At a political level, a number of feminist critics seek to explain the continued social, economic and cultural subordination of women by examining the elements of power within the hegemony of cultural attitudes. In my view one of the most significant contributions to the 'exclusion of women' debate has been made by María Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman in their article 'Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for "The Woman's Voice"' (1988). Lugones and Spelman call into question the universality implied by an uncritical use of the word women by feminist critics. They acknowledge that "there are not just epistemological, but moral and political reasons for demanding that the woman's voice be heard, after centuries of androcentric din".<sup>13</sup> But they then go on to raise the issue of what exactly is meant when feminists demand that the woman's voice should be heard.

Lugones and Spelman point out that the 'exclusion of women' debate is misleading in so far as there has been insufficient attention given to other

determinants of the process by which subjectivity is constituted. They argue that the focus on gender as a unifying category can only be made by ignoring other issues:

. . . the demand thus simply made ignores at least two related points: (1) it is only possible for a woman who does not feel highly vulnerable with respect to other parts of her identity, e.g. race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual alliance, etc., to conceive of her voice simply or essentially as a 'woman's voice'; (2) just because not all women are equally vulnerable with respect to race, class, etc., some women's voices are more likely to be heard than others by those who have heretofore been giving - or silencing - the accounts of women's lives.<sup>14</sup>

Lugones and Spelman thus argue that not even feminist theory is immune from participating in the power structures of the dominant Western tradition, for as they rightly maintain "feminist theory has not for the most part arisen out of a medley [of] women's voices: instead, the theory has arisen out of the voices, the experiences, of a fairly small handful of women, and if other women's voices do not sing in harmony with the theory, they aren't counted as women's voices - rather, they are the voices of the woman as Hispana, Black, Jew etc".<sup>15</sup> In my view Lugones and Spelman highlight an aspect of feminism which has always been problematic, but which tends to have been subsumed in an overall attempt to create a sense of cohesion amongst women.

However, I would argue that the work of those feminists who attempt

to bring feminism and postmodernism into conjunction with one another provides a standpoint from which heterogeneity, multiplicity, and difference are recognized rather than ignored. If feminism has too long assumed a unity between women based on gender alone, then the practice of postmodernist women novelists such as Brigid Brophy, Muriel Spark, Angela Carter, Joyce Carol Oates, Christine Brooke-Rose, Toni Morrison, Kathy Acker and Margaret Atwood, amongst others, demonstrates the differences amongst and between women.

The work of Adrienne Rich has consistently highlighted the problematics of women's positioning within culture and the ways in which power is institutionalised in society. In the context of this discussion of postmodernism and feminism it might at first seem as though Rich's standpoint would be incompatible. Yet I would contend that whilst one aspect of the work of Adrienne Rich, who identifies herself as a radical lesbian feminist, seeks to create a unity amongst women, other dimensions highlight the differences between women on the basis of sexual preference and race. If the diversity of feminisms is to be welcomed, rather than ignored, then I would suggest that there are some, but not other aspects of her work which may be considered pertinent to a discussion of the alignment between feminism and postmodernism.

The Foreword to Rich's text *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (1979)



provides a relevant example of how feminist and postmodernist thinking may be viewed in conjunction with one another. Here Rich notes how the process of subjectivity consists of a sense of multiplicity rather than a coherent, unified self:

The essays in this book represent the journey of my own thought toward the paragraph I have just written. A journey of this kind is not linear. I would feel sorry if I thought that anyone reading this collection of writings would imagine that I have arrived smoothly from that point to this. Rather, I trust the contradictions and repetitions in this book to speak for themselves. I disagree with myself in this book, and I find in myself both severe and tender feelings toward the women I have been, whose thoughts I find here.<sup>16</sup>

Rich's acknowledgement of "the women I have been" and of the contradictions inherent within her own non-linear discourse, suggests both the degree of overlap and the complexities of the relations between feminism and postmodernism.

Writing in *Of Woman Born* (1977), Rich provides an early feminist account of how power operates within culture but which is nevertheless still pertinent today. She pointed out that even with visible institutions, it is not in their 'symbolic architecture' that true power lies, but in:

. . . the ways in which power is maintained and transferred behind the walls and beneath the domes, the invisible understandings which guarantee that it shall reside in certain hands but not in others, that information shall be transmitted to this one but not to that one, the hidden collusion and connections with other institutions of which it is supposedly independent.<sup>17</sup>



Thus Adrienne Rich provides one dimension of how the different voices of feminism may provide a critique of postmodern theory by revealing the hidden discourse of power within the postmodern debate, and questioning the process by which it perpetuates the relative exclusion of some women from cultural representation.

Postmodern theoretical accounts have legitimised the practices of postmodernism so that, for example, the fictional texts of some literary postmodernists have now been constructed into a new literary canon. But at the same time it must be recognized that, as Victor Burgin argues, "Institutional legitimation imposes a grid of the permissible upon the field of the possible".<sup>18</sup> The new literary canon of postmodernism that is currently receiving much attention tends to consist only of male writers; the work of women postmodernist writers has been critically disregarded and relatively neglected.

Christine Brooke-Rose has addressed this issue from her perspective both as a writer and as a critic in recent interviews and essays. Brooke-Rose describes how her position as a writer, as a woman writer, as a postmodernist woman writer, as a late-comer to feminism, and as a literary critic allows her to recognise that the notion of a unified self is more usefully replaced by the concept of multiplicity. She also acknowledges ruefully that gender politics has affected the reception of her fiction. The

method of legitimising a grid of the permissible upon the field of possible postmodern works derives from the dominant cultural master discourse, as Brooke-Rose highlights when she suggests:

In theory the canonic/noncanonic opposition applies to all writers and thus cuts across sexual and any other oppositions. In practice a canon is very much a masculine notion, a priesthood (not to be polluted by women), a club, a sacred male preserve. . . . And not only a male preserve but that of a privileged caste. . . . Nevertheless, male outsiders enter the canon more easily than women do, for reasons much deeper than that of caste. . . . Traditionally then, this notion of a canon, of a central tradition around the central myth, which is essentially male, priestly and caste-bound, underlies types and levels of critical attention, so that despite the various and increasing waves of emancipation since the nineteenth century, certain relics remain, ill iterations in the unconscious of society.<sup>19</sup>

Brooke-Rose raises the issue of how the power of critical discourse operates in such a way as to acknowledge women as writers, but then to discount them as somehow ineligible for consideration as postmodernist writers.

By calling into question how mainstream critics relatively exclude the work of postmodernist women writers from critical interpretation, Brooke-Rose notes how their novels become forgotten, and are often mysteriously absent from critical essays and books. She writes, "only the canonical is deemed worthy of interpretation. Inside the canon interpretation multiplies wildly, while outside it a text does not even exist. Further, the pressure of the canonic is such that . . . this process of canonization, until feminist



work, has been more consistently applied to male works than to the few female entries".<sup>20</sup> Brooke-Rose considers herself to be a postmodernist writer, interested in innovatory literary techniques, and especially interested in the nature of language as discourse. At the same time, many of her novels focus on the ways in which women are positioned as subordinate within patriarchal cultures and how language operates to create and perpetuate gender divisions as a structural element of power.

As a postmodernist woman writer, Brooke-Rose's fictions have rarely received the attention they deserve. Postmodern theorists have constructed a methodological grid that overlaps with the ideological mapping of culture in general, in which it seems as though, as Adrienne Rich argues, "women are a subgroup, that 'man's world' is the 'real' world, that patriarchy is equivalent to culture and culture to patriarchy".<sup>21</sup> Despite their very different feminist standpoints both Brooke-Rose and Rich expose one the major problems in postmodernist culture, indicating that there would appear to be a fundamental contradiction in prevailing theoretical accounts of postmodernism.

Whereas *postmodernism* recognises the contemporary sphere as a multi-cultural space in which all traditional hierarchies are in question, *postmodern theory* organises the contemporary cultural field in terms of not only what is permissible but also what is thinkable within its dominant



power discourse. Brooke-Rose comments ironically that "women writers, not safely dead, who at any one living moment are trying to 'look in new ways' or 'reread,' and therefore rewrite, their world, are rarely treated on the same level of seriousness as their male counterparts".<sup>22</sup> Noting how some women writers such as Kate Chopin or Edith Wharton were dismissed as imitators but are now receiving critical attention long after their death, how others such as Ivy Compton-Burnett, Nathalie Sarraute and Jean Rhys only received recognition very late in life, and still others such as H D or Laura Riding were less renown for their work than because they were someone's mistress, Brooke-Rose illustrates the political nature of the range of problems confronting the woman writer.

Clearly then, there are a considerable number of feminist critics who would argue that it is not the case that women's participation in the cultural sphere is minimal and therefore not of value. Donna Przybylowicz, for example, in discussing the relations between different strands of feminist theory, maintains that there is a shared concern which involves attempts to:

. . . destroy the hegemonic phallogocentric system. The demand should not be for an exclusively female society but for a society where men and women share the same anti-logocentric, anti-hierarchical values. Women's history and accomplishments must be acknowledged and not subordinated to a marginal status or relegated to silence. . . women's contributions to society exist because of a division of labor based on sex *and* class, which reflects the attitudes of a patriarchal order.<sup>23</sup>

Przybylowicz's comments would seem to reinforce the work of those feminist literary critics such as Linda Hutcheon and Helen Carr who seek to explore the postmodernist fictions of both men and women as representative of cultural modes of resistance.

In Terry Eagleton's discussion of the political dimensions of socio-symbolic sign systems which construct and are inscribed within culture, he writes:

It is in the nature of feminist politics that signs and images, written and dramatized experience, should be of especial significance. Discourse in all its forms is an obvious concern for feminists, either as places where women's oppression can be deciphered, or as places where it can be challenged.<sup>24</sup>

The non-recognition of women's productive role in culture in general, and in postmodernism in particular, is a question of the arbitrary authority of the dominant cultural paradigm and the exercise of power politics in terms of gender difference, and it is these issues which many feminist literary critics seek to challenge.

However, whilst a dominant cultural discourse may attempt to achieve total control in all spheres, it can never do so. Cultural hegemony exists in a constant state of tension between the dominant discourse and other competing discourses. It is for this reason that the conjunction of postmodernism and feminism, as for example in the novels by postmodernist women writers such as Christine Brooke-Rose, Toni Morrison, Angela



Carter, and Joyce Carol Oates, amongst others, can and does have important implications for an understanding of culture. The use of postmodernist literary strategies and techniques in their novels, together with political insights drawn from diverse strands of feminism, articulates voices of dissent against some of the key principles upon which Western culture is based, as I shall hopefully demonstrate in my discussion of their work in Chapters Three, Four, and Five.

The plurality of cultural discourse was noted by Susan Griffin and is highlighted in her commentary on the nature of patriarchal ideology, where she argues that, "That which in society has created conditions which imprison us, also determines the shape of the dialogue we have between us".<sup>25</sup> One of the more commonly shared strategies throughout various strands of feminist criticism is to 're-read' culture and thus emphasize the ways in which ideologies of gender, race, and class operate. Such different writings as Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Tillie Olsen's *Silences*, Bell Hooks' *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center*, and Cheryl Wall's *Changing Our Own Words* have drawn upon the recognition that the contradictory experience of women, who are seen as both inside and outside of culture, may provide one of the basic underpinnings of their theoretical practice.

The typologies of feminism present a spectrum of viewpoints which



range across such fields as philosophy, politics, literature and literary criticism, history, psychoanalysis, sociology, popular culture and film studies, marxism and post-structuralism. As Alix Kates Shulman once noted, "feminism is not a monolith; there are many different, even at times, contradictory positions".<sup>26</sup> Historically, feminism has always been heterogeneous and because of this, different analyses and tactics co-exist to critique the existing social structure.

Linda Hutcheon, for example, has argued that one of the most significant characteristics of feminist theory is that it "offers perhaps the clearest example of the importance of maintaining an awareness of the diversity of the history and culture of women: their differences of race, ethnic group, class, sexual preference. It would be more accurate, of course, to speak of feminisms, in the plural, for there are many different orientations that are subsumed under the general label of feminism".<sup>27</sup> This tension between the different modes of feminist critique is inevitable; it is both its source of energy and its source of committed engagement. Although there are many differences within feminist theory, there is nevertheless a shared purpose in that one of the common aims is the analysis of gender in social and economic structures and in the discursive and representational cultural systems.

Feminist literary critics who produce critical accounts of the 'ideology

of gender' provide an exemplary illustration of the way in which a dominant ideology operates. Critics such as Patricia Waugh, Linda Hutcheon, Meaghan Morris and Helen Carr have demonstrated that the dominance of male writers in the literary canon of postmodernism, for example, shows how the perceptions of mainstream literary critics are already gendered, though they pretend to speak from a universal value system. As I shall highlight in the following chapters, the relative exclusion of women writers from this canon indicates the gendered nature of critical discourse. For when the signifying process of legitimising certain texts is focused upon by the above mentioned feminist critics, amongst others, the gaps, blind spots, prejudices, and biases within this process are revealed and it is possible to see a sign system literally *as* a sign system.

It is through the examination of the concept of language as a sign system that it can be seen how the dominant culture signals its understanding of the lexicon of gender as one in which women are secondary and their cultural practices merely ancillary. For example, in the early 1970s Ann Oakley argued that dominant accounts of contemporary culture showed that "a way of seeing is a way of not seeing"<sup>28</sup> and she described how social and cultural studies set up a process of focusing attention on some areas of social reality so that issues concerning women were rarely the focus of attention. If the conceptualisation of postmodernism is to be analyzed in

such a way that its inherent contradictions and tensions can be acknowledged rather than glossed over, then an aesthetic model of postmodernism must surely include the representation of women's contribution to the contemporary cultural scene.

Yet despite the prolific published accounts by feminist critics across most discipline areas since the late 1960s, it is paradoxical that even in 1982 Mary O'Brien should state that, "It is a commonplace feminist complaint that the history of male supremacy has bequeathed to us a set of cultural and symbolic forms that view human experience from the distorted and one-sided perspective of a single gender".<sup>29</sup> An important feminist issue is expressed by the aphorism that the 'personal is political'<sup>30</sup>, a rhetorical statement which attempts to reconcile both the taboo area of the personal sphere with the power relations of the public sphere. Catharine MacKinnon argues that the concept of the personal as political ". . . is not a simile, not a metaphor, and not an analogy".<sup>31</sup> The principle underlying this concept is that "gender as a division of power is discoverable and verifiable through women's experience of sexual objectification, which is definitive of and synonymous with women's lives as gender female".<sup>32</sup> It is for this reason that, for feminism, "the personal is epistemologically the political, and its epistemology is its politics".<sup>33</sup> These aspects, which are representative of many strands of feminist thought, although admittedly not of others, are



highlighted by Christine Brooke-Rose's writing that I discussed earlier.

Brooke-Rose notes how the works of many innovative modernist women writers were not considered by mainstream critics to be of equal value to that written by their male contemporaries. Further, reflecting upon her own experience as an innovative writer, she points out some of the problems which she perceives in relation to the attempts of feminist critics to deal with women's writing. Brooke-Rose draws upon Elaine Showalter's well known essay 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness,' to illustrate the dilemmas facing both women writers and feminist critics. Showalter's description of how male and female culture may be conceptualised by the notion of the 'dominant' (male) group and the 'muted' (female) group, based on the work of Shirley and Edwin Ardener, proposes that there is an imaginary area or 'wild zone' which only women inhabit. But Brooke-Rose argues this notion of a 'wild zone' of women's writing raises a number of problematic issues.

Although Brooke-Rose appreciates the attractiveness of the concept of a women's literary tradition proposed by Showalter, she notes how the work of many women writers was easily dismissed by mainstream critics of earlier literary movements, and thus points out that "one *safe* way not to recognize innovative women is to shove them under a label, and one such is 'woman writer'".<sup>34</sup> Brooke-Rose suggests that whilst such a label may

be cause for celebration by some women writers, it also creates problems for others whose writing does not seem to fit into a new female canon. Indeed, the fiction of postmodernist women writers, such as Brooke-Rose herself, has until recently received very little attention by feminist critics.

Brooke-Rose, in commenting upon the belatedness of feminist critical response to the work of innovatory women writers, highlights the disadvantages of a female canon:

Naturally it must be comforting to be backed and pushed and hailed by a sisterhood (a female canon), but that sisterhood is, with some notable exceptions, generally so busy on feminist 'themes' and on discovering or reinterpreting women authors of the past . . . that it has no time to notice or to make an effort to understand, let alone to back, an unfamiliar (experimental) woman writer who does not necessarily write on, or only on, such themes, but whose discourse is, in Elaine Showalter's phrase "a double-voiced discourse, containing a 'dominant' and a 'muted' story," what Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* call a 'palimpsest.' If the 'wild zone' writer is inaccessible to most male readers, she is at least appreciated by feminists. The 'double-voiced' writer (unless he is a man) antagonizes both, she is in the sea between two continents.<sup>35</sup>

The problems that Brooke-Rose discerns in the political strategy of separatism have, however, been addressed recently by such critics as Linda Hutcheon, Meaghan Morris, and Helen Carr for example. Brooke-Rose wishes to see forms of critical practice that are more flexible than in the past, so that the work of all kinds of women, and men too, is not hived off into priestly canons or female ghettos.

There is at present a disjuncture between dominant accounts of postmodernism which do not take into account the contribution made by women postmodernist practitioners and feminist accounts of postmodernism. Of the few male critics commenting upon this issue, Craig Owens suggests that "women's insistence on difference and incommensurability may not only be compatible with, but also an instance of postmodern thought".<sup>36</sup> It is recognised that in all theoretical accounts, analysis and description must always take place from a point of view. All discourse operates from the basis of those aspects deemed relevant or important.

Yet as Jean Bethke Elshtain points out "Description as evaluation either opens events up for critical scrutiny or forecloses on our capacity to examine them in this way. A serious problem of choice emerges for the thinker who wishes to describe a situation and simultaneously condemn it".<sup>37</sup> Feminist critics need therefore, as Lugones and Spelman argue, to be able to maintain an edge of self-criticism whilst deconstructing other theoretical discourse. For it is only by confronting the anomalies of dominant theoretical accounts, that they can be challenged and ultimately this can and does lead to the reversal and shifts of paradigm. The discourse of postmodernism stresses the paradigm shifts currently taking place and yet still does not take into account the role of feminism within those changes.

As Linda Hutcheon has repeatedly pointed out, there is a genuine



deficiency in the dominant models of postmodernism that has led to a constant recycling of distorted theories and impoverished accounts of the contemporary cultural condition. Terry Eagleton has argued that "'culture' is once more a vital nexus between politics and personal experience, mediating human needs and desires into publicly discussable form, teaching new modes of subjectivity and combating received representations".<sup>38</sup> However, this sense of a vital nexus is overlooked in dominant accounts of the postmodern.

Despite the fact that critics have been constructing models of the postmodern for nearly thirty years, recent critical works on postmodernism continue to pursue a genderised perception of the postmodern condition which demands a thorough re-evaluation of existing theory. As Gisela Breitling says in her essay 'Speech, Silence and the Discourse of Art', "historiographical methods which consider only half of humanity . . . construct not only an incomplete universality but also a false one".<sup>39</sup> Breitling's comments reinforce the argument of postmodernist women writers such as Christine Brooke-Rose in suggesting that there clearly is a form of sexual/textual politics operating at the heart of dominant accounts of postmodern theory which must be addressed.

It has been suggested that there is a schism between postmodern theory and feminist theory which cannot be bridged, and that to incorporate

feminism within the postmodern debate is to disadvantage feminism yet again. Meaghan Morris raises this issue in *The Pirate's Fiancée: Feminism, Reading, Postmodernism* (1988). Morris shows how "a sense of intrigue" has developed "around a presumed absence - or withholding - of women's speech" in relation to postmodernism.<sup>40</sup>

Morris cites the work of Craig Owens, Andreas Huyssen and Jonathan Arac, as instances of critics who have noted the absence of women's writing on the issues of postmodernism and feminism. She demonstrates that the majority of accounts of postmodernism retain the old habit of privileging the names of 'master narrative' writers, at the expense of other contributors to the debate. Morris utilises the device of listing 'excluded' women and provides a seven page bibliography of women writers whom she perceives to have discussed the relationship between feminism and postmodernism.

By choosing this method to deconstruct the discourse of postmodern theory, Morris is immediately trapped in the 'but what about the women' syndrome. Morris recognises that her methodology has created a problem that is apparently irresolvable:

The problem that interests me . . . is . . . the difficulty that a feminist critic now faces in *saying* something about this - in trying to point out, let alone come to terms with, what seems to be a continued, repeated, basic *exclusion* of women's work from a highly invested field of intellectual and political endeavour. What woman writer wants to say, in 1987, that men still aren't reading feminist work? that women are being

'left out again' . . . ?<sup>41</sup>

This privileging of the writers of 'master narratives' is revealed by Morris to be part of the sexual/textual politics of the theorising of the postmodern.

In using the methodology of counteraction to put gender issues on the postmodern agenda, Morris is trapped in a labyrinth of discourse, as she herself demonstrates:

In addressing the myth of a postmodernism still waiting for its women we can find an example of a genre, as well as a discourse, which in its untransformed state leaves a woman no place from which to speak, or nothing to say. For by resorting to the device of listing 'excluded' women. . . I have positioned myself in a speech-genre all too familiar in everyday life, as well as in pantomime, cartoons, and sitcoms: the woman's complaint, or *nagging*.<sup>42</sup>

Faced with this contradictory position and rather than leave the postmodern arena altogether, Morris suggests instead that a critical intervention can be made by providing an alternative bibliography. This bibliography of women's writing is proposed as a way in which feminist work can be used to "frame discussions of postmodernism, and not the other way round".<sup>43</sup>

One of the most significant aspects of Morris' bibliography is the way in which it traces the work of feminist writers over a similar time-span to that of postmodernist writers, indicating the areas where both feminism and postmodernism seem to intersect. Whilst Morris' solution of offering an alternative bibliography has its merits, it does not go far enough in terms of



engaging theoretically with the dominant accounts of the postmodern.

However, the suggestion here is not that there should be some kind of synthesis which attempts to integrate feminist issues within the postmodern framework. On the contrary, there is a fundamental problem with accounts of postmodernism which exclude feminist theory and practice, and this is crucially a failure, not at the level of theory, but at the level of method. Theoretical conceptions must necessarily organise their area of enquiry and concern. It is method which shapes and constructs the vision of social reality for any theory, and it is method which thereby creates its particular conception of politics.

Thus, the concept of postmodernism derives its *meaning* from the way in which it is approached, from the method of interpreting its cultural manifestation. In this sense, it is method that organises and determines what counts as evidence and defines what is taken as verification. Feminist critics working from a number of different standpoints provide a range of methods that call into question the dominant definitions of postmodernism. Thus, from the standpoint of socialist feminism, Michèle Barrett has argued that, "Cultural politics are crucially important to feminism because they involve struggles over *meaning*"<sup>44</sup>, and since women's representation in culture appears to be defined as of marginal significance this is clearly an important issue which needs addressing.

The way forward, then, instead of engaging in debate over whether postmodernism is a facet of feminism, or whether feminism is an aspect of postmodernism, is "to explore the conflicts and connections between the *methods* that found it meaningful to analyze social conditions in those terms in the first place".<sup>45</sup> The argument put forward in this thesis is thus concerned with articulating the points at which feminism and postmodernism intersect by examining the politics and practice of postmodernist literary criticism. Rather than trying to find out *why* the achievements of women have been ignored, it is more centrally concerned with constructing an account of postmodernism in which we may see *how* women's cultural achievements figure in the postmodern world. In particular, this study will examine postmodernist literature and will focus especially on the work of a number of different women writers.

One of the purposes of postmodern critical discourse could arguably be taken as an attempt to organise culture into a new field of knowledge. Attempts to differentiate postmodernist literary practice from that of modernist writers may, in this sense, represent a conceptual paradigm shift. But to organise a new field of knowledge is also to organise a new set of power relations: power is granted to the definers.

Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore point out in *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism* (1989), that "Culture

itself is the limit of our knowledge: there is no available truth outside culture with which we can challenge injustice".<sup>46</sup> Since all meanings *are* cultural, and are at the same time unfixed and plural, they are also the site of political power plays. Belsey and Moore argue that one of the strengths of the diversity of feminisms is the recognition that "culture is also contradictory, the location of resistances as well as oppression, and is therefore ultimately unstable"<sup>47</sup>, and thus there are many possibilities from which to operate within this contradiction.

One of the fundamental aims that unite different feminisms, as Rosalind Brunt and Caroline Rowan maintain, is to "transform the boundaries of knowledge, by offering a critique which highlights the absences and silences of orthodox approaches".<sup>48</sup> Clearly, certain feminist writers, both in terms of critical project and political intent, share affinities with the work of postmodernist theorists, in their attempts to explore and change traditional concepts of knowledge. The 'deconstructionist' project of the post-structuralist Jacques Derrida and the work of Gayatri Spivak may be viewed as one example of the ways in which postmodern theory and feminist theory have a common approach to their analytical work.

Whilst it is not my intention to consider the similarities and differences between their work in any depth here, there are nevertheless aspects which are of relevance to this discussion. Derrida's theoretical



practice in *Of Grammatology* (1976), for instance, demonstrates a kind of textual game in which texts are confronted and read against themselves, so that the inherent conflicts are laid bare. In Derrida's reflections on Saussure's *Course of General Linguistics*, Derrida seizes upon the 'aporias' of the text, the gaps and blindspots, to reveal the self-contradictions which betray the tension between what the text means to say and what it is constrained to say.

Thus Derrida focuses on how that which "was chased off limits", nevertheless does not "cease to haunt" the rhetoric of its own method.<sup>49</sup> Spivak utilises deconstruction and demonstrates, for example, how white feminist critics have marginalised the work of women of colour, and in privileging gender they have ignored their own racism. In my view, one of the significant elements of Linda Hutcheon's work is the way in which she develops a critique of theories of the postmodern, that demonstrates how postmodern discourse operates from a power politics of gender and racial difference, and that whilst the issues and concerns of those who are 'ex-centric' are 'chased off limits', their very invisibility will continue to 'haunt' postmodern rhetoric.

It is my contention in this thesis that the recurring problem of discussing the alignment between feminism and postmodernism without simultaneously incorporating the issues of feminism within a dominant male

paradigm can be resolved in such a way that does not resort to the 'women and . . .' syndrome, or, as it has been called, the "add-women-and-stir method".<sup>50</sup> An effective solution is to re-evaluate prevailing theories of postmodernist literature by focusing on what has been left out and to deconstruct postmodernist theory against itself. As part of this process, in the following chapter I shall examine how mainstream accounts have formulated an aesthetic model of postmodernism from the late 1950s onwards. Then in Chapter Three I shall relate this account of postmodernism to that of a number of postmodernist women writers whose novels and short stories have been created over the same period.

Developments within feminist criticism since the 1960s have provided a new analysis of women's marginal social and cultural position. Yet much of the drive of feminist work has been seen to have little or no impact or implication for other academic/discipline areas. Feminist researchers Liz Stanley and Sue Wise have argued that the problem is that "If 'academic feminism' becomes 'women's studies' then this separation of feminism from particular disciplines may also separate it from ideas and debates of crucial importance to it".<sup>51</sup> Myra Jehlen agrees that the majority of feminist scholars who create an alternative context in which "women are not just another focus but the centre of an investigation whose categories and terms are derived from the world of female experience"<sup>52</sup> do face a particular

problem.

Feminist scholars see the issues they raise as having a context of their own but which are at the same time global and structural in character. The problem is, as Jehlen points out, "that the issues and problems women define from the inside as global, men treat from the outside as insular . . . thus there is little indication of feminist impact on the universe of male discourse".<sup>53</sup> This is particularly true in the case of literature, where the implications of the work of feminist literary critics has not been seen to be of relevance to the postmodernist debate.

This same point has also been raised by feminist art practitioners, who fear that their work will simply be hived off into a 'feminine ghetto'.

The German artist and painter Gisela Breitling argues:

. . . after all, the male-oriented bias of the culture business is no secret to feminists and they are therefore justified in mistrusting a public which has from time immemorial assigned certain characteristics to 'women's art', specified it as feminine, and excluded it from 'general' development trends.<sup>54</sup>

Like Christine Brooke-Rose, Breitling articulates here the desire for her work to be respected in its own terms, at the same time as being considered in its contemporary context.

It would seem that whilst the theme of 'both-and', rather than 'either-or' runs throughout accounts of postmodernism, mainstream critics are



unable to extend their schema to include *both* the specificity of feminist concerns *and* their cultural context. Arguably, this hiatus in dominant postmodern theorising occurs because in ignoring the issues raised by feminist criticisms, the contribution of some women to the cultural scene is cut away from its historical and contemporary context, so that "their work, their achievements and their ideas usually become incomprehensible".<sup>55</sup>

Wide ranging attempts in recent years by feminist critics to reconstruct the cultural history of women have consequently led to a reconsideration of the process of forming theories and concepts. This is not simply an exercise in archaeology, but a strategy of political action. Thus any consideration of women's cultural production, must also be linked to a critique of existing theory and history.

At the same time it must be recognised that women do not stand outside history but that "they are within history in a special position of exclusion in which they have developed their own mode of experiencing, their way of seeing things, their culture".<sup>56</sup> This paradoxical articulation of women's position of being 'within yet without' can be more clearly understood by applying the concept of "double ontology"<sup>57</sup> developed by Sandra Lee Bartky. Bartky argues that women are ontologically present within culture, but they are simultaneously denied a sense of presence by the political process of power relations inscribed within the dominant male

ideology. This concept facilitates an understanding of the process of being both at once involved and excluded, within and without, visible and invisible, and reveals the incommensurate nature of women's position within culture.

The focus of many feminist critical studies is upon the practice of developing criteria for what counts as 'knowledge', so that what is of relevance is the way concepts are defined, related to each other and used. It consists of questioning established ways of thinking, but in particular it calls into question the principles of rational thought and its claims to universality which hide a hierarchical value system in which women are always seen as Other. As Joan Robert has commented:

. . . what if the masculinist world view, which has depended on a logic of time lines, is also erroneous? What if the most fundamental error is the search for mono-causation? What if the world is really a field of interconnecting events, arranged in patterns of multiple meaning?<sup>58</sup>

Robert's argument is that theorising which proceeds from the basis of unquestioned assumptions about what constitutes knowledge and how meaning is constructed, is necessarily impoverished and open to challenge. Over a decade later, another feminist critic was to confirm Robert's probing, since it can be seen in Helen Carr's comment that such a mono-dimensional world view no longer holds true, and that "this world of uncertain directions and kaleidoscopic, contradictory images is increasingly labelled as

postmodernist".<sup>59</sup> These instances indicate that despite the diversity of feminist standpoints, there are methods of analysis which highlight the intersections between postmodernism and feminism which are nevertheless always "within yet outside the male paradigm"<sup>60</sup>, and as such expresses the double ontological position of feminisms in the postmodern world.

Adrienne Rich identified "the rejection of the dualism, of the positive-negative polarities between which most of our intellectual training has taken place. . . ." as a consistent "undercurrent of feminist thought".<sup>61</sup> It is paradoxical, then, that accounts of postmodernism which point out the contradictory and paradoxical nature of postmodernist practice, are unable to similarly construct a paradigm which is not based on binary thinking.

Linda Hutcheon takes up this point in her text *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, where she argues against the reductionist theorising of many postmodernist critics. She suggests that:

. . . the binary oppositions that are usually set up in the writings on postmodernism - between past and present, modern and postmodern, and so on - should probably be called into question, if only because, like the rhetoric of rupture (*discontinuity, decentering . . .*) *postmodernism* literally names and constitutes its own paradoxical identity, and does so in an uneasy contradictory relationship of constant slippage. So much that has been written on this subject has physically taken the form of opposing columns, usually labelled modernist versus postmodernist . . . But this is a structure that implicitly denies the mixed, plural, and contradictory nature of the postmodern enterprise.<sup>62</sup>



The problem that Hutcheon highlights is fundamentally that too many accounts of postmodernism are dualist.

Postmodern theoretical accounts point to the incommensurable nature of postmodernism itself, of its tendency to blur boundaries, to merge previously discrete cultural positions, to be 'both-and' rather than 'either-or'. Yet the simple fact that these discussions have proceeded without any substantial reference to similar debates within feminism, seriously weakens their accounts of postmodernism, for, as Carolyn Brown argues in her essay 'Feminist Literary Strategies in the Postmodern Condition,' "The conjuncture of feminism and postmodernism articulates politically the complexity of the postmodern existences and identities".<sup>63</sup> Therefore it can be argued that in failing to come to terms with the implications of the work of feminist critics and writers, postmodern theory does not simply demonstrate an intellectual limitation, it also demonstrates the hidden politics inscribed within its very discourse.

This political dimension of postmodern discourse stems from a form of rationalistic dualism, which is premised on binary thinking. Adrienne Rich, in characterising the way in which women are positioned in the construction of social reality, argued that some aspects of feminism might potentially challenge the dualism that had characterised Western philosophy for so much of its long history:

The dominant male culture, in separating man as knower from both woman and from nature as the objects of knowledge, evolved certain intellectual polarities which still have the power to blind our imaginations.<sup>64</sup>

It is this polarised way of thinking that perpetuates the positing of male values as the norm, and issues to do with women as Other. In rejecting this form of thought, the work of some feminist critics, though not all, does offer alternatives which may affect the dominant boundaries of knowledge. For example, Carolyn Brown points out, "The languages and analyses developed by feminist post-structuralism are attempts to articulate feminist cultural (sexual-textual) politics within the postmodern condition".<sup>65</sup> Brown would contend then, that such work operates from a basis of perceiving 'reality' as more complex and multi-dimensional than is commonly expressed in dominant accounts of the postmodern.

I would not like to suggest that feminism is the vanguard of revolution, or that somehow feminism inevitably reveals the 'truth' in a way that other methodologies do not. But in the sense that the diversity of feminisms indicate the potential for developing methods of analysis that can deal with "what in the West is offered to us as a 'culture of plenty', a culture of abundance and choice", a culture that has been defined as postmodernist culture,<sup>66</sup> it would seem that there is a shared concern between feminist and postmodernist critics in responding to multiple

constructions of reality which are continually open to both conflict or negotiation.

Many feminist critics have argued that traditional methods of analysis are unable to grasp the nature of different women's experience in the world. Thus, for instance, Helen Carr has commented that the "traditional binaries of advance/regress, improvement/impairment, progress/decline [do not] fit our contemporary experience, with its multitudinous, pluralistic range of images of women and diverse and contradictory political shifts".<sup>67</sup> Perhaps it is for this reason that the work of feminist scholars is not restricted to a single discipline; in its breadth it is able to work beyond interdisciplinary, and multidisciplinary boundaries, and can operate beyond traditional discipline areas to create trans-disciplinary work.

Similarly there are many instances of postmodernist women's fiction which have been neglected simply on the basis that it is impossible to categorise and classify them within any one mode of writing. One of the contradictions of postmodern theory is that these works are perceived as unclassifiable and are therefore ignored, whilst in fact they display the characteristics identified as postmodernist. Alison Light has expressed this paradox in describing some of the most interesting feminist work that has emerged over the last five or six year as:

. . . writing which doesn't fit into disciplines, nor strictly



speaking, into genre studies either; work which is anti-nomian, which sits perhaps uneasily in amongst a mix and match of perspectives and theories, and which isn't dutiful nor deferential.<sup>68</sup>

Tillie Olsen has described the situation of many women writers and critics who are confronted with the "effects of having to counter and encounter harmful treatment and circumstances as a writer who is female".<sup>69</sup> As I have pointed out earlier, there is a constant political issue here which indicates that feminist work may be discounted within patriarchal systems of thought that construct women's social reality as peripheral, marginal and Other.

By examining the relations between feminism and postmodernism, it is not my intention to suggest that the work of feminist critics provides simply just another definition of the postmodern condition. In my view it offers a crucial political intervention which is able to criticize the construction of the postmodern paradigm both from within and without.

Michèle Barrett emphasises the way in which feminism :

. . . has politicized everyday life - culture in the anthropological sense of the lived practices of a society - to an unparalleled degree. Feminism has also politicized the various forms of artistic and imaginative expression that are more popularly known as culture, reassessing and transforming film, literature, art, the theatre and so on.<sup>70</sup>

Yet the feminist project of a redefinition of dominant models of culture, is not without its own internal political struggles. Barrett's comment highlights

a number of controversial questions about feminism and postmodern culture which cannot simply be glossed over.

Essentially, these questions hinge upon the conflation of women's art and feminist art and the problems such a conflation creates. This issue is important for understanding the significance of women writers in literary postmodernism. For some feminists, the recovery of a women's cultural tradition, *per se*, is not of major importance, whereas for others, such recuperation is a fundamental feminist project. The work of feminist literary critics has for some time now been devoted to revising and re-evaluating the modernist canon, both in an attempt to reveal the hidden history of women's writing and as a basis for providing a context for contemporary women's literature.

Meaghan Morris's intervention, described earlier, into the sexual/textual politics of the postmodern debate, highlights the problems confronting feminist critics wishing to discuss the work of women postmodernist practitioners in relation to both feminism and postmodernism. Michèle Barrett poses the question "Is the recovery of women's artistic work of the past an integral part of our developing feminist project, or merely a sentimental resuscitation of marginalia better left in the obscurity to which establishment criticism has consigned it"<sup>71</sup>? In my view, the recovery of the wide range of women's writing from the past is not a sentimental act,

but a political act. For such work not only contextualises contemporary work which would otherwise be left in a cultural vacuum, but also challenges the value systems of establishment criticism.

Rosalind Coward, in her well known article 'This Novel Changes Lives: Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels?' would seem to suggest that there are affinities between the postmodernist practice of women writers such as Toni Morrison and Angela Carter, Marilynne Robinson and Joyce Carol Oates, amongst others. Coward argues:

Feminism can never be the product of the identity of women's experiences and interests - there is no such unity. Feminism must always be the alignment of women in a political movement with particular political aims and objectives. It is a grouping unified by its *political interest*, not by its common experiences.<sup>72</sup>

The fictions of these postmodernist writers highlight the differences between women, at the same time as sharing a political commitment to innovative forms of writing which may challenge and resist dominant perceptions of women's writing as merely imitations of male writers or trapped by outdated conventions.

Silvia Bovenschen, discussing the concept of a female aesthetic, proposes that:

. . . a historical archaeology in search of women past and forgotten, their obscured activities, living conditions and forms of resistance, is not just nostalgia. The hidden story of women . . . is the dark side of cultural history - or better, the dark side



of its idealised version.<sup>73</sup>

I would argue that whilst women's art and feminist art practice should not be conflated, their differences are part of the contradictory cultural position of women.

To ignore the work of some women, because of political differences, is to become trapped in traditional modes of theorising which, as Adrienne Rich argues, "affect even the categories in which we think, and which have made of even the most educated and privileged woman, an outsider, a non-participant, in the moulding of culture".<sup>74</sup> The recent work of feminist critics such as Shari Benstock, Gillian Hanscombe and Susan Rubin Suleiman has highlighted the extent to which the mainstream accounts of modernism have marginalised the writings and activities of numerous modernist women. Similarly, accounts of postmodernism by Linda Hutcheon, Patricia Waugh, Helen Carr, and Molly Hite take account of the differences between the women writers whose works they examine, whilst also indicating their shared concerns.

Christine Brooke-Rose, discussing her perceptions of the exclusive nature of the canon-making activities of mainstream critics, argues for a reappraisal of critical discourse especially in relation to innovative fiction. By acknowledging that mainstream critics and many feminist critics have been reluctant to recognise the work of women postmodernist writers,

Brooke-Rose questions the basis upon which literary classifications are made. Somewhat ironically, Brooke-Rose writes:

The best way, in my view, for any writer - but especially for a woman writer - is to slip through all the labels, including that of 'woman writer.' The price, however, is to belong nowhere.<sup>75</sup>

Similarly, in discussing the problems confronting the woman writer, Joyce Carol Oates makes a critique of the gender politics of mainstream critics:

Being thus ghettoized feels like an insult until one stops to realize - that a ghetto, after all, is a place to exist: dissolve it, and one may find oneself with no place in which to live at all. . . . Clearly, the (woman) writer who imagines herself 'assimilated' into the mainstream of literature, the literature of men, is mistaken, or deluded, or simply hopeful: or is her faith based upon a stubborn resistance to what is, set beside what *may one day be?* . . . . A writer may be beleaguered by any number of chimeras, but only the (woman) writer is beleaguered by her own essential identity. How can the paradox be accommodated, one asks, and an answer might be, *With difficulty.*<sup>76</sup>

Despite the efforts of the entire feminist literary critical enterprise over the last three decades to map in the work of women writers, it would seem that there is a considerable gap in relation to women's innovatory fiction.

Currently feminist critics are reappraising notions of modernism on the basis that a variety of women played a much more crucial role in making the modernist movement than has been previously recognised. I would argue that if contemporary postmodernist women writers are not to be similarly marginalised, thus repeating the patterns of the past, then their

work deserves attention. Although postmodernism has appeared to be a predominantly male literary movement, in my view this misleading notion has arisen from the lack of recognition accorded to women writers. In the following chapter, I shall examine critical studies which attempt to formulate an aesthetic model of postmodernism that differentiates postmodernist literary strategies and techniques from those of modernist writers. Thus Chapter Two is a necessary part of the process of understanding postmodernist literature, and provides a basis for my exploration of the work of a wide range of women writers in Chapters Three, Four and Five.



1. Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér, *The Postmodern Political Condition* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), p144.
2. Dana Polan, 'Postmodernism and Cultural Analysis Today,' in *Postmodernism and Its Discontents: Theories, Practices*, ed. E Ann Kaplan (London: Verso Editions, 1988), p49.
3. Carolyn J. Allen, 'Feminist Criticism and Postmodernism,' in *Tracing Literary Theory*, ed. Joseph Natoli, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), p279.
4. Ibid, p280.
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## Chapter Two

# The Aesthetics of Postmodernism

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The world has moved on. It is no longer necessarily tied to traditional discourses, institutions and voices for information about its meaning. The centres of history have multiplied, both internally and externally. Even white, ex-colonial Europe sometimes seems a self-obsessed, fashionable ruin on the side-lines of tomorrow's world: Africa, Latin America, the East, Japan, the shores of the Pacific.

Iain Chambers, *Popular Culture*<sup>1</sup>

There can have been few contemporary cultural issues which have occasioned more impassioned critical stances than the concept of postmodernism, and whether or not it "is something more than a dash surrounded by a contradiction".<sup>2</sup> The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to make an exposition of the nature of the postmodern debate, by tracing the evolution of the concept of postmodernism in the works of critics who collectively comprise the dominant tradition in Anglo-American literary criticism, from the late 1950s to the present. The following analysis seeks to give an account of prevailing notions of postmodernist literary practice, and to establish which writers and their works are widely considered to typify an aesthetic model of postmodernism. In particular, this survey attempts to explore the complex relations between modernism and postmodernism, by detailing how mainstream critics have responded to this

issue, and to establish the extent to which postmodernist literature may be differentiated from the works of modernist writers.

Many critical accounts point to postmodernism as epitomising the dynamics of the present day in terms of ideas, methods, expectations, politics, aesthetics, and so on. The concept of postmodernism is often invoked to describe all the insidious social phenomena which add to what has been characterised as a cultural malaise of moral dimensions with psychological causes and economic symptoms. Postmodernism has become the focus of attention for a broad range of academic and intellectual fields essentially because it articulates specific and particular changes which are currently occurring in contemporary society.

The centrality of culture and in particular the arts is common to all facets of the modernist/postmodernist debate. It has been argued that since the modernist revolution which dominated the early decades of this century, Western culture has declined to the point where a general sense of debility pervades every aspect of society. One critic of the postmodernist debate, Ihab Hassan, argues that the character of the postmodern condition can be understood as "a period of 'delegitimation', a time of decreation and dispersal, derealization and diffusion, of everything that 'de-defines' *and* at

the same time disseminates".<sup>3</sup> It is not necessarily the case that this pervasive sense of delegitimation will be experienced identically, or that its manifestation at the cultural level will be represented uniformly. In my view one of the main drawbacks of so many critical accounts of postmodernism, is the tendency to identify one element of change and then to argue that it applies universally. If this notion of delegitimation is to convey something more tangible, then I would suggest that it is important to explore how this process occurs in relation to a specific instance. Thus, in this chapter, the focus on the relationship between modernist and postmodernist literature provides a context wherein such a proposition may be examined.

For many critics, the modernist revolution which broke with the antiquarian, the gothic and the romantic, that rejected thoroughly the legacy of the past, that enthusiastically embraced technological progress and sought to 'make it new', has petered out and been abandoned. In its place, it is argued that there is only the counter-revolution of postmodernism, lurching between an uneasy alliance of conservative anti-modernists who regard progress as an unpleasant experience to be endured and genuine after-modernists, who creep amongst the modernist ruins desperately trying to



salvage something of value before the remains of the modernist period disappear forever.

It has often been convenient for critics to use organic metaphors to refer to the birth, development, waning and finally the death of movements or eras or schools of thought. This is particularly true of modernism, where critical accounts describe it as the culture of innovation and change that evolved from such diverse points of reference as Marinetti's Futurist manifestos to the clear, uncluttered lines of the Bauhaus and the sharp, simple design statements of the Constructivists<sup>4</sup>, through the prose narratives of Proust, Woolf and Joyce, Kafka and Mann, Lawrence and Faulkner, the poetics of Eliot and Pound, Rilke and Valery, the camera work of Fritz Lang and Stieglitz, the artworks of Matisse, Braque, Cézanne and Picasso and the musical innovations of Stravinsky, Berg and Schoenberg.

By the second half of this century, it has been argued that these radical, innovative and revolutionary cultural statements had become almost the reverse: in their dotage, they had ossified into becoming not simply the cultural norm, accepted by society and the establishment; they had *become* The Establishment. A number of critical studies have suggested that the aftermath of the Second World War created unfavourable conditions for any

further flourishing of the modernist movement. There seems to be a two-fold process at work in many of these studies, for on the one hand there is an apparent desire to affirm the radical nature of modernism, and yet on the other hand, there is an equally apparent insistence that the revolutionary impulses which once invigorated the culture and aesthetics of the Western World are no longer appropriate to conditions in post Second World War society.

It is unfortunate that debates about the nature of modernism and postmodernism are so frequently cast in strongly rhetorical terms, for this has created the effect of flattening out the distinctive and diverse innovations of both in order to create a more homogeneous image of either one or the other. It has also given the impression that the possibility of writing innovative literature ceased with the deaths of key modernist writers. Yet to document the death of modernism and the birth of postmodernism to a specific historical moment is really a redundant exercise. The precise moment of the last gasp and the primal scream are not relevant here, since this aspect of the modernist-postmodernist debate is perhaps the most tedious and least interesting. In this context I would agree with the perspective put forward by Jean-Francois Lyotard when he says that for him, the "postmodern signifies not the end of modernism, but another relation to modernism".<sup>5</sup> This notion is one which will be taken up later in this

chapter and indeed throughout the thesis, for it is central to my exposition of the postmodern debate and the concept of postmodernism. Rather than trying to set up a definitive account based on the proposition that modernism and postmodernism are two entirely separate phenomena, I feel that there is more potential to evaluate modernist and postmodernist fiction by examining their similarities together with their differences.

It has been argued that the death of modernism has simply left a void, an heirless throne, into which postmodernism has happily fitted itself. Indeed, Hassan insists that even the expression 'postmodernism' is a vexed issue, suggesting that postmodernism "has changed from awkward neologism to derelict cliché without ever attaining to the dignity of a concept".<sup>6</sup> This new pretender to the throne has been characterised as a pluralistic movement of parody and pastiche that celebrates the surface 'depthlessness' of culture through an over-indulgent stylistic promiscuity. Yet again, part of the problem in seeking to define postmodernism in relation to modernism, is the polemical nature of so many critical studies. If a particular method of modernist literary criticism is to identify the genius of individual writers, to establish their uniqueness, to elevate their literary techniques to the status of scientific discoveries, this would then seem to invite a negative reaction to postmodernist works which may seem to undermine the foundations of modernism itself.



There is ample evidence in many of the critical accounts of postmodernism that there is a sense of loss which accompanies the way in which postmodernist practices are viewed. For example, Charles Newman's account in *The Post-Modern Aura: The Act of Fiction in an Age of Inflation* (1985) argues that postmodernism is merely a holding action, a mood "which appropriates all the stale metaphors of transition while gripped in the fear of stasis", and he insists that "ours is not a period of consolidation [unlike modernism], lacking as it does a great master to give it tone or label".<sup>7</sup> Thus, the pessimistic view that postmodernism encapsulates a 'loss of meaning' would seem to be a form of nostalgia about the past. Less comfortable perhaps, is the portrayal of modernism as a frequently phallogentric, imperialist, not to say, fascist movement; the product of a particular Western culture which ignored, marginalised, and trivialised in other ways the work of those who were not considered eligible contenders for the modernist crown. However, it is not the purpose of this thesis to scratch and pick at the bones of the modernist achievement, nor to illustrate how such a debate can degenerate into a pointless playground fight.

It is my firm contention that what has appeared in scholarly journals, academic debate and the mass media in recent years as a scurrilous fisticuffs between defenders of the 'old' and promulgators of the 'new' has become a pseudo-issue. In fact, the rhetoric involved in this opposition

between traditional and radical stances obscures the actual nature of an emergent cultural transformation in Western societies, a paradigm shift of social, economic, and cultural practices, which appears under the portmanteau term of 'postmodernism'.

There is no doubt that there has been an important and significant shift in cultural practices which distinguish postmodern perspectives, assumptions and propositions from those of preceding periods. This cultural shift is more usefully understood if it is viewed from the perspective of a 'restructuring' of dominant and peripheral features that characterised modernism, rather than a distinct break or schism. Yet much of the debate concerning the nature of postmodernism is held back by accounts which attempt to define it from a negative viewpoint. This negativity can be explained to some extent, if we recognise that many of these otherwise admirable critical accounts are over-reliant upon aesthetic and poetic models, which do not permit a sufficiently exhaustive play of interpretation and extrapolation.

I would argue that the inadequacy of much of the debate concerning the nature, or indeed actual existence of postmodernism, stems from analytical models that arise from a very narrow and partial view of modernism. Part of this problem derives from how modernism has been perceived retrospectively, the dominant values and attitudes it carries, and

how it persists in carrying an ideological and cultural function after the Second World War. It is not modernism in itself that fuels the passions of the modernism/postmodernism debate, it is, as Andreas Huyssen argues "a specific image of modernism that has become the bone of contention for the postmoderns, and that image has to be reconstructed if we want to understand postmodernism's problematic relationship to the modernist tradition and its claims to difference".<sup>8</sup> The process of creating a particular image of modernism against which postmodernism is then contrasted, can be seen as part of a defensive strategy designed to protect high culture from all manner of threats.

A certain image of modernism has been put on a pedestal by numerous critical writers who see themselves as custodians of modernist culture, anachronistic family retainers faithfully serving their masters to the bitter end. It is a particularly austere image of high modernism that has been held up and used as a weapon with which to beat postmodernist practitioners and this is, of course, to the detriment of some of the outstanding achievements of modernism. I would suggest that postmodernism has not rejected modernism *per se* but it is intensely resistant to that version of modernism which became part of a 1950s consensus; a modernism which was no longer seen as an adversary culture opposing a dominant class and its world view; a modernism which had been absorbed



and institutionalised into the culture industry. There *was* however a reaction in the 1950s against the falsity and meretriciousness of modernist culture which was frequently expressed, particularly in literature, through ironic detachment and a cool indifference to politics.

Yet it is not surprising that the canonization of modernism took place during the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, the era of the Cold War. It could be argued that the great desire to block out the hideous realities of the Second World War, necessitated a cultural identification with the notions of progress, modernity and modernization, already manifest in the modernist arts movement. The extent to which modernism was rooted in 19th century evolutionary progressivism should not be overlooked, especially with its perpetual rhetoric of breakthrough. As Newman points out in *The Post-Modern Aura* (1985), "to pre-suppose an art which is increasingly higher, deeper, richer, and more complex, is to describe a process programmed for self-destruction".<sup>9</sup> Aesthetic expectations based on a premise which can never reach a goal could be neatly summarised by the German expression *Totsiegen*, which roughly translated means 'winning oneself to death'!

Cultural critics have produced an image of modernism which, shaped from these major pressures and rationalised into an austere logic, has become inappropriate to postmodernist practitioners and theorists. These champions of modernism have, in their attempts to uphold rigid guidelines

for further artistic and cultural production and subsequent critical evaluation, produced an aesthetic cul-de-sac. This type of critique is essentially extremely conservative and is grounded in a theory of the arts in which a culture-bearing class confers distinctions and sets norms, and which therefore identifies its own survival with the survival of high culture. Yet, at the same time, this form of critique ignores the extent to which modernism suffocated itself through its own institutionalised success.

It is against these rather dogmatic notions that postmodernism has produced distinctly new perspectives, which Lyotard suggests can be understood as a particular "mood" or "state of mind".<sup>10</sup> Postmodern perspectives *are* different from those of modernism in that they raise fundamental questions of culture as aesthetic and political issues, that reach beyond movements within the arts. Those who embrace the notion of postmodernism are actually suggesting that there is a larger formulation of the relationship between postmodernism and society than was the case with modernism.

Postmodernism could perhaps best be understood not as a fixed entity, but more as a cultural process which operates in a dialectical position between "tradition and innovation, conservation and renewal, mass culture and high art, in which the second terms are no longer automatically privileged over the first".<sup>11</sup> This state of tension or dialectical play is also

one which "can no longer be grasped in categories such as progress *vs.* reaction, Left *vs.* Right, present *vs.* past, modernism *vs.* realism, abstraction *vs.* representation, avantgarde *vs.* Kitsch".<sup>12</sup> These either/or arguments, dichotomous propositions which form a central role of the classic stance of modernism, have been challenged by postmodernism, since part of the postmodern project has been to demonstrate that such dichotomous patterns of argument must be questioned for their inherent validity. Thus, the search for definitions of postmodernism in sharp contrast to modernism tends to prove elusive, since a postmodernist literary text, for example, might well operate at so many levels that it seems to resist any single category.

Indeed, Arthur Kroker and David Cook maintain in *The Postmodern Scene* (1986) that the concept of postmodernism is one which eludes the categories of the past and requires new models of theorizing which abandon previous conceptual approaches. It is for this reason that much of the focus here and in subsequent chapters is directed towards conceptualising postmodernism by drawing upon the restructuration model, outlined earlier, which allows for the shifting of literary practices between different systems, modes and genres.

I shall now move on to examine the way in which literary critics have developed the term postmodernism in relation to fictional texts that are neither traditionally realist nor purely modernist. This survey will also



explore the critical process that elucidates the textual strategies and techniques which characterise the aesthetics of postmodernist fiction. Essentially then, this chapter will attempt to establish a model which may be considered representative of prevailing notions of postmodern literary discourse and postmodern fiction. This will enable a closer inspection of these issues in relation to my discussion of the work of women writers and feminist criticism in the ensuing chapters.

The notion of the concept of postmodernism as a portmanteau term is particularly evident in seeking to identify the hydra-headed creature that exists variously as postmodernism, Postmodernism, post-modernism, Post-Modernism, and POSTmodernISM. Reviewing the literary criticism of the past twenty-five years or so, on the issue of postmodern fiction, a surprisingly clear picture emerges. I say surprisingly because the same consensus of opinion is not true of either modernism, realism or romanticism, the major literary movements which preceded postmodernism.

The picture that has emerged so far is really one of a rather loose and sometimes irresponsible use of the term postmodernism. It is a term which has been used since the 1930s when Federico de Onis employed it to classify different periods in Hispanic literature<sup>13</sup>, but it is only really since the 1950s that it has appeared to any great extent as the *focus* of literary criticism.

The chronological development of the term shows that in the period between the late 1950s and early 1970s, there is a tendency to describe the emergence of postmodernist writing as merely the fag-end of modernism. There is an underlying trend in the criticism of this period to designate as postmodernist, writing which is felt not to quite match-up to the achievement of modernist literature. Thus, it is argued that whatever techniques are used in postmodernist fiction, these techniques were already inherent in the work of the modernist writers, and that basically, there has been no significant 'breakthrough', no major literary development since modernism. It can be seen how distinctly this process occurred by briefly looking at some early commentaries on postmodern fiction by literary critics.

The earliest significant investigation of the issue of postmodern fiction writing can be found in Irving Howe's article 'Mass Society and Post-Modern Fiction' written in 1959. Howe identifies the immediate post Second World War period as the point where, for him, "post-modern" novelists began to make an appearance, and he feels that some interesting novels had been appearing during the previous fifteen years, which were significantly different "from the kind of writing we usually call modern".<sup>14</sup>

Howe briefly discusses Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant*, Wright Morris's *The Field of Vision*, Herbert Gold's *The Man Who Was Not With It*, J D Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Nelson Algren's *A Walk on the*

*Wild Side*, and Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*, and notes that despite their qualitative differences, there is a degree of unison between them. According to Howe, the major characteristics shared by these writers which defines their work as postmodern, is:

. . . the recurrent search - in America, almost a national obsession - for personal identity and freedom. In their distance from fixed social categories and their concern with the metaphysical implications of that distance, these novels constitute what I would call 'post-modern' fiction.<sup>15</sup>

Howe insists that the personal identity theme needs to be grounded in a recognizable world, and he therefore finds the result of their work disconcerting:

It is here that the postmodern novelists run into serious trouble: the connection between subject and setting cannot always be made, and the 'individual' of their novels, because he lacks social definition and is sometimes a creature of literary or even ideological fiat, tends to be not very individualized.<sup>16</sup>

The features that Howe identifies here as disconcerting and troublesome, are precisely those features which epitomise the textual strategies of some postmodern fictions in their attempt to problematise the issues of subjectivity and the construction of a shared conception of 'reality'.

As an explanation for the emergence of postmodern fiction and the parallel development of a mass society Howe suggests that:

. . . the modern theories about society - theories which for novelists have usually been present as tacit assumptions - have



partly broken down; and that this presents a great many new difficulties for the younger writers.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, argues Howe, these new difficulties also provide postmodern writers with new possibilities; this whole new sensibility is the mass society.

Whilst the description Howe gives of this mass society is basically little more than a "social cartoon", his speculations do help illuminate what he feels to be the problems facing those writers of the post-war years. Almost parodying Eliot's dictum concerning the use of myth to impose shape and form onto chaos, Howe speaks of the difficulties confronting these writers:

How to give shape to a world increasingly shapeless and an experience increasingly fluid; how to reclaim the central assumption of the novel that telling relationships can be discovered between a style of social behaviour and a code of moral judgement, or if that proves impossible, to find ways of imaginatively projecting the code in its own right . . .<sup>18</sup>

Essentially, Howe suggests that for postmodern writers, the crucial problem is that with the advent of the "mass society" there is no longer a society to write about; a feeling which seems to be captured in his brief quotation from a young German writer:

Now people no longer have opinions; they have refrigerators. Instead of illusions we have television . . . The only way to catch the spirit of the times is to write a handbook on home appliances.<sup>19</sup>

Howe feels that this group of writers rejected the use of realism to express

their criticism of American life and turned instead to fable, picaresque, prophecy and nostalgia. Although Howe admits that these novelists:

Better than any other group of literate Americans . . . resisted the mood of facile self-congratulation which came upon us during the post-war years . . . they saw . . . the hovering sickness of soul, the despairing contentment, the prosperous malaise . . . Yet the problem remained: how can one represent malaise, which by its nature is vague and without shape.<sup>20</sup>

Howe points out that Chekhov, of course, succeeded in this representation, and in a sense, it is Chekhov's achievement that makes it doubly difficult, in Howe's view, for postmodern writers to express their relation to their own times without repeating Chekhov's methods and style.

In the early 1960s, Harry Levin used the term 'Post-Modern' to denote a state of art which is in contradistinction to modernism. It is not Levin's aim at all to delineate postmodernism, his concern (as can be seen clearly from the title of his article 'What Was Modernism?') is a systematic definition of modernism. Levin, a passionate admirer of modernism, denounces what he perceives to be a subsequent decline in the arts. It almost seems the only advantage that living in the "Post-Modern Period" has to offer is that:

. . . at this distance we can perceive, with increasing clarity, that the modernist movement comprises one of the most remarkable constellations of genius in the history of the West.<sup>21</sup>

The task that Levin has set himself is the defence of the genius of the

modernists, against the "stupidity" of "their Post-Modern attackers", and he condemns the anti-intellectual undercurrent which now surfaces as "Post-Modern", describing it as "weak" in appealing to "philistines".<sup>22</sup>

Looking back at the modernists, Levin feels that "We may well count ourselves fortunate in that we can so effortlessly enjoy those gains secured by the pangs of our forerunners", since now:

Lacking the courage of their convictions, much in our arts and letters simply exploits and diffuses, on a large scale and at a popular level, the results of their experimentation.<sup>23</sup>

However, Levin is too much of a gentleman to carry out a remorseless attack without considering his own bias, for he does ask:

Since many of the modernists are now recognized as classics, are we not indulging in passé-ism when we hesitate to hail the present generation as even more modern, equally gifted but naturally harder to appreciate through first impressions.<sup>24</sup>

Yet after a very brief consideration of the work of Burroughs, Bellow, Updike, Beckett, Miller and Albee (Levin's list of representative postmodern writers), he stoutly maintains that "It is difficult not to conclude, if we retain any perspective, that we have fallen among epigones".<sup>25</sup>

Despite the fact it is nearly thirty years since the publication of Levin's essay, there is still a significant faction within literary criticism that continues to view postmodernism in very negative terms. Indeed, Levin's essay has influenced the approach taken by many critics, in that close



analysis of the techniques of postmodern fiction is neglected in favour of over-generalisations. The effect this has had, and indeed continues to have upon the postmodernist literary paradigm will be demonstrated in the following chapters.

Frank Kermode, in his book *Continuities* (1968), sets up his own criteria for distinguishing between modernist writing and that which is considered to be postmodernist. He makes the distinction between two phases of modernism and calls them "paleo-modernism" and "neo-modernism", however this is not a distinction shared by any other literary critics. He maintains that they do have elements in common, and although there are differences, the differences are not of such a degree as to really require a new terminology.

Kermode investigates the question of form in the context of the romantics and the modernists, and comes to the conclusion that:

. . . the theoretical bases of neo-modernism, in so far as they show themselves in relation to form . . . are not 'revolutionary'. They are marginal developments of older modernism.<sup>26</sup>

Kermode is at pains to point out that in his opinion there has only been one revolution, and that for him this was the modernist revolution. Since he refutes the difference between modernism and postmodernism, maintaining only the distinction between "paleo" and "neo-modernism", so far as

Kermode is concerned there has been little radical change, only "More muddle, certainly, and almost certainly more jokes, but no revolution, and much less talent".<sup>27</sup>

Kermode's work reinforces Harry Levin's point, stressing that the modernist revolution was so great, so revolutionary, that to expect to have another comparable movement so soon is quite unrealistic, and that whatever it is that the neo-modernists are doing, essentially all they do is "help us to understand rather better what the Modern now is, and has been during this century".<sup>28</sup> The problem with the approach taken by Kermode is that his interest in establishing an organic model in which literary practice is rooted, struggles for growth in a hostile climate, reaches maturity, flowers profusely, and perhaps sets itself to seed, prevents him from establishing the nature of the distinctions between discrete works.

Frank McConnell, working from a similar approach to that of Kermode, finds that the fictional techniques of postmodernism are strongly linked to romanticism, and that the continuities outweigh the differences. In his study of Bellow, Pynchon, and Barth, McConnell argues that one of the most crucial characteristics of postmodernism seems to remain:

. . . the basically romantic (post-Cartesian) problem of the nature and status of language as (a) an accurate reflection of the universe man confronts and (b) an incarnation, indeed the first and necessary incarnation, of human freedom.<sup>29</sup>

He suggests that postmodern writing can be regarded as a "metalanguage of romanticism" and that the "high romantics" and the postmodernists share a common aim in their exploration of the area between irrationalism and logic.

McConnell proposes that Malcolm Lowry's novel *Under the Volcano* (1947) is as important to postmodernism as Joyce's *Ulysses* was to modernism, since Lowry's novel:

. . . patterned self-consciously on aspects of *Ulysses*, is a 'meta-linguistic' transformation of that source, and of the nineteenth century literary history which *Ulysses* itself implicates.<sup>30</sup>

In Lowry's first novel, *Ulamarine*, for the character Dana Hilliot there is already exploration of living life "in inverted commas", a feeling of inauthenticity, an apprehension of quotedness. McConnell argues that similarly today:

. . . we are caught in a civilization which . . . increasingly manifests its own plastic, reproduced unreality and the corresponding impossibility of *real* communication within our gigantic information networks.<sup>31</sup>

However, this is not to imply that postmodernism is therefore necessarily moving totally towards a 'literature of silence' as the only possible response. To hold this view would be to distort the tradition of postmodernism, for McConnell makes the point that the "end of the civilizing power of language" is also the "originating point for [its] creative aspects".<sup>32</sup> Whilst few other accounts link postmodernism with romanticism directly as in



McConnell's essay, the issue of the arbitrary nature of language and the loss of belief in some rational order of 'reality' is a common theme in the work of most critical studies.

Gerald Graff's article 'The Myth of the Postmodernist Breakthrough' which first appeared in *TriQuarterly* in 1973 and was later reprinted in *The Novel Today* (1977), sets out to question the prevailing attitude to postmodernism. Graff identifies Leslie Fiedler, Susan Sontag, George Steiner, Richard Poirier and Ihab Hassan as the exponents of a particular stance on the achievements of postmodernism. In Graff's view, these critics generally agree with "the standard description of postmodernism as representing a sharp break with romantic-modernist traditions".<sup>33</sup> Yet, as the studies discussed above have shown, the notion that postmodernism marks a 'sharp break' with modernism is not accepted by all critics. Furthermore, Hassan's views are different to those of Fiedler, for example, since Hassan has consistently speculated about the continuities and differences between postmodernism and modernism. Whereas, Fiedler by contrast, has tended to distinguish postmodernism from modernism by pointing to the blurring of the boundaries between high and popular culture, which he sees as a key distinction.

Graff locates his argument in two areas. Firstly, he maintains that postmodernism:

. . . should be seen not as breaking with romantic and modernist assumptions but rather as a logical culmination of the premises of these earlier movements.<sup>34</sup>

And secondly, he argues that postmodernism is most certainly not revolutionary, but indeed, shows itself as a reactionary tendency, which reinforces the "technocratic and bureaucratic" elements of contemporary society. The problem with Graff's first point is that by running together the assumptions of the romantics and the modernists, he gives the impression that there are no differences between them. Furthermore, he compresses the diverse and contrasting elements of modernism into a unified set of premises, when it might be more appropriate to write of their competing and often hostile ideas. As to Graff's second point, he again avoids specifying particular instances in postmodernist literature that might add weight to his argument, thereby creating a situation which does not allow for the complex composition of postmodernism.

Graff moves on to discern within the different positions which are associated with postmodernism, two basic categories which he labels an "apocalyptic" and a "visionary" strain. The "apocalyptic" tendency being dominated by "the sense of the death of literature and criticism; literary culture assumes a posture acknowledging its own futility".<sup>35</sup> Whilst the second strain, the "visionary", is concerned with building a new sensibility out of the ruins of the old and with radical transformations of consciousness

bringing about revolutionary changes.

Graff thus identifies what he terms a "healthy-minded, untroubled postmodernism" in such diverse elements as:

. . . happenings, Living Theatre, the music and writings of John Cage, the more beatific poetry of the Beats, the fiction of Ken Kesey and Richard Farina, and the more hopeful and ebullient strains of the rock and psychedelic movements.<sup>36</sup>

but points out how these elements contrast with the:

. . . ironic, disillusioned vision of such writers as Barthelme, Robbe-Grillet, Beckett, Borges, the Barth of *The End of the Road*, and the Nabokov of *Invitation to a Beheading*.<sup>37</sup>

These two strains of postmodernism are linked, according to Graff, to an apocalyptic world view, which is predicated on the loss of confidence in an empirical, external reality and the concomitant uselessness of traditional ways of understanding the world. Graff argues that for one group this situation is a cause for celebration, whilst for the other, it only gives rise to pathos:

Different in character as the two strains of the post-modernist impulse are, their common intellectual, social, and historical origins establish their family relationship as continuations of the single tradition of romantic and modernist art.<sup>38</sup>

Graff insists that "the culture religion of modernism" has not ended with postmodernism, but rather:

. . . has reached a further, possibly ultimate stage of its development. Postmodernist anti-art was inherent in the logic of the modernist aesthetic, which in turn derived from the

romantic attempts to substitute art for religion.<sup>39</sup>

In terms of his own classifications, Graff has certainly clearly delineated two aspects of the postmodern culture of the 1960s, the apocalyptic and the visionary, which he claims, already existed within modernism.

Yet Graff overlooks a most important issue. In seeking to categorise postmodernism into two opposing elements, and then arguing that these elements are no different to modernism and romanticism, Graff avoids any notion of the cultural, historical and social context of these different movements. Furthermore, by neglecting the historical positioning of modernism and postmodernism, Graff ignores the issue that it is a particularly narrow image of modernism, which became institutionalised through the insistence of the New Critics and other custodians of modernist culture, that the 1960s' postmodernist writers are responding to. It is quite erroneous to assume that the nihilistic and anarchic aspects of postmodernism in that period are merely the overflow of a profusion of pre-existing modernist impulses, since such a view does not allow for the relationship of such aspects to their historical context or for the particular ways in which such aspects are expressed.

Graff's later article 'Babbitt at the Abyss: the Social Context of Postmodern American Fiction' develops and refines the themes of his earlier work. This is basically that since the Second World War, "it has seemed



necessary to speak of a 'postmodern' mode of fiction, one which departs not only from realistic conventions but from modernist ones as well".<sup>40</sup> In this article Graff examines some of the work of Saul Bellow and Donald Barthelme as representative of antithetical poles in the debate between tradition and innovation in the novel. He suggests that these writers share a conviction in the loss of power of literary language, but continues to argue that "because postmodern comedy satirizes certain aspects of modernism" it would be a mistake to think that "it represents a sharp and complete break with aspects of the modernist tradition".<sup>41</sup> Yet Graff himself points out how postmodernists do differ from modernist writers, and his analysis of Barthelme's work is exemplary in showing this. For Barthelme's device, for instance, of drawing upon figures from popular culture such as King Kong, Batman and Robin, and Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, is a dominant feature in many postmodernist works, whereas in modernist fiction it appears as a minor interest.

The view that Robert Alter takes in 'The Self-Conscious Moment: Reflections on the Aftermath of Modernism' is less extreme than that of Gerald Graff, although he also compares postmodernism with the achievements of modernism:

It would of course be foolish to claim that we are now in anything like that extraordinary period of innovative literary creativity of the 1920s when modernism was in flower, but the

opposite inference, that narrative literature has reached some terminal stage of sterility, is by no means necessary from the facts of contemporary writing.<sup>42</sup>

Alter notes that within postmodernist writing there is a consistent tendency towards the foregrounding of the literary artifice and some experimentation with shorter fictional forms, influenced by the Borgesian model, which are more aptly termed "fictions" rather than "short stories".<sup>43</sup>

The writers whom Alter identifies as representative postmodernists are, amongst others, Raymond Queneau, Samuel Beckett, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor and Claude Mauriac in France; John Fowles in England; Robert Coover, John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Donald Barthelme, and Kurt Vonnegut in America; Borges and Cortazar in Latin America and Nabokov in Switzerland.

Whilst Alter identifies a number of fundamental features to be found in postmodernist writing he also argues that the self-conscious element in postmodernism has two flaws, which he identifies as that of "arid exercise and indiscriminate invention".<sup>44</sup> He feels that there has been too much experimental work in the area of style, which often proves to be fruitless and has, in any case, already been done earlier and better in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. Secondly, Alter argues, there is too great a tendency to give "free rein to every impulse of invention or fictional contrivance without distinguishing what may serve some artistic function in the novel and what

is merely silly or self-indulgent".<sup>45</sup>

Focusing on Flann O'Brien's novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) which he sees as one of the earliest postmodern novels of "flaunted artifice", Alter argues that artifice should not be "flatly self-evident but cunningly revealed". Consequently, he considers that O'Brien's text is flawed on the grounds that:

O'Brien produces a hodgepodge of fictions in which nothing seems particularly credible and everything finally becomes tedious through the sheer proliferation of directionless narrative invention. *At Swim-Two-Birds* is a celebration of fabulation in which novelistic self consciousness has gone slack because fiction is everywhere and there is no longer any quixotic tension between what is fictional and what is real.<sup>46</sup>

Whilst Alter claims not to be suggesting that later postmodernist fiction has been heavily influenced by O'Brien's book, he insists that the faults of conception and execution which he finds in *At Swim-Two-Birds* provide a "perfect paradigm for those of much contemporary fiction".<sup>47</sup> Indeed, Alter would seem to hold a particularly negative view towards Anglo-American postmodernism, and his stance towards postmodernist fiction may perhaps be best summarised by his comment that:

We love to think we are on the threshold of a radically new era, but in fact the continuity of much of contemporary fiction with its literary antecedents is too substantive to be dismissed as mere vestigial reflex.<sup>48</sup>

Despite Alter's evident dislike for what he considers to be the dismal over-experimentation of postmodernism, he does at least suggest that there are

certain aspects which may be differentiated from modernism. In particular, by drawing attention to the frequent flaunting of the literary artifice that is evident in so many postmodernist works, Alter's article is useful in that it helps establish one of the dominant aspects of postmodernism.

Writing in a similar vein, Maurice Beebe attempts to analyze postmodernism from a modernist perspective in his article 'What Modernism Was'. Beebe acknowledges Levin's polemical essay 'What Was Modernism?' and like Levin he remarks that:

For many of us the passing of the greatest literary age since the Renaissance may well be occasion for regret, but we can take some comfort in the realization that we can now define Modernism with confidence and that we shall not have to keep adjusting our definition in order to accommodate new visions and values.<sup>49</sup>

Beebe acknowledges the semantic problems that arise from labelling and classifying periods and literary/artistic movements. For example, he points out that literary history is often seen in terms of the classical, the medieval and the modern periods. More specifically, he admits that the term modern may equally apply to works that are recent and up-to-date, and to "the international revolution in literature and the arts which began in the late nineteenth century and flourished until the late 1950s".<sup>50</sup> Although Beebe sets the transition date between modernism and postmodernism to the late 1950s, rather than to the late 1930s as do many other critics, he nevertheless



does address the problem of drawing up a model that allows for differences to be highlighted. He concludes that these difficulties may be avoided by the use of:

. . . 'contemporary' when referring to the present time and 'Post-Modernism' when referring to a current literary and artistic movement which has certain distinguishable and definable characteristics. Just as all modern literature is not necessarily Modernist literature, today's literature is not entirely Post-Modernist. Some of it is still Modernist, and much of it harkens back to Pre-Modernist traditions.<sup>51</sup>

In his analysis, Beebe seeks to identify in both modernism and postmodernism, certain traits which are shared by writers and artists representative of their time. Beebe's approach would seem to be more appropriate to exploring the complexities of modernism and postmodernism, than many of the earlier critical works.

Commencing with modernism, Beebe sets out four features which he considers distinguish modernist literature from both nineteenth century writing and that of today. He adds, however, that these features are perhaps more useful for distinguishing the beginning of modernism rather than the ending. The characteristics Beebe identifies are as follows:

First, Modernist literature is distinguished by its formalism . . . Secondly, Modernism is characterized by an attitude of detachment and non-commitment which I would put under the general heading of 'irony' in the sense of the term as used by the New Critics. Third, Modernist literature makes use of myth not in the way myth was used earlier, as a discipline for belief or a subject of interpretation, but as an arbitrary means

of ordering art. And, finally . . . I think there is a clear line of development from Impressionism to reflexivism. Modernist art turns back upon itself and is largely concerned with its own creation and composition.<sup>52</sup>

Having drawn up a minimal set of characteristics, Beebe also acknowledges that they are not unique to modernism: irony may be traced back to classical literature whilst reflexivism is evident as long ago as *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy*. Moreover, Beebe notes that contemporary writers also utilise these characteristics:

That an interest in form and technique is still with us is readily apparent when one considers such Post-Modernist developments as *le nouveau roman* and concrete poetry. Some contemporary writers carry irony so far that for them art seems to be only a game. And . . . such Post-Modernist novelists as John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Bernard Malamud, John Fowles, and Iris Murdoch . . . use myths as a means of arbitrarily structuring their works, but often do so in an extravagantly reflexive way.<sup>53</sup>

Beebe contends that, theoretically at least, the third of his list of characteristics does differentiate modernism from postmodernism, in that the postmodernist use of myth is quite different from that of the modernist writers. Beebe's analysis can be linked fruitfully to the restructuration model discussed earlier. Thus, although the device of utilising myth in modernist and postmodernist works is a shared characteristic, it is used for quite different purposes. In modernism, the tactic of drawing upon the Greek classics to structure fictional works is associated with the cultural

élitism that is often seen as one of its dominant aspect. Whereas in postmodernism, the use of myth tends to figure merely as one strategy amongst many others, and is often the subject of critical scrutiny.

A further point which Beebe makes, is that the postmodernists seek to discard the self-consciousness that is characteristic of the romantics and the solipsism of the modernist period, which is typified not only in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, Gide's *The Counterfeiters* and Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, but also in what he regards as more representative works, Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*, Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, and Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. Thus Beebe argues:

If a movement dies when it begins to parody itself, we can say that Nabokov's brilliant little combination of fiction, poetry, myth and puzzle, marks the beginning of the end of the Age of Modernism.<sup>54</sup>

Beebe concludes that it is apparent that the works of such writers as John Barth, Robert Coover and Ronald Sukenick mark the end of a tradition, since there is little indication of where they may be going from there. Yet Beebe does feel that a new era in literature is beginning, for he states:

Although it is difficult to point to successful works of literature which reflect the Post-Modernist preference for content over form, emotional commitment over irony, 'contingency' over 'mythotherapy', and the group over its members, the fact that knowledgeable critics like Richard Wasson, Leslie Fiedler and Ihab Hassan can call for a new Post-Modernist literature which will reflect a more democratic and popular view of literature is evidence in itself that we are

moving into a new literary age.<sup>55</sup>

This statement of Beebe's paradoxically raises a number of issues which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters. For it is not the factors which he identifies as recurring features of postmodernist fiction that are contentious, it is the value system from which he constructs his criteria of success that is questionable.

The same point may be made in relation to the value systems that are apparent in the critical studies discussed above, since these formative works have significantly influenced the approach taken by many subsequent critics. In these studies, virtually the only fictional texts which are seen to be of sufficient value for an extended analysis, are those of male authors. Even though Beebe does include the names of some women writers in his discussion, this tends to be the exception rather than the rule. It is noticeable that the work of women postmodernist writers rarely feature in these discussions. The valuing of any text as a successful example of postmodernism, would seem to immediately exclude their work from consideration. In my next chapter, I shall examine to what extent the approach taken by Beebe and other critics has contributed to misleading notions about the nature of postmodernism.

The comparative method of classifying postmodernism against the traditional canon of modernism, begun by Howe in the 1950s, continued



throughout the 1970s and well into the 1980s. Christopher Butler's *After The Wake* (1980) seeks to analyze the aesthetics of postmodernism which underlie literature, painting and music. For Butler, the issue of whether or not postmodernism may be considered to be a significant cultural movement turns upon the vital question "is post-modernism a mere, possibly decadent, development of modernism, or did it fight through to a real independence?"<sup>56</sup> Butler's argument is based on locating the transition from modernism to postmodernism in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, since he feels, like many other critics, that this work represents the furthest reaches of modernist innovation and experimentation.

The approach taken by Butler is to position innovative works within an overall framework which he defines as within the tradition of the historical avant-garde. There are problems with such an approach, not least that by arguing for a continuity of avant-garde tradition, Butler is forced to decontextualise works from their historical periods, thereby neglecting the relation of such works to the audience of the time. Nevertheless, Butler's work is a significant contribution to the postmodern debate, for the way in which he compares and contrasts a number of different works from literature, painting and music, demonstrating how major features link them together. Thus, Butler argues that postmodernism may be seen as a coherent and significant cultural movement.

In contrast, Charles Newman declares in *The Post-Modern Aura* (1985) that "Modernism in its heroic phase is a retrospective revolt against a retrograde mechanical industrialism. Post-Modernism is an ahistorical rebellion without heroes against a blindly innovative information society".<sup>57</sup> Newman's account of postmodernist fiction as a symptom of inflationary economics is buried within a form of critical delirium that unfortunately adds little specificity to the debate, other than to demonstrate his distaste for innovative forms of literature. Ihab Hassan attempts to distinguish postmodernism from modernism in *The Postmodern Turn* (1987), and states "postmodernism sounds not only awkward, uncouth: it evokes what it wishes to surpass or suppress, modernism itself. The term thus contains its enemy within".<sup>58</sup> Despite Hassan's critical involvement with postmodernism for over twenty years, his writings tend towards the speculative rather than the analytical and thus no definitive position emerges. The critical process of defining the emerging history of postmodernism has been significantly influenced by the stance taken by the critics discussed above and others, and these formative studies reveal that the problematic relation between modernism and postmodernism is still open to debate.

Nevertheless, there are certain aspects that emerge from the above discussion from which it is possible to draw some conclusions. Whilst I would agree that the writers most commonly considered to be representative

of postmodernism do include those male authors cited in the above critical accounts, I would argue against the proposition that postmodernism merely extends the project of modernism. Such a proposal underestimates the differences between modernist and postmodernist literary techniques, which, in my view, are sufficiently dissimilar to merit the concept of postmodernism.

However, whilst these studies have put the issue of postmodernism on the critical map, and individually and collectively have advanced the general understanding of the nature of postmodernist literature, there are a number of problems which arise from their work. The various claims which these critics make tend to be largely rhetorical, and are based on a narrow conception of modernism. Irrespective of whether postmodernism is seen to represent a sharp break from modernism or to merely continue modernist practices, there is little extended analysis of modernist or postmodernist texts, which results in over-generalisations being made. Thus, for the sake of generating plausible definitions of either modernism or postmodernism, there is a tendency to set up somewhat monolithic models which flatten out crucial differences and important similarities. Above all, in seeking to establish credible models of both modernism and postmodernism, the majority of critical studies have relatively excluded the work of women modernist and postmodernist writers. Thus, the validity of prevailing notions

of postmodernism may, arguably, be called into question, since the fictional texts that have been drawn upon for illustration, are hardly representative of the range of material available.

Thus, despite the strengths and weaknesses of the studies examined so far, it would seem that attempts to define postmodernism on the basis of the approach taken by the above mentioned critics continue to prove elusive. It is my view that if postmodernism is to be differentiated from modernism then a more appropriate approach would be to look specifically at the strategies, techniques and devices of the narrative discourse, and attempt to draw out some of the complexities which necessarily arise in discussing the transition between literary systems. Instead of arguing about whether or not postmodernism makes a sharp break or merely continues the programme of modernism, I would suggest that it is potentially more interesting to explore how postmodernist writers deal with the impact of modernism in relation to realism, and the implications and consequences of such innovations. At this point then, I shall examine the work of a number of mainstream critics in an attempt to identify the extent to which the characteristics of postmodern fiction may constitute an aesthetic paradigm of postmodernism.

It is generally recognised that in fiction a line of descent can be drawn back to Laurence Sterne and his novel *Tristram Shandy* as the earliest precursor of the type of writing that postmodernism now represents. Most



critics tend to consider that Borges, Nabokov and Beckett are the 20th century forerunners of postmodernism, with James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* representing the dividing line between modernism and postmodernism.

There also appears to be a wide cartography of postmodernist fictional practice which stretches from South American writers to Italian, French, English and American. Yet it is also clear that there is no literary manifesto of postmodernism and no unified school of writers. However, since the mid-seventies, the group of writers considered to be postmodernist seems to have remained fairly stable. Most critical accounts have established that the representative writers are Donald Barthelme, John Barth, Kurt Vonnegut, Thomas Pynchon, Ronald Sukenick, Raymond Federman, Robert Coover, and Steve Katz.

A useful starting point for the examination of the strategies and techniques of postmodern fiction is to identify certain issues that arose from the 'death of the novel' debate, as mentioned earlier. From the late 1950s through to the mid 1970s it was argued that prose fiction had reached a dead end. It can be seen from the combined arguments of Beebe, Levin, Graff, Kermode *et al*, that critics did indeed feel strongly that fiction currently being produced could not, and did not, achieve what the modernist writers had accomplished.

The issue at the heart of this debate was essentially that the aesthetic

conventions which underpinned prose fiction writing were used up and in many ways were no longer pertinent to represent contemporary reality. Thus, it was argued, the novelist was at 'the crossroads' and was faced with a dilemma. Fiction writing could either continue to produce works in the traditional manner (which was not likely to excite much critical interest), or merely repeat the experimentation that characterised so much of modernist writing (but after *Finnegans Wake*, experimentation could hardly go anywhere else).

However, a more constructive way of looking at the 'death of the novel' debate would be to see it in terms of my previous discussion of the way in which modernism became institutionalised, partly through the efforts of those critics who wished to maintain a hierarchical distinction between high and popular culture. The two options open to fiction writing mentioned above are, of course, extremely limiting. To view writing in terms of binary oppositions and to state that it can only go in either one direction or another, that the only possibilities are that of traditional realism or traditional modernism is completely fallacious.

John Barth's well known essay 'The Literature of Exhaustion' is indicative of the limitations of this either/or dichotomy. In this essay, Barth is writing about what he sees as "the literature of exhausted possibility . . . the literature of exhaustion", but he emphasises that by exhaustion he does

not mean "physical, moral or intellectual decadence" but "the used-upness of certain forms or exhaustion of certain possibilities".<sup>59</sup> The publication of Barth's essay in 1967 may be seen as a significant reference point within the postmodernist debate. For in raising the issue of the extent to which the strategies and techniques of modernist fiction were no longer felt to be adequate vehicles for the concerns of contemporary writers, Barth's essay can be read in more than just one way. The most obvious interpretation is that Barth's desire to clear a space for his own mode of writing and that of his peer group, is a demonstration of the break that postmodernists wish to make from modernism. Yet, when viewed in the light of Virginia Woolf's essays 'Modern Fiction' (1919) and 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' (1924), Barth's pronouncement would seem to be a repetition of the modernists' sense of frustration with the modes of writing that were current then.

In contrast, Charles Newman proposes that it is not simply literature that is "exhausted", but its market. He suggests that:

The 'last reader' is a far more interesting metaphor than any latest 'last writer' . . . Post-Modernism destroys the belief that aesthetic evolution alone can definitively alter our perception. Confronted with an audience which has discounted in advance all possibility of being shocked, it is the writer who is often left holding the toxic bag of his latest catastrophism.<sup>60</sup>

Newman actually makes an interesting point here, despite the outraged rhetorical gestures he makes in his study of postmodern fiction. For it can

be argued that the sense of aesthetic limitation which constricts so many of the representative postmodern writers discussed by these critics does mean that much of their work appears to be little more than an arid exercise in stylistics. Yet Newman's position on postmodernism also needs to be scrutinised, since his polemical stance is often in danger of being merely an exercise in semantics. Newman's argument seems to be based on the notion that postmodernist writers must, by definition, set out to shock their audience. However, this is a very prescriptive view of postmodernism and Newman's desire to deflate postmodernist literature ignores many of its more interesting possibilities. This issue will be taken up in the following chapters, where its complexities can be more fully explored in relation to how women postmodernist writers respond to the 'death of the novel' debate during this period.

Barth suggests that one of the elements which is being questioned in postmodernist writing is not simply the notion of the omniscient author but rather the idea of the 'controlling artist'. The idea of artist as *auteur* who can impose a redemptive vision, is one of the dominant notions of modernism that has been discussed earlier. Barth illustrates this point by referring to Borges' argument that:

. . . no one has claim to originality in literature; all writers are more or less faithful amanuenses of the spirit, translators and annotators of pre-existing archetypes.<sup>61</sup>



The question of the author's role in relation to the narrative discourse in the fictional text is an issue shared by both modernist and postmodernist writers. But the methods used in postmodernist fiction do differ to some extent from the devices in modernist writing. For instance, Joyce's strategy of drawing upon the Greek classics as a structural principle in *Ulysses*, whilst carried out with a great deal of irony, was nevertheless part of the wider modernist project of investing moral intensity in their struggle for a new aesthetic. Joyce's well known views on the role of the writer were articulated in his earlier novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where he writes:

The personality of the artist, at first a cry or a cadence or a mood and then a fluid and lambent narrative, finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalizes itself, so to speak. . . . The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.<sup>62</sup>

Despite the differences between many of the modernist writers, Joyce's views may be taken as a primary aspect of modernism which has not necessarily disappeared altogether in postmodernist writing, but has shifted to a more secondary consideration in a significant body of work.

A more dominant concern of postmodernist writers is the tendency in many works to focus on the themes and forms of fiction itself as the main object of interest for the writer. The narrative discourse flaunts its fictional artifice, comments and speculates on previous works of fiction, and often

incorporates mock editorial notes, pastiches of critical reviews and discussions on the work itself as it progresses. Whilst any, or indeed, all of these elements may appear in some modernist texts, it is the extreme degree to which they are present in so many postmodernist fictions, that allows a critical distinction to be made between modernism and postmodernism in regard to this technique.

Ronald Sukenick's account of how literary works are categorised, suggests that it is necessary to rethink the whole idea of tradition in fiction, and in fact, he proposes the invention of a *new tradition*:

The modern is now a period - both an era and an end of something. . . . The modern behaved as if a new age were due tomorrow, and as if it were it, the final goal of progress. Here in tomorrowland we have a more tragic sense of things. We know there is no such thing as progress, that a new age may be a worse one, and that since the future brings no redemption, we better look to the present. In consequence the new tradition makes itself felt as a presence rather than a development. Instead of a linear sequence of historical influences it seems a network of interconnections revealed to our particular point of view.<sup>63</sup>

Sukenick suggests that *Don Quixote* could be taken as the starting point of this alternative tradition, and from there links could be made with Rabelais, and from Rabelais to Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* or Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, and then to Butor, Cortazar, Nabokov, Robbe-Grillet, and Raymond Federman. The point that Sukenick makes, basically, is that this tradition can be seen in groups of fiction without regard to period or nationality.

It is more a question of the qualities which these types of fiction have in common, qualities which have been there since *Tristram Shandy* where "the new tradition coexisted with the old tradition from the beginning, not as the exception that proves the rule but as an alternative rule".<sup>64</sup> The frequent referring back to Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* is significant since, as John Ditsky also points out:

[It] is a reminder that the traditional novel has had available for centuries the model it has now chosen to follow up, and a figure whose existence makes possible the disturbing suggestion that the novel form has been sidetracked since long before Austen.<sup>65</sup>

Sukenick proposes that Diderot's masterpiece *Jacques the Fatalist* which begins and ends with *Tristram Shandy* should also be included, together with Gide's *The Counterfeiters*, the novels of Kafka and Borges, and Raymond Roussel's *Impressions of Africa*. If this link was extended in the direction of the French 'new novelists', especially Robbe-Grillet, then:

With a twist of the surreal in the direction of the fantastic you arrive at Donald Barthelme, and with another twist in the direction of the psychological you come to John Hawkes. Somewhere in this area you also find Leonard Michaels, Ishmael Reed and lately, Jonathan Baumbach, as well as Kenneth Patchen.<sup>66</sup>

Within this tradition, Sukenick also includes John Barth's experimentation with the "revitalization of narrative" and the "mythmakers and fairytalers" William Gass, Robert Coover, and Steve Katz.

However, Sukenick's notion of postmodernism's relation to other modes of writing, in addition to modernism, whilst useful in that it shifts the discussion towards a consideration of other innovative works, also presents some problems. For instance, although he suggests that the tendency to construct literary history as a linear sequence is limiting, and that it is more fruitful to work on the basis of interconnected networks, he nevertheless excludes the work of women writers completely. Furthermore, he seems to assume that in speaking unproblematically of how, in contrast to the moderns, "we have a more tragic sense of things" that his ideas are somehow shared by all postmodernists. I would suggest that this is not necessarily a view which is shared by many women postmodernist writers. Indeed, in the works of Angela Carter, Joyce Carol Oates and Christine Brooke-Rose, amongst others, notions such as Sukenick's are often the subject of considerable criticism. Perhaps Philip Stevick's point is a little more apt in this regard, when he writes that postmodernist fiction:

. . . no longer orients itself according to its own relations to the modernist masters and this sense of discontinuity with the dominant figures of modernism is one of the few qualities that unite [this] fiction.<sup>67</sup>

Stevick's proposition thus allows for a model of postmodernism that does not simply take "the modernist masters" as its key reference point, although he does not go on to suggest how the work of women modernist and



postmodernist writers might figure in such a model. It is my intention in this thesis to explore this problem in such a way that the novels and short stories of a number of women postmodernists may be given a frame of reference which has been largely denied in postmodernist literary history.

A crossover point between postmodernism and modernism is in the use of myth as a narrative device. For modernist writers, the use of myth functioned as a mode of perception and as a technique for ordering the chaos of reality; as T S Eliot stated in his essay '*Ulysses, Order and Myth*', it enabled artists to find "a way of controlling, or ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history."<sup>68</sup> Postmodernists either reject the use of myth entirely or subvert the principles which lie behind the modernist's use of myth, especially as articulated by Eliot. Representative texts which use this technique are considered to be John Barth's *End of the Road*, Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association*, Gass's *Omensetter's Luck*, and Gardner's *Grendel*. The device of drawing upon myth in these postmodernist fictions is noted by many critics to have a somewhat altered function in comparison to modernist literature, and is utilised in such a way as to set up a critique of the very type of control and order it potentially offers.

Christopher Butler proposes that a key development in postmodernism is the reaction against order, especially Eliot's "authoritarian and

schoolmasterly fixing of the syllabus"<sup>69</sup>, the discarding or modifying of procedures which are based on linear logic, and the conflation of fact and fiction, and dream, game and waking fantasy. Yet although Eliot's critical writings may epitomise a sense of the modernist's desire for order, the features that Butler suggests are all present in modernist literature itself. For example, the above description would also seem to fit such texts as James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, and Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*.

Butler suggests that analogies can be made between the developments in painting and music, and between these arts and postmodern writing. Indeed, he proposes that elements of form in serialist music are very similar to postmodern fiction:

. . . it has many levels upon which it can be read, but no dominant one; a large number of independently calculated elements (series or narrative themes) that are ingeniously woven together; . . . one can lose oneself in it, since it need have no single harmonic 'plot', no end, and no culmination. It is composed indeed partly to see what happens to its own *écriture*.<sup>70</sup>

Butler's analysis of the key points of postmodern fiction also include the notion of the novel as a linguistic construct, the emphasis on linguistic texture and the impact of the 'pop art' movement. The importance of the latter has significant long term effects, argues Butler, because:

. . . if its premises concerning the interaction of different levels of culture could be accepted, it could offer a much needed reconciliation between advanced technical means,

pleasure and intelligibility.<sup>71</sup>

Whilst I would disagree with a number of the propositions that Butler makes about the distinctions between modernism and postmodernism, I feel that Butler's recognition of the impact of popular culture as a marker of the difference between them, does have significance.

The role of popular culture is important in a consideration of postmodern fiction, for the relationship between them constitutes one of the major areas of the aesthetics of postmodernism. Jim Collins has argued persuasively in *Uncommon Cultures: Popular Culture and Post-Modernism* (1989), that postmodernist textual practices are fundamentally different to any other preceding movement. His argument is based on recognising that it is the co-presence of competing styles, modes and genres within some postmodernist texts that distinguishes them from previous notions of avant-garde, modernist, realist, popular fiction and so on. Thus, Collins states that:

. . . there is indeed a Post-Modernist textual *practice* in literature, . . . but what distinguishes the Post-Modernist context is the simultaneous presence of that style along with Modernist, pre-Modernist, and non-Modernist styles - all enjoying significant degrees of popularity with different audiences and institutions within a specific culture. While this co-presence of competing styles could be found in the Modernist period as well, Post-Modernism departs from its predecessors in that as a textual practice it actually incorporates the heterogeneity of those conflicting styles, rather than simply asserting itself as the newest radical alternative seeking to render all conflicting modes of representation obsolete.<sup>72</sup>

It is precisely this process of incorporation and assimilation of the heterogeneity of different popular cultural forms and literary traditions and the blurring of the boundaries between high art and popular culture that distinguishes this practice as a postmodern aesthetic. Collins illustrates this point by a discussion of novels such as Robert Parker's *The Promised Land* (1976) and *A Savage Place* (1981) which contain references to popular music, films and television shows along with quotations from Shakespeare, Coleridge, Fitzgerald and Eliot. Whilst modernist works also incorporated elements from other textual material, there is a considerable difference of degree between the few modernist novels which used this tactic, and the way in which it fairly saturates large numbers of postmodernist novels.

The early contribution of Leslie Fiedler to the theorisation of postmodernism must be recognised here. Fiedler's 1965 essay 'The New Mutants' and his 1975 article 'Cross the Border - Close that Gap: Postmodernism' staked out the basis for later theories of postmodern aesthetics. Fiedler highlighted the increasing interest in the mode of science fiction and the related shift in the concept of time (for example in some of the works of Kurt Vonnegut) and argued that this concern would have "a major impact on the future direction of literature".<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, he argued that high art had been subverted by the postmodernist practice of drawing upon areas of pop art for the material of their fiction, areas which



had previously been considered beneath the interest of great literature.

Fiedler insisted that to "close the gap" between high art and pop art, also

meant to "cross the border" between:

. . . the Marvellous and the Probable, the Real and the Mythical, the world of the boudoir and the country house and the realm of what used to be called Faerie but has for so long been designated mere madness.<sup>74</sup>

Postmodernist fictional practice certainly does exhibit these characteristics as part of the textual strategies and techniques which facilitate the breakdown of normative spatial, temporal and linear narrative conventions. Many texts mix together elements from fable, quest, romance, dream-sequence, expository writing, detective story, spy thriller, science fiction, surrealism, melodrama, cartoon and fairy tale. Indeed, the full extent of this practice as an aesthetic of postmodernism has not been fully appreciated, since most critical studies tend to concentrate only on how male authors use these strategies. In the work of some women postmodernists, these tactics are put to rather different purpose, as will be demonstrated in subsequent chapters.

It would seem that postmodernist fictional techniques and strategies move away from both the modernist and the realist methods of responding to reality and making sense of the world. David Lodge illustrates this point by referring to Donald Barthelme's text *Snow White*, in which a character

asks "Where is the figure in the carpet?" (thus alluding to the Henry James story as an image of the goal of critical interpretation) but Barthelme's character adds, "Or is it just . . . carpet?". Much postmodernist writing, argues Lodge, "implies that experience is 'just carpet' and that whatever patterns we discern in it are wholly illusory, comforting fictions".<sup>75</sup>

Similarly, Albert Guerard identifies a distrust of 'reality', of the inherited novel form and the very act of fictionalizing as a central feature in postmodernist writing. This distrust may be seen to stem, particularly in American writing, from the effects of the Second World War, and from twenty-five years of cold war and political deception, when "nothing was ever what it seemed, or what on highest authority it was said to be".<sup>76</sup> Of course, distrust of the traditional novel form and the act of fictionalizing were apparent long ago, but Guerard illustrates the specific manifestation of this distrust as a textual strategy in postmodernist writing, by referring to the portrayal of 'unsettled identities' which he suggests can be found in the work of Thomas Pynchon (the identity of V for example), Richard Brautigan (*Trout Fishing in America* is simultaneously the title of one of his books, a person and a part of speech), and Nabokov (the problematic identity of Charles Kinbote in *Pale Fire*). Yet again, this question of unsettled identity and its representation figures as a shared concern in both modernist and postmodernist writing; the difference in the texts which are considered to be

representative of postmodernist writing would seem to point towards a more extreme portrayal of identity as a linguistic construct.

Lodge suggests that a fundamental principle which underlies much postmodernist writing is the construction of narratives which operate at the level of "endemic uncertainty"<sup>77</sup>. This textual problematic often seems to manifest itself through the conflation of the factual and fictive in a manner which can be disconcerting for the reader. Similarly, Stevick points to the works of Greenberg, McCord, Anderson and Barthelme, whose texts employ strategies which would seem to deny the basic fictive impulse. In their fictions, these writers often adopt "the tones, syntax and rhetorical orientations of factual prose while converting those rhetorical possibilities to a kind of mad invention".<sup>78</sup> Greenberg's "'Franz Kafka" by Jorge Luis Borges', McCord's 'The Geography of Ohio', and Barthelme's 'Robert Kennedy Saved From Drowning' cannot be described as short stories, nor are they traditional parodies, nor exercises in irony or burlesque.

This strategy in postmodern fiction:

. . . tells stories in an odd and sketchy way at best, often does not make stories at all. Often it masquerades as essay, or encyclopedia article, or biographical summary, or news magazine report. As such, it invites us to mock the form of factual assertion. Yet it does not exist for the purpose of formal mockery.<sup>79</sup>

Stevick suggests that more extended works of this nature would include B

S Johnson's *See The Old Lady Decently*, which parodies the conventions of the history textbook and the tourist guide and simultaneously undermines notions of the material of narrative discourse, and Donald Barthelme's *Amateurs*, which operates in a similar fashion.

It may well be that the questioning of the notion of literary tradition underpins, to some extent, the extensive use of parody in postmodern fictions. Until very recently parody has tended to be other directed, usually by one writer against another or directed at the literary modes of a particular period. Yet there is quite evidently a newly developed form of self-parody that does not so much operate against any specific literary structure but rather questions the enterprise of writing itself, as Guerard argues:

An art form may begin in parody and self-parody, revealing the intense uneasiness of the creator over what he is doing and the materials he is using: *Don Quixote*, *Tom Jones*, etc. In much the same way widespread use of parody by serious writers may indicate, several centuries later, the radical transformation of a genre, if not its exhaustion and 'end'.<sup>80</sup>

This issue of the transformation of genre which is evident throughout the whole field of postmodern writing will be examined in more detail in the following chapters in relation to the work of women postmodernist writers, since their handling of genre raises important issues of how their work has been perceived by mainstream critics, especially in connection with the positioning of their work as postmodernist.



Postmodernist self-parody undermines traditional genre classifications and the choice of style, so that it is as Richard Poirier suggests, "the activity itself, of creating any literary form, of empowering an idea with style"<sup>81</sup> that is being questioned. Borges, for example, has already established the idea of parodying the creative function to its extreme. In *Labyrinths* (1964), Borges erases the distinction between fiction and literary criticism, incorporating into his writing the analysis of his subject matter:

I live, let myself go on living, so that Borges may contrive his literature, and this literature justifies me. It is no effort for me to confess that he has achieved some valid pages, but those pages cannot save me, perhaps because what is good belongs to no one, not even to him but rather to the language and to tradition.<sup>82</sup>

This emphasis on the way in which language functions to construct notions of meaning and reality within an intertextual realm is one of the major elements in postmodernism. In many postmodernist texts, reality is depicted by techniques which interrupt and fragment any consistent viewpoint, thereby acting as constant reminders of the conditions and the process by which aesthetic experience is formed.

Postmodern fiction tends to employ techniques which explore the notion of reality by emphasizing that it exists only in its fictionalised version; that meaning does not pre-exist language, it is language which creates meaning. Raymond Federman argues therefore that "to write . . . is

to *produce* meaning and not *reproduce* a pre-existing meaning".<sup>83</sup> Many critical accounts point to this understanding of language as one of the major characteristics of postmodern literature, and thus correspond with Federman's view that "writing fiction will be a process of inventing, on the spot, the material of fiction"<sup>84</sup>, rather than believing that the material of fiction can be drawn from somewhere outside of language.

Yet, a significant body of postmodern fiction is characterised by the use of recollective techniques which seem to counteract this dominant claim by postmodern writers for artistic originality derived from a new conceptualisation of the imagination. There are a surprising number of texts which reveal retrospective features in the way that they make use of the past to contextualise the present. This writing utilises autobiographical, biographical and historical facts as well as frequently parodying the conventional patterns of the novel. Alfred Hornung suggests that there is a distinct element of postmodern fiction in which:

The paradox of using concrete facts and questioning their reality status at the same time forms the creative principle of what could be called a recollective imagination.<sup>85</sup>

and for Hornung, the most representative texts of this type are Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, E L Doctorow's *Ragtime* and *The Book of Daniel*, Coover's *The Public Burning*, Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor*, Vonnegut's *Jailbird*, Abish's *How German Is it*, and Gass's *The Tunnel*.

Hornung insists that fiction which uses this particular technique contradicts the criticism often levelled at postmodern fiction as being superficial and out of touch with reality. Indeed, Hornung argues that these texts "have a firm basis in personal or public histories, which . . . undergo a number of changes, which in turn affect their reality status".<sup>86</sup> This is one area of postmodernism that women writers have dealt with consistently in their fictional texts, and which potentially offers a discursive space in which the conjunction of feminism and postmodernism might produce some significant readings. However, my survey reveals that mainstream critics, Hornung included, overlook the fiction of women postmodernists writers, in their discussions of retrospective or historiographical fiction. I shall explore this area in more detail in the chapters that follow, especially since this aspect of postmodernism is one in which feminist critics, such as Linda Hutcheon, have recently begun to develop an interest.

It is evident then that a major characteristic to be found in postmodernist writing is a recurring emphasis on the nature of writing as a fictional construct. Borges has written on this issue in his essay 'Partial Magic in the Quixote', where he asks why we find it disturbing when we read for example, that Don Quixote is a reader of *Don Quixote*, and Hamlet, a spectator of *Hamlet*. Borges proposes that the reason is more than a simple but perplexing issue of the status of information in the text:

. . . these inversions suggest that if the characters of a fictional work can be readers or spectators, we, its readers or spectators, can be fictitious. In 1833, Carlyle observed that the history of the universe is an infinite sacred book that all men write and read and try to understand, and in which they are also written.<sup>87</sup>

The postmodernist technique of exploring the fiction making process through the fiction itself leads to a heightened awareness of its own artificiality. Robert Scholes suggests that this tendency has developed from an attitude which may be termed "fabillism" (from the work of philosopher Charles Saunders Peirce), in much the same way that nineteenth century realism developed from positivism. Thus postmodernist fiction does not reject the concept of reality, but instead seeks to find "more subtle correspondences between the reality which is fiction and the fiction which is reality".<sup>88</sup> This is frequently signalled in postmodernist fiction through techniques which seek to "*make sense* out of language . . . *to give sense* to the fiction of life"<sup>89</sup> by exposing the means by which the real is made intelligible and showing up these means for the artificial conventions they are. This is an aspect of fictional writing which I feel is shared by modernist and postmodernists authors, but the rhetorical arguments against postmodernism have tended to represent their work as uniformly meaningless.

Perhaps the most significant strategy that is argued to be found in a



considerable number of postmodernist works is the change in the concept of character. Many critical accounts which attempt to define the concept of postmodernist fiction have highlighted how writers seem to place considerably less stress upon character and correspondingly more upon structure, reality construct, fable and various non-fictional components. A considerable number of writers tend not to pursue the problems of fictional characters but rather the problems of the character of fiction itself. Postmodernist writers who explore the positing of a self prior to and exterior to the fiction, place in question the very nature of the self, and tend to be suspicious of the concept of the unity of self altogether. Yet of course, this was also an area explored in great depth by modernist writers, especially Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, and Djuna Barnes. It may well be that the claims of a fundamental change in postmodernist characterization seem to be more radical than is actually the case. The modernist model with which they are compared rarely includes sufficient analysis of the work of the women modernists, thereby creating a misleading notion of characterization in modernist literature. This in turn then leads on to a misrepresentation of the differences between modernist and postmodernism.

Raymond Federman's observations on the representation of subjectivity through the act of characterisation, are widely considered by

many critics to express prevailing notions of postmodernist fictional practice. He notes that there is a considerable body of postmodernist fiction which employs a concept that he terms a "grammatological self", that "invents itself in the present of the text", and is therefore quite unlike the notion of 'self' in traditional fiction, which as "past self" is embodied in a "personality, a character, a personal psyche".<sup>90</sup> Whilst Federman's argument may be true of the difference between a postmodernist and a typical realist text, I feel that such claims do not mark the distinction between postmodernism and modernism, but rather show how the exploration of the literary representation of subjectivity is an area of shared concern. It may be that the textual practice of a postmodernist writer like Federman has more in common with the strategies of Dorothy Richardson or Virginia Woolf, in her later novels, than has previously been realised.

Similarly, this issue of subjectivity in postmodern fiction is explored by Charles Caramello. He suggests that there is a difference in attitude towards the concept of "self" held by writers such as Conrad and James for example, and that held by postmodernist writers. He concludes that this difference consists "in the positing of a self prior and exterior to the fiction" and the "radical placing in question of that self".<sup>91</sup> Just as Roland Barthes makes the distinction between "work" and "text", and Jacques Derrida distinguishes between "book" and "writing", Caramello argues that there is

a similar distinction to be found in the concept of "self" in traditional and postmodern fiction. He proposes that there is an ambivalence about the authorial self in postmodernism, which causes it to oscillate between presenting itself as "writing", as "text" or as a facet of "work", as "book"; although it is drawn towards the former, argues Caramello, it "remains nostalgic" for the latter.<sup>92</sup> As a result of this ambiguity, characterisation in postmodernist writing tends either to consist of fixed identities with stable social and psychological attributes or to be:

. . . as changeable, as unstable, as illusory, as nameless, as unnameable, as fraudulent, as unpredictable as the discourse that makes them.<sup>93</sup>

In some postmodernist fiction, the concept of character is emphasised as a property of the literary construct. Some critics, such as Robert Ryf, claim that:

The traditional concept of character is no longer viable and that character as such, once generally accepted as a staple of the novel, is no longer of primary importance as a vehicle of meaning.<sup>94</sup>

Whilst this may be the case in certain postmodernist texts, it is not true of all postmodernist fiction. This re-conceptualising of character may manifest itself, for example, as a shift from the probing of psychological depths found in Joyce, Proust and Lawrence towards a display of surface, already prefigured in the work of Gertrude Stein. Ryf argues that traditional

characterisation techniques may be employed in order to parody the conventions themselves, thus emphasizing "their essential irrelevance to the contemporary world".<sup>95</sup> This is certainly true in those postmodernist fictions which question traditional notions of gender and challenge stereotypes of masculine and feminine roles. Postmodernist characterisation is often sexually ambivalent, and examples which are considered to be representative of this tendency are usually cited as Gore Vidal's *Myra/Myron Breckinridge*; Henry, the hero of the postmodernist half of Julian Mitchell's duplex novel *The Undiscovered Country* and John Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy*. Indeed, this area is crucial to an understanding of the full range and significance of postmodernist literature, and will therefore be examined more closely in the following chapters.

It has also been argued that the re-conceptualising of character derives from a significantly new attitude which is not so much interested in the question of the diminishing importance of character, but it is employed self-consciously in a process which stresses the construction of character, and as Ryf argues:

. . . by extension, the underlying process which is thrown into more or less bold relief is the process by which we ourselves come to terms with our environment, as the imagination is called into play to order or shape it. Or, in other words, to 'write' it. In short, the author-character relationship . . . serves as an analogy to, or indeed embodies, the epistemological function of the imagination.<sup>96</sup>



Thus, this questioning of the concept of character is intimately related to the way in which 'reality' is imagined, to the shaping of facts by the imagination. As part of this process, the importance of assigning names to characters is often undermined and incongruous or completely inappropriate names may be used. Examples often given of this technique include Pynchon's Profane and Stencil in *V*, Oedipa Mass in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Bloat and Feel in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Person in Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*, and Dick (Detective) in Gilbert Sorrentino's novel *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things*.

The notion of character is persistently challenged in postmodernist fiction, especially in relation to the idea of fixed identity. A number of critics argue that this aspect of characterisation may sometimes be revealed by techniques which focus on "the dissociation of an individual into incompatible fragments and the distribution of the pieces according to completely new units".<sup>97</sup> Raymond Federman maintains that there is also an accompanying shift from a "past self" to a disembodied "present self" which sometimes exists beyond "nomination, beyond pronominal being, as the voice of the text" is without doubt one of most important aspects of postmodernism, and he locates this crucial shift in Beckett's *Molloy*. However, I would suggest that Virginia Woolf had already made such a shift, as for example in her novel *The Waves* where she explores the notion

that subjectivity is "not one and simple, but complex and many".<sup>98</sup>

Many critics also identify the interchangeability of characters as a significant feature of postmodernist fiction. Examples used to illustrate this feature include Carlos Fuentes' *A Change of Skin*, where the narrator and characters oscillate between each other's identities, and John Barth's *Letters*, in which characters that have appeared in some of Barth's other novels, ostensibly write letters to themselves, to each other, and to 'the Author'. So that, for example, one character signs himself as 'the author' and another character addresses him as Mr John Barth.

The expectations of the reader are challenged in the context of the relationship between author and character, so that the appearance of the author as a principal character in the fiction is demonstrated through the notion of 'self' as a function of pure rhetoric. Thus the 'self' in some postmodernist fiction may often assume the name of its author, in a playful and ironic way, who then becomes as fictitious as the created self in the text. Many critical accounts find this tendency is very evident in the work of Raymond Federman, John Barth, Ron Sukenick, Steve Katz, Kurt Vonnegut and Philippe Sollers, and argue that particularly clear examples of this technique can be found in B S Johnson's *Albert Angelo* and John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

In addition, there may also be the inclusion of other writer's names

into postmodernist texts, or the names of friends of the writers. Raymond Federman, Ron Sukenick and Steve Katz are close friends who appear in each other's fictions. Indeed, Katz was written into Ron Sukenick's novel *Up* before the publication of his own first novel, *The Exaggerations of Peter Prince* (in which Sukenick duly appears).

The notion of the fictional text as linguistic construct operates to a large extent through the arbitrariness of narrative method. The reconceptualizing of characterisation is often accompanied by an absence of plot or, equally, incredibly exaggerated plots, a deliberate engagement with banality or wildly improbable coincidences through a dysfunction of tone and subject matter, so that in postmodernist texts of this type a high degree of textual instability is displayed to the extent that it can then become metaphysically disturbing. It might be argued that such strategies were also present in modernism, in that the structuring of Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando* is based on the quite unbelievable notion of the central character living for hundreds of years, changing sex arbitrarily, and witnessing events that strain the reader's credulity. However, the techniques used in Woolf's fiction could not be said to be a primary feature of modernism, whereas in postmodernism these tactics surface to such an extent in so many fictional texts, that they form a dominant concern, and thus point to a significant difference between modernism and postmodernism.

A number of critics argue that many examples of postmodern fiction tend to be structured so as to mix the traditional elements of narrative in unusual or novel combinations or to try to work with the minimal reference to standard narrative techniques. A distinctive feature of traditional and modernist fiction is that of the 'epiphany', indeed, it might be argued that 'insight' into the human condition has always been a moral imperative of such fiction. Yet this element is very often avoided in postmodernist texts, so that in those texts where characterisation does include most of the recognisable traits of traditional 'characters', there is a tendency to find that these characters simply:

. . . do not learn. There are no insights. Relationships are not grasped in an instant.<sup>99</sup>

Above all, structurally, fictions of this type are frequently not climactic; they may be flat, or circular, or cyclic, or indeterminate and there can be a hesitation to use the climactic form together with a working against the notion of 'event' in the story telling. In these instances, there is often a rejection of linear narrative, and a movement towards a fictional discourse which:

. . . will circle around itself, create new and unexpected movements and figures in the unfolding of the narration, repeating itself, projecting itself backward and forward along the curves of the writing.<sup>100</sup>

This is an area in which I would suggest that the differences or similarities



between modernism and postmodernism are difficult to distinguish. Whilst it may be the case that, unlike some postmodernist texts, modernist authors often utilised the device of the leitmotif as a means of highlighting particular moments of revelation or insight, as in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, and Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, it is also the case that the rejection of linear narrative is a dominant feature of modernism generally. Thus, although modernist and postmodernist texts may share the tendency to reject the linear narrative typical of realist fiction, where they differ is in how some postmodernist writers question the issue of providing insight into the human condition as a necessary role of fiction.

Many postmodernist texts tend to have an ambiguous relationship with the traditions of prose fiction, so that some fictions may well appear to display little involvement with such conventions yet at the same time may well contain and often intensify precisely those same traditions through strategies which transform their accepted purpose. These postmodernist texts tend to suspend the conventions of narrative continuity, frequently composing their fictions in very short sections, the content of which is often quite disparate. The technique of 'numbering' paragraphs, or sections, within the body of the text, such that they do not constitute recognisable prose text or chapters, is a characteristic that is often found in postmodernist texts. Many critics feel that the fictions of Coover and Barthelme

particularly exemplify this trait. This technique confers an ambiguous quality upon the form of the work, for the effect at first makes the sections appear to come to a logical conclusion. However, as the work proceeds it becomes more and more obvious that the 'numbering' is adding up to less and less, until finally it seems that the sections are randomly selected and arbitrarily numbered, themes are not demonstrated, expectations are not satisfied and tensions are not resolved.

Alongside the fragmenting of the text into splinters of prose, a recurrent feature in postmodernist texts is the concern with fictional endings. Instead of the closed ending of the traditional realist novel and the open ending of the modernist novel, postmodernist fiction frequently utilises the "multiple ending", the "false ending", the "mock ending", or the "parody ending".<sup>101</sup> Some of the texts which are considered to demonstrate this technique include John Barth's 'Lost in the Funhouse', Robert Coover's 'The Magic Poker' and 'The Babysitter' in *Pricksongs and Descants*, John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and Raymond Federman's *Double or Nothing*.

Postmodernist writers cannot be said to have broken with the mimetic impulse altogether, but there is a tendency to repudiate the traditional practice of nineteenth century mimesis, thus sharing an area of concern with modernist writers. Albert Guerard suggests that this disavowal is apparent

in the self-reflexivity over the fiction-making process itself, and the lexical foregrounding of the relation of fiction to reality; the tendency to fragment form and consciousness through acts of discontinuity; and the distinct element of 'play', an ancient attribute of fiction which has "survived the 1850-1950 longeurs of social realism".<sup>102</sup> Guerard examines in some depth the work of Jerome Charyn, whom he considers to be a representative writer, although he adds that Joyce Carol Oates "would have provided an example almost as striking", since both typify writers "much aware of contemporary life, fascinated by 'real reality' but aware too of what is 'going on' in fiction".<sup>103</sup> The fact that Guerard does mention Joyce Carol Oates, but as an aside, is indicative of the way in which so many mainstream critics appear to dismiss the work of women postmodernists. My survey of postmodernist literary criticism reveals that whilst the majority of critics are not unaware of the fictional practice of a range of women writers, nevertheless they consistently exclude such works from consideration in their discussions of postmodernism.

Guerard and a number of other critics point to the resurfacing of a sense of play as a key characteristic of postmodernism. They argue that this playfulness with the referential qualities of language, undermines the solemnity with which literary language has traditionally been regarded. Charles Caramello suggests that it could be argued that "postmodern fiction

bifurcates into the 'post-Modern', suffering its 'anxiety of influence' and the 'postmodern' proper, enjoying its 'pla(y)giarism'".<sup>104</sup> So that whereas some postmodernist writers feel a sense of limitation from the achievements of modernism, others may regard modernism as simply one avenue of literary innovation amongst many others which may be plundered and played with, since language offers a multiplicity of possibilities. Indeed, it has been argued that there has been a radical epistemological shift, "which calls into question the traditional use of prosaic language as a window onto the world"<sup>105</sup>, and there thus tends to be an exploration of the theory of fiction through the fiction itself, together with close scrutiny of all facets of the literary construct. Postmodern fiction seeks to represent either implicitly or explicitly, "the act of writing as an act of play"<sup>106</sup>, even though this may challenge the reader to discern sense and significance in what at first might seem inscrutable.

To conclude then, in discussing how mainstream literary critics have responded to the issue of postmodernism, it would seem that there are a number of key features which may be identified as characteristic of the postmodern debate. There seems to be little agreement as to whether postmodernism merely continues the project of modernism or manifests some form of break from modernism. I have argued earlier that one of the problems with such a formulation is that it tends to lead to over-



generalisations, and fails to account for the diverse nature of both modernism and postmodernism and the complexity of their similarities and differences.

Nevertheless, this issue may be more fruitfully discussed if it is viewed within the framework of a restructuration model along the lines suggested by the work of Williams and Jameson. In such a model the uneven nature of change may be registered by noting how certain aspects of literary systems shift from a position of dominance to one of peripheral concern, and other elements move from a marginal to a more central position. On the basis of such an approach, I find it difficult to agree with the 'continuity' argument as epitomised by such critics as Gerald Graff and Frank Kermode. For despite the shared concern with innovation on the part of modernist and postmodernist writers, I feel that there is a sufficient degree of change to merit the concept of postmodernist literature. Furthermore, I would argue against the view of Harry Levin and Robert Alter that the nature of these changes necessarily signifies a literature of decline, for such a view would seem to be based on partial accounts of postmodernism which are rather misleading.

The critical studies of these Anglo-American critics have a combined effect that constitutes what may be termed postmodernist literary discourse. It is through this discourse that a new canon of writers has emerged to

replace the earlier canon of modernist writers. The writers most widely referred to as postmodernist, such as John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, Steve Katz, Thomas Pynchon, Ron Sukenick, Raymond Federman, and Kurt Vonnegut, do indeed epitomise certain aspects of postmodernism. But such writers only represent a very small proportion of the wide range of postmodernists engaged with contemporary innovative fiction, just as the modernists with whom they are compared are frequently only a limited few. Exaggerated claims about the work of this limited group of postmodernists has had the effect of underestimating the more socially and politically engaged writers such as Salman Rushdie, Günter Grass, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Milan Kundera. The accusation against postmodernism as a politically inert, nostalgia-ridden, morally detached form of literary games-playing is somewhat spurious, and whilst possibly applicable to some elements of postmodernist fiction, it is not true of all postmodernism.

My survey has revealed that critical attempts to formulate this new canon of literature are accompanied by contradictory arguments about whether a distinct set of aesthetics is identifiable that differentiates postmodernism from other literary movements. Yet it would seem that through the process of examining the relation between modernism and postmodernism, this reformulation of the literary canon establishes the importance of postmodernism as a significant cultural movement and does

delineate a sufficient number of aesthetic features by which a postmodernist fictional text may be recognised.

However, in both modernism and postmodernism the literary canons do not appear to include women writers, with the exception of Virginia Woolf. But, as I shall argue in the following chapters, women writers such as Brigid Brophy, Muriel Spark, Christine Brooke-Rose, Joyce Carol Oates, Angela Carter, Toni Morrison, Marilynne Robinson, Maggie Gee, Joanna Russ, and Kathy Acker utilise postmodernist strategies and techniques, yet their works have not received the attention they deserve within debates over the nature of postmodernism.

If the studies of the mainstream critics discussed in this chapter had not restricted their focus to such a small number of writers, then arguably prevailing notions of postmodernism would not be so negative and dismissive. For such devices as metafiction and magic realism, literary intertextuality, the incorporation of formulaic sub-genres, the juxtaposition of the banal with the extraordinary, the delight in the playful possibilities of language, and the attempts to collapse the hierarchical distinction between high and popular culture, amongst others, may be and indeed are used to serious and positive ends in a wide range of postmodernist fictions.

My thesis, therefore, seeks to alter rather than completely reject the model of postmodernist aesthetics discussed in this chapter, especially in

terms of reappraising the notion of postmodernism as a literature of exhaustion. This is especially the case when it is acknowledged that postmodernism has also been shaped by women writers, many of whom find that postmodernist aesthetics provide innovatory strategies for the articulation of feminist concerns. As part of this process, I shall attempt to demonstrate that postmodernism may be considered to be a more dynamic, socially and politically engaged aesthetic than the critical studies surveyed in this chapter have suggested.



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## Chapter Three

# Postmodernist Literature: a New Cartography

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"Major Art is about the activities of men." . . . "Major Art includes where women can't go, or shouldn't, or never have" . . . "And look at women writer's *style!*" Critics of this type always know what major art is - and wish to discuss only major artists. That's how they know they're major critics.

Hortense Calisher, 'No Important Woman Writer'<sup>1</sup>

Theories of postmodernism suggest that it is no longer tenable to suggest that a rigidly linear model is adequate to delineate the range of traditions in literary culture. The debate over the emergence of postmodern literature described in the preceding chapter demonstrates the way in which literary critics, confronted by the literary strategies and techniques of postmodernism, have had to re-evaluate and reappraise their models of literary aesthetics. The distinctions between modernism and postmodernism are often contentious, sometimes contradictory, and in places so slight that there is a subtle shading of one into the another, yet the claims of postmodernism's break with modernism are not totally unfounded.

It would be more appropriate, however, to locate the difference between modernism and postmodernism in the way in which postmodernist writers deal with the impact and consequences of modernism in relation to the conventions of realism, rather than in seeking a definitive point of

rupture. As I have argued earlier, the complexities of a transition from one literary system to another may be fruitfully analysed by drawing upon the model of literary change suggested by Fredric Jameson and Raymond Williams. Indeed, the notion of the shifting of literary conventions from a dominant position to more peripheral concern is not only relevant in differentiating postmodernism from modernism, but also provides a useful framework for analysing the continuities between writers too.

With the blurring and dissolving of the boundaries between high art and mass culture, and between literature and its theory, the nature of literature itself has been called into question, as Terry Eagleton points out:

. . . it is most useful to see 'literature' as a name which people give from time to time for different reasons to certain kinds of writing within a whole field of what Michel Foucault has called 'discursive practices', and that if anything is to be an object of study it is this whole field of practices rather than just those sometimes . . . labelled 'literature'.<sup>2</sup>

The modernism/postmodernism argument derives from major cultural shifts whereby the issue is more than simply a question of aesthetics. For instance, the cultural élitism associated with modernism can be understood as a desire to block out the impurities associated with mass culture, whereas postmodernism often strives to reach a wider audience by drawing on the



possibilities offered by the formulaic genres of popular culture such as the detective novel, the ghost story, the fairy tale and the romance.

More importantly, however, the postmodern debate epitomises not simply a crisis in literary studies, but "a crisis in the very *culture* in whose name criticism pronounced its judgements".<sup>3</sup> The prevailing notions of postmodernism as constructed by the critics considered in the previous chapter, are very limited in their selection of representative writers. One result, perhaps, of their neglect of the work of women postmodernist writers and feminist critics has been to present an image of postmodernism as more nihilistic, futile and derivative than I would suggest is actually the case. An alternative approach might be to regard the various shifts taking place in literary criticism, as well as in literary practice, within a framework where its constitutive elements may be seen as dominant, residual and emergent modes of discourse. Thus if mainstream literary criticism is seen as representative of the dominant mode of Anglo-American criticism, then feminist criticism or rather the varying critical positions associated with feminism, can be seen as an emergent discourse which calls the dominant practice into question.

There is, in a sense, a culture clash particularly evident in the conjuncture of postmodernist literary criticism and feminist discourse. As Rebecca O'Rourke, writing in 1982, points out:

The modes of women's writing are defined primarily through the public discourse about them. This discourse includes considerable areas of silence: much women's writing is never publicly spoken about. It provides feminist criticism with a starting point: the current version of women's relation to literary production as endorsed by the establishment. We take this starting-point not necessarily to assent to the version of importance and significance it implies - although a social history of reading and readers cannot ignore this public moment - but to use them as a means of appropriating the excluded women's writing of the time.<sup>4</sup>

O'Rourke's contention highlights the fact that despite the combined works of the entire feminist critical enterprise of the 1960s and 1970s, the works of women authors in general and women postmodernist authors in particular, are not defined as 'literature' and therefore are excluded from the discursive practices which constitute literary discourse.

Yet Cora Kaplan has called the present time "a historic moment for feminist cultural critique"<sup>5</sup>, for she argues that some of the approaches which are characteristic of feminism can now be seen to have influenced other areas of cultural analysis. Thus Kaplan points to the significance of the shift towards the specific, the detailed and the contextual and the move

in some of the more aware modes of cultural discourse.

One of the key characteristics of the postmodern condition, as critics such as Craig Owens argue, is that the totalising theories of the 'master' narratives which until recently epitomised the basis of Western culture have lost their legitimacy. In the context of Cora Kaplan's statement, it would seem that there may be a closer relationship between feminism and postmodernism than prevailing accounts of postmodernist literature would suggest. Similarly, Bonnie Zimmerman argued in 1985 in her article 'Feminist Fiction and the Postmodern Challenge' that the work of contemporary feminist critics has played a formative role in shaping the nature of postmodernism:

. . . feminism has . . . knocked away the underpinnings of the revolutionary theories that made the twentieth century an age of transformation, uncertainty, and experimentation. Marx challenged political philosophies; Darwin, biblical creation; Freud, theories of the self: feminism provides a ... discourse about these very challenges.<sup>6</sup>

Zimmerman's argument that the emergence of a diversity of feminism has challenged the legitimacy of patriarchal assumptions which are inscribed within the dominant ideology of Western Culture, again points to how mainstream accounts of postmodernist literature are limited in their neglect of the work of feminist critics.

The approach of feminist critics such as Cora Kaplan, Bonnie

Zimmerman, Linda Hutcheon, Molly Hite, Catherine Belsey, Helen Carr, amongst others, to issues of postmodernism, offers considerable potential to probe the ways in which the rhetoric of mainstream critical discourse relies upon questionable assumptions about its own process of defining what counts as literature. In the first part of this chapter, I will attempt to illustrate the problematics involved in rewriting the 'history' of literary postmodernism. Specifically I will consider and question the notion of the radical 'break' between postmodernism and modernism. Perhaps more politically, I will also hope to indicate by way of examples from prominent male postmodernist writings, how certain time-honoured literary motifs most noticeably that of woman as muse or silent victim, still feature as part of their narrative technique. In part two, the relationship of these issues to the aesthetic practices of women's postmodernist literature will be examined, thus widening the parameters of prevailing models of postmodernism and proposing a somewhat alternative reading of the nature of postmodernism.

### **The Sexual/Textual Politics of Postmodernist Literary Criticism**

The basis of the argument in this section is not whether postmodernism is a totally new phenomenon, or whether its distinctions from modernism are too slight to deserve a new generic title, or whether its practitioners can decisively be grouped together as a coherent movement or



school, or even whether postmodernism has had its day, and that a new 'ism' should be found to denote the most recent radical, experimental writing. These arguments have been sufficiently rehearsed in the studies examined in the previous chapter so as not to need further elaboration or clarification.

If theories of the postmodern condition indicate that there is a significant shift in the methods and theories of understanding and constructing accounts of the social world, then equally it could be expected that the impact of such fundamental challenges to orthodoxy would have implications for the work of literary theorists and critics. This is true to the extent that fundamental conceptions of language, perception, myth, history, truth, time and space are being examined in literary criticism as well as in other disciplines. Yet, there is a significant limitation within these theoretical projects, since the implications of these questions tend to be explored only in relation to the work of male fiction writers, as the studies examined in the preceeding chapter have shown.

Helen Carr argued in 1989 that the work of feminist literary critics has ensured that "the discussion of women's writing because it was by women, which little more than a decade ago was rare, marginal and academically suspect, is now part of the currency of our culture".<sup>7</sup> However, in the value systems and cultural models of mainstream

postmodernist critics, this currency is as irrelevant as the notion of barter in late consumer capitalism. For, within the circles of debate over the nature of literary postmodernism, both the practice of women literary postmodernists, and the theoretical accounts of feminist postmodernist critics are essentially discounted. Whilst a new canon of literary postmodernism may now be in the process of being established, as indicated in the previous chapter, this process retains the power politics of gender difference that are evident in the construction of earlier canons, particularly that of modernism.

Recent work by feminist scholars has demonstrated that the critical construction of modernism as shaped by mainstream Anglo-American commentators lacks an adequate account of the contribution made by women. Thus, Shari Benstock's *Women of the Left Bank* (1987), Gillian Hanscombe and Virginia Smyer's *Writing for their Lives: The Modernist Women 1910-1940* (1987), Susan Rubin Suleiman's *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics and the Avant-Garde* (1990), and the multi-volume project of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* (1988,1989), explore the impact and significance of the many different ways in which women do figure in modernism, and argue that modernism needs to be understood differently from the way in which it is currently formulated.

Despite the different feminist positions from which these works are

written and the diversity of critical approaches taken to the texts studied, there is nevertheless a shared project which contests the ways in which mainstream critics respond to the work of women writers. For example, Dorothy Richardson, Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, H.D., Mina Loy, and Djuna Barnes are widely considered to have played a central role in the development of modernist literary innovations, yet in Ellmann and Feidelson's gathering of key modernist texts, their contribution is recognised by the inclusion of only one essay by Virginia Woolf. Yet even Woolf's reputation is often treated rather scathingly in other critical volumes on modernism.

In the seventh volume of *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature*, which maps the literary scene from James to Eliot, Frank Bradbrook's essay on Woolf appears initially to admire her work as a novelist, but the esteem in which he holds her novels seems to disappear when he considers her role as a woman writer:

Virginia Woolf was very conscious of her place in the tradition of women writers, and her determination to maintain the dignity of her sex could at times even tempt her into the unartistic faults of stridency, exaggeration, and overemphasis. *A Room of One's Own*, which directly deals with the problems of the woman writer, is interesting and occasionally amusing, but there is a sense of strain and even of viciousness in the attack on various types of masculine pomposity and self-importance in *Three Guineas*. A good case and legitimate attitude are spoilt by an unusual crudity of presentation.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, John Holloway's treatment of Woolf and Dorothy Richardson, is remarkable, if only for its shallowness.

In considering the work of Woolf in relation to G.E. Moore and Walter Pater, Holloway writes:

This side of Virginia Woolf, at its slightest, can be disconcerting. It leads occasionally to a kind of perky incompleteness in her criticism, and an almost dithery brightness in her fiction, in which there is even a streak of vulgarity . . .<sup>9</sup>

His commentary on Richardson is in much the same vein, and in discussing her work in relation to Lawrence, Woolf, and John Cowper Powys, Holloway maintains:

Crucial interest attaches to the individual's supreme attempt to achieve selfhood. It is significant that this is a key motif in a talented novel of the time, Richard Garnett's *Go She Must!* (1927): the title neatly expresses the theme. Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* series (from 1915) focuses upon the same idea from the standpoint of Woman; though perhaps the relaxed but subtle, sensuous awareness and immediacy that she often depicts is characteristic of people in general at their best, not of women only; and a man, anyhow, may find that her reiterated sweeping condemnations of men are self-defeating.<sup>10</sup>

It is hardly surprising that the attention of feminist critics is necessarily addressed to refuting the negative views of women writers as represented in mainstream critical accounts of modernism, especially when such comments appear in a volume which, although first published in 1961, was revised as recently as 1983.



The combined effect of the work of Benstock, Gilbert and Gubar, Hanscombe and Smyer, and Rubin Suleiman in reappraising the positioning of women in relation to modernism is currently providing a wealth of new material from which to formulate a somewhat different version of modernism to mainstream accounts. Yet because feminist scholarship has somewhat belatedly addressed this issue, in the meantime mainstream literary histories of the relationship between modernism and postmodernism have continued to be published which neglect the role of women modernists. For example, in Ihab Hassan's account of modernism and postmodernism, the positioning of Gertrude Stein's work appears as an afterthought. In discussing the distinctions between modernism and postmodernism in his own study *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (1971), Hassan writes "*Erratum: Gertrude Stein should have appeared in the latter work for she contributed to both Modernism and Postmodernism*".<sup>11</sup> It is paradoxical that Hassan should compare his work with that of Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1879-1930* (1931) in which an entire chapter is devoted to Gertrude Stein.

This, arguably, has led to a situation where postmodernist writers have been perceived even by themselves to possess only a very limited selection of role models, a small group of father figures to admire or to rebel against. Inevitably, this has made the position of women postmodernist

writers, until recently perceived to be lacking corresponding role models, seem tenuous, aberrant and culturally estranged.

Molly Hite, however, in *The Other Side of the Story* (1989) has suggested that feminism has affinities with both modernism and postmodernism, in that there is a shared interest in opposing the assumptions which underpin the conventions of realism. However, as she points out "there are fewer female writers in the canons of twentieth-century narrative experiment than in the canon of English nineteenth-century realism".<sup>12</sup> Hite notes how the positioning of women writers in literary canons has diminished from including Jane Austen, the Brontës, and George Eliot in accounts of realism, to virtually only Virginia Woolf in modernism, whilst the canons of postmodernism do not feature any women at all.

The problems that feminist critics, such as Hite, have disclosed in connection with the canon-making activities of mainstream literary critics paradoxically reveals that in reading postmodern theory and criticism of literary postmodernism it would seem that the critical scene, in Victor Burgin's words, "has undergone a sea change and yet it has not changed at all".<sup>13</sup> Even now the names of some women writers are only mentioned in the occasional study, and few critics use the work of women writers on an extensive basis to illustrate their arguments concerning the aesthetics of postmodernism.

Despite the number of full-length studies of postmodernist literature which have appeared in the last few years, only Meaghan Morris' *The Pirate's Fiancée: Feminism, Reading, Postmodernism* (1988), Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), Patricia Waugh's *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* (1989), and Helen Carr's *From My Guy to Sci-Fi: Genre and Women's Writing in the Postmodern World* (1989), deal seriously with the sexual/textual politics of postmodernism. These feminist critics pinpoint the problem as lying in the relationship between modernism and postmodernism, and have argued that limited notions of modernism led to an account in which only a few 'masters', most commonly Joyce, Lawrence, Eliot and Pound, are seen to be the practitioners of modernist literature. This process has given rise to a similar distortion in the emerging history of postmodernism, as constructed by male critics, whereby women postmodernist writers are being written out of the postmodern paradigm.

As I have argued earlier, no critical discourse is neutral and value free; there is always a question of power and politics inscribed within the criteria set up by all value systems. One of the central contradictions of postmodernist literary theory that is revealed in this study, is the way in which literary critics as illustrated in the previous chapter, have set up a value system for postmodernism, so that virtually the only texts which are

seen to have value within the postmodernist literary paradigm are those written by male writers.

One perhaps inevitable effect of this has been the categorisation of male postmodernist writing as valuable, and by implication, other types of writing by women which may be postmodernist but has not always been treated as such, is devalued. In John Fekete's discussion of value discourse and postmodern theory, he argues that "It is noteworthy . . . that value discussion, especially in the form of literary evaluation, has been exiled from cultural discourse during the past half-century - during a very lively time, in fact, as far as development of non-valuative interpretive models is concerned".<sup>14</sup>

Fekete's statement highlights how the dominant models of literary criticism, especially that of New Criticism, have erected a model whereby the functions and dynamics of the process of evaluation have been seen as irrelevant and redundant. However, surely, the very fact of including some writers (male) and excluding others (female) implies and insists upon hierarchy, selection, and thus exclusion. This is Fekete's point.

Fekete clarifies this issue by showing that this process of concealment is essentially a political issue for:

In other words, the forgetting of value is really the ratification of established evaluative authority, and thus rests on a politics of interpretation, evaluation, and institutionalization that ought



itself to be an object of investigation.<sup>15</sup>

Fekete is not really demanding the restoration of a new critical value scheme, but rather alluding to the 'dangers' attendant upon its apparent absence. He is asking for postmodernist commentators to examine their material/subject matter more critically. Most obviously, the lack of female writers considered might seem to point to a problem.

Contemporary critical theory offers an exciting arena in which to debate literary theory and critical practice. The blurring of disciplinary lines between linguistics, philosophy, sociology, psychology, history and so on, which stake out the foundations of the postmodern critical framework, provides the potential for critical models not previously possible. It therefore might be expected that this rejection of orthodox criticism would incorporate marginalised aspects of literature. Since postmodernist literary theories allow the possibility of approaching the literary text from a multiplicity of perspectives this process should be able to reveal aspects which until now have been ignored though ideological blind spots.

Arguably, the major problem now is that just as the critics who legitimised and canonized the works of modernist writers ignored women modernists, so today critics are repeating the pattern, and omitting women postmodernists from the postmodern literary map. Even as recently as 1985, Philip Stevick could insist that:

. . . it would be an eccentric sense of the canon that did not place these figures at its center; John Barth, Donald Barthleme, Robert Coover, Kurt Vonnegut, William Gass, Stanley Elkin and Thomas Pynchon. A number of figures, may in the long run, seem just as central. At the present time, either their reputations are less firmly established or they seem to speak less powerfully to the aesthetic impulses of postmodernism than the first group.<sup>16</sup>

Stevick's statement would apparently categorise as eccentric the work of feminist critics who contest the all male bias of the postmodernist canon and the exclusion of women postmodernists. This is perhaps still not so surprising since, as Stephen Heath argued:

Any discourse which fails to take account of the problem of sexual difference in its own enunciation and addresses will be, within a patriarchal order, precisely indifferent, a reflection of male domination.<sup>17</sup>

The effect of this indifference, as exemplified by Stevick, is such that feminist critics, Meaghan Morris amongst others, find this state of affairs in contemporary critical arenas virtually unbelievable. The tendency within postmodern literary criticism to stay with the canon is particularly paradoxical, given the nature of postmodernism and its explorations of representation, discourse and subjectivity as signifying practices within the socio-symbolic order.

It is precisely these same cultural practices which form the basis of analysis for both feminist critics and critics of postmodernism. Catherine Belsey's discussion of the role of post-structuralist theories in analyzing the

relation between literature and subjectivity clearly demonstrates the link between these approaches:

One of the central issues for feminism is the cultural construction of subjectivity . . . Since the late seventeenth century feminists have seen subjectivity as itself subject to convention, education, culture in its broadest sense. Now feminist criticism has allowed that fiction too plays a part in the process of constructing subjectivity.<sup>18</sup>

Both deconstructive and feminist approaches to the literary text view the role of literature as an important aspect in the social and cultural construction of meaning. Since it is through language that perceptions of 'reality' are constructed, then language, in the form of literary texts, has the potential to disrupt and subvert the socio-symbolic order from within. The reception of postmodernist literature is valued differently when it is written by women. Such texts disrupt not simply literary conventions but social and cultural conventions too and raise issues that are not just artistic but perforce political.

In one of the most extensive studies of postmodern fiction, Larry McCaffery comments in relation to male postmodernist writers on the potentially radical, subversive nature of postmodernism:

. . . by opening up a radical awareness of the sign systems by which men and women live, and by offering exemplars of freely created fictions that oppose publicly accepted ones, postmodern fiction contains the potential to rejoin the history which some claim it has abandoned. Thus, although most critics have been largely blind to the political thrust of

postmodern experimentalism, it will surely soon be recognized that the fiction of Barthelme, Coover, Sukenick, Federman, Gaddis, Barth, Pynchon, DeLillo, Silliman, and other innovators of postmodernism is very much centred on political questions: questions about how ideologies are formed, the process whereby conventions are developed, the need for individuals to exercise their own imaginative and linguistic powers lest these powers be coopted by others.<sup>19</sup>

McCaffery raises the issue of the political nature of postmodernism, and stresses the extent to which postmodern writing reveals "the process whereby conventions are developed" and how this writing poses "questions about how ideologies are formed". Yet, with one exception, the studies in McCaffery's text are curiously traditional in their approach to postmodernist fiction, and tend to work within the safe confines of the Magnificent Seven canon.<sup>20</sup>

The inclusion in McCaffery's volume *Postmodern Fiction* (1986) of an essay by Bonnie Zimmerman on the relationship between feminist fiction and postmodernism, to some extent redresses this imbalance. But as Zimmerman herself points out, her aim in this essay is to examine "*feminist* fiction, not all fiction by women", and for that reason the texts she has selected are those in which "gender and sex roles are central, not marginal, to its meaning".<sup>21</sup>

Zimmerman's essay is an invaluable contribution to the debate on postmodernism because of the centrality she gives to feminist fiction. It is perhaps one of the earliest essays on this issue which links postmodern



theory and feminist theory specifically to some quite detailed accounts of feminist postmodern fiction. Zimmerman declares that:

Feminism, from its modern emergence during the French revolution to its contemporary manifestations, has always allied itself with . . . forces that have overthrown conventions, hierarchies, and orthodoxies.<sup>22</sup>

Whilst this comment rather overlooks those aspects of feminism which seek to maintain certain aspects of the status quo, Zimmerman is correct to identify a dominant characteristic of various feminist standpoints as an oppositional and alternative cultural force.

Yet as I have argued previously, if the central aim of the postmodern project is to challenge the process by which traditions are constructed then its major contradiction lies in its inability to engage with the potential offered by feminist theory and create a discourse which would articulate the conjunction of feminist and postmodernist theory. Barbara Creed raises the question of the relationship of feminist theory and postmodern theory, and finds that "there is a crossing of both the feminist and postmodern critiques of narrative and representation".<sup>23</sup> Her general theme is that postmodern theory owes a significant debt to feminism which it has failed to acknowledge.

One of the points of my study is to suggest that male postmodernist critics create problems by on one side arguing that the legitimising narratives

have lost authority (many critics have no difficulty, for example, in accepting the tenor of Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition* as a yardstick) but on the other failing to take note of the sexual ideology which could be perceived to underpin their discussions. In this context Iain Chambers has pointed out that:

The debate over modernism/postmodernism is ultimately the sign (deferred, displaced, denied . . .) of a debate over the changed politics of knowledge, authority and power in the present world. A particular mode of explaining, including that of the post-modernist prophet who announces the 'end of meaning' but significantly refuses to relinquish the right to speak incessantly of that 'end', is now supplemented and de-centred by the more extensive semantics of a socialized collage.<sup>24</sup>

Recent work by feminist critics such as Helen Carr, Linda Hutcheon, Carolyn Brown and Megan Morris, amongst others, refuses the mono-dimensional legitimacy of patriarchal discourse by revealing the inadequacies of the postmodern paradigm and its indifference to the sexual/textual politics of its own discourse.

Craig Owens makes one of the very few contributions by male critics to the problematic stance of postmodern theory and its relationship to women postmodern practitioners. In his article 'The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism', Owens recognises that "among the most significant developments of the past decade - it may well turn out to have been *the* most significant - has been the emergence in nearly every area of

cultural activity, of a specifically feminist practice", but at the same time, it is also clear that despite the presence of a feminist discourse within the many voices of the postmodern condition, "theories of postmodernism have tended either to neglect or to repress that voice".<sup>25</sup> Owens differs from the majority of accounts by male critics, in that he seeks to:

. . . negotiate the treacherous course between postmodernism and feminism . . . in order to introduce the issue of sexual difference into the modernism/postmodern debate - a debate which has until now been scandalously in-different.<sup>26</sup>

Owens incorporates in his essay an excerpt from the work of Paul Ricoeur, which is particularly apt in the context of this study. Ricoeur points out that "the discovery of the plurality of cultures is never a harmless experience":

When we discover that there are several cultures instead of just one and consequently at the time when we acknowledge the end of a sort of cultural monopoly, be it illusory or real, we are threatened with the destruction of our own discovery. Suddenly, it becomes possible that there are just *others*, that we ourselves are an "other" among others.<sup>27</sup>

The condition that Ricoeur speaks of has come to be regarded as postmodern, and Owens suggests that "What is at stake, then, is not only the hegemony of Western culture, but also (our sense of) our identity as a culture".<sup>28</sup> Yet the question must be asked, whose cultural identity is being so severely threatened, whose demise is being enacted? In Andreas Huyssen's discussion of the issues of modernism, mass culture and

postmodernism, the answer to this question is quite clear:

The postmodern crisis of high modernism and its classical account has to be seen as a crisis both of capitalist modernization itself and of the deeply patriarchal structures that support it.<sup>29</sup>

When Ricoeur's comments are analyzed in conjunction with feminist accounts of postmodernism such as those in Helen Carr's collection the hidden patriarchal assumptions of his position are revealed. Ricoeur's reflections on the possibility of being an "other among others", constitutes a viewpoint which is only possible if it rests upon unspoken presuppositions inscribed within a dominant male ideology.

It has become increasingly clear that the majority of accounts of postmodernism do not go far enough in tracing through the implications of its own discourse. Whilst it is generally accepted that the concept of modernity and the practices of modernism signalled what Helen Carr has described as the "cracking of the European hierarchies of bourgeois/proletarian, male/female, white/other, high art/low culture"<sup>30</sup>, it must also be recognized that the epistemological basis of these hierarchies was never unproblematic. These hierarchical oppositions were based:

. . . not on confidence but on deep anxieties that emerged as misogyny, homophobia, racial and class fear. What the change marks is the end of the European assumption that our culture is the only path of civilised progress, and that the white, bourgeois, male represents true humanity. It follows the . . . realisation that Western culture and traditions are only



one of many.<sup>31</sup>

It would seem that within the parameters it has set up, postmodernist criticism has a tendency to operate from one viewpoint only, for as Owens argues, "the representational systems of the West admit only one vision - that of the constitutive male subject - or, rather, they posit the subject of representation as absolutely centred, unitary, masculine".<sup>32</sup>

The impact of this mono-dimensional system can be seen at work in the discourse of a number of postmodern critics. For example, Charles Jencks, has achieved a very visible position in the postmodern debate by his well publicised accounts of postmodern architecture which have been used by many critics, including Linda Hutcheon, as a model for their own discussions of the postmodern.

Curiously, however, a closer examination of Jencks' theorising of the postmodern, reveals the hidden sexual politics of his methodology. Thus, in discussing the postmodernist's use of past forms as an innovatory technique, he introduces a statement made by Umberto Eco in relation to the motivation for utilising the past in an ironic way:

I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, "I love you madly" because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, "As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly". At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly

that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her, but he loves her in an age of lost innocence. If the woman goes along with this, she will have received a declaration of love all the same. Neither of the two speakers will feel innocent, both will have accepted the challenge of the past, of the already said, which cannot be eliminated, both will consciously and with pleasure play the game of irony . . . But both will have succeeded, once again, in speaking of love.<sup>33</sup>

Eco's commentary provides Jencks with an exemplary model for a major aesthetic of the postmodern. Jencks is apparently able to perceive the postmodern aesthetics but not also the sexual/textual politics inscribed within, for he argues, "Thus Eco underlines the lover's use of Post-Modern double coding and extends it, of course, to the novelist's and poet's social use of previous forms".<sup>34</sup>

Umberto Eco's account of the nature of the postmodern attitude, and by association Jencks' use of Eco's statement exemplifies exactly what Owens is describing, when he points to the stance taken by male postmodernist practitioners and critics, oblivious of their male bias and gender-specific statements. Eco's view of postmodernism, therefore, precludes the autonomous position of women by positing them in the passive state of receiving declarations of love by men. He has not travelled very far from the Chivalry mode of romance, which similarly positioned men and women into static modes of behaviour and ironically was also an extremely self-conscious act. It is also relevant to point out here that in Eco's *The*

*Name of the Rose* there is only one female character and she is portrayed as a mute, nameless, figure in the abbey's kitchen.

The contradictions inherent in this aspect of postmodern theory are immediately apparent if both Eco and Jencks are read against the grain, and their comments examined in relation to the critiques of feminism. In this instance, one of the earliest standpoints of feminism as epitomised by Kate Millett's work, offers a fruitful approach to this issue. In juxtaposing Millett's comments on the subject of courtly and romantic love, the hidden sexual politics of Eco and Jencks are revealed.

In Millett's theory of sexual politics she argues that it is generally accepted that the patriarchal dominance of Western culture "has been much softened by the concepts of courtly and romantic love"<sup>35</sup>, but at the same time it must also be recognised that the tradition of chivalrous behaviour represents a certain sort of concession. Millett suggests that this type of contradiction is common within the patriarchal order, for it always seeks to obscure its true nature. The chivalrous mode, then, represents:

. . . a sporting kind of reparation to allow the subordinate female certain means of saving face. While a palliative to the injustice of woman's social position, chivalry is also a technique for disguising it. One must acknowledge that the chivalrous stance is a game the master group plays in elevating its subject to pedestal level. Historians of courtly love stress the fact that the raptures of the poets had no effect upon the legal or economic standing of women, and very little upon their social status.<sup>36</sup>

The tradition of chivalry and courtly love has generally resulted in a tendency to confine women "in a narrow and often remarkably constricting sphere of behaviour"<sup>37</sup>, Millett insists. A feminist critique drawn from an approach such as Millett's, highlights how the type of postmodernist irony suggested by Jencks and Eco is hardly indicative of a mold-breaking technique, if it reinforces traditional assumptions about the cultural role of women.

The practice of postmodernism and of postmodern critics is paradoxical since, as Owens argues:

It is precisely at the . . . frontier between what can be represented and what cannot that the postmodern operation is being staged - not in order to transcend representation, but in order to expose that system of power that authorizes certain representations while blocking, prohibiting or invalidating others. Among those prohibited from Western representation, whose representations are denied all legitimacy, are women. Excluded from representation by its very structure, they return within it as a figure for - a representation of - the unrepresentable (Nature, Truth, the Sublime, etc.). This prohibition bears primarily on woman as the subject, and rarely as the object of representation, for there is certainly no shortage of images *of* women.<sup>38</sup>

I feel that Owens, in his desire to demonstrate sympathy for the concerns of feminism, rather exaggerates the issue of women's representation in arguing that they are 'prohibited' and denied all legitimacy. Many of the women writers whose works I shall be discussing are widely published and have won major literary prizes. More to the point, I would suggest, is that most



male critics (and some feminist critics) have not yet recognised the significance of postmodernist writers such as Angela Carter, Joyce Carol Oates, Muriel Spark, Toni Morrison, Marilynne Robinson and Christine Brooke-Rose.

However, the authorization of certain literary representations as postmodernist can be understood as a particular dimension of the power systems of a dominant male culture based on a gender differentiated politics. Whilst one would not necessarily wish to agree totally with Owens' view that:

The absence of discussions of sexual difference in writings about postmodernism, as well as the fact that few women have engaged in the modernism/postmodernism debate, suggest that postmodernism may be another masculine invention engineered to exclude women.<sup>39</sup>

It would seem, however, particularly bearing in mind the volume of work already described in the previous chapter, that the exclusion of women from this debate, must be challenged. Owens' article, along with the writings of Andreas Huyssen, Linda Hutcheon, Meaghan Morris and Carolyn Brown are amongst the few contributions to the debate on postmodernism which engage with the sexual/textual politics inherent within postmodern discourse, and actually attempt to go beyond this limitation.

Bonnie Zimmerman declares that feminism can be understood as a "challenge to the authority of authorship"<sup>40</sup>, and that this sense of challenge

highlights the impact that a diversity of feminist critiques may have upon accounts of both literary modernism and postmodernism which only offer a model based upon the writings of male postmodernists. The hidden history of women's writing, the re-evaluation of the 'great works of literature', especially the modernist canon, has been, and continues to be an important part of the project of many feminist critics. As Carolyn Brown says "The effect of feminist literary and cultural work has been a multiplication of histories, of narratives, which themselves form part of that postmodern dissolution of history".<sup>41</sup>

It is not that these works should be valued simply because they have been written by women. It is because feminists are attempting to understand the present by examining the past, for without a background for contemporary cultural theory and practice, there is no context from which to operate. Thus, this feminist project is not mere nostalgia, or some kind of value free archaeology, it is a form of political action. For it is based on the question of "the conjunction of the present and the past that is intended to make us question-analyze, try to understand - both how we make and make sense of our culture".<sup>42</sup>

However it should not be assumed that the categories of women's writing and feminist criticism are somehow homogenous and that they constitute a monolithic entity. Just as Helen Carr argues that:

It's no longer possible or fruitful to try to discuss women's writing as a single category in the way one could or at any rate did in the mid 1970s. We now realise that we can't talk of women as a monolithic category. There are questions of race, class, sexuality and historical context, and in writing of different modes and contexts of literary production, different conventions and functions, all of which must be considered.<sup>43</sup>

So it is important to recognise that feminist literary criticism is the focus of continual argument and its function, forms, and methods are the subject of considerable theoretical debate. In this sense, it would seem that there is a degree of convergence between feminism and postmodernism, especially in those aspects which seek to question dominant cultural accounts based on a notion of universality.

Whilst dominant accounts of both modernism and postmodernism include very few serious studies of women writers, this thesis argues that women's writing is central to both. Women writers may be singled out and their works analyzed in depth, as indicated earlier for example, with the *oeuvre* of Virginia Woolf. Yet in examining critical accounts of literary modernism and literary postmodernism by male critics, it is rare to find the works of any women writers given the centrality they deserve. Thus, of the many mainstream accounts which focus on the modernist novel, most do not inscribe the works of Dorothy Richardson, Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, Emily Holmes-Coleman, and Ivy Compton-Burnett amongst others in the context to which they crucially belong.

It can now be seen quite clearly that the mainstream notion of the modernist literary canon has become a very narrow and limited account of what it actually was. As Chambers has argued:

With the emergence of a previously silenced language, a hidden history, an earlier truth is challenged. Other histories, other knowledge, other dimensions and details break in upon former perspectives.<sup>44</sup>

The discourse of modernist critics discussed earlier has instilled a hidden sexual/textual politics into the literary arena which the work of feminist critics such as Shari Benstock reveals when it re-examines the process by which literary canons are constructed.

Terry Eagleton's analysis of the process which sets up literary canons uncovers suppressed political dimensions:

The power of critical discourse moves on several levels. It is the power of 'policing' language - of determining that certain statements must be excluded because they do not conform to what is acceptably sayable. It is the power of policing writing itself, classifying it into the 'literary' and 'non-literary', the enduringly great and the ephemerally popular.<sup>45</sup>

On the basis of this analysis, one can perhaps perceive how the modernist canon has been 'policed' so that dominant accounts of literary modernism and models of modernist novels have shrivelled to include only Joyce, Mann, Lawrence and perhaps one or two others. Eagleton's analysis of critical discourse is particularly pertinent to the work of feminist critics discussed here, for it demonstrates that in addition to the hidden politics of



discourse, it is also important to reveal and question notions of authority within this arena:

It is the power of authority *vis-a-vis* others - the power relations between those who define and preserve the discourse, and those who are selectively admitted to it. It is the power of certificating or non-certificating those who have been judged to speak the discourse better or worse.<sup>46</sup>

In a literary critical establishment which operates from the basis of a patriarchal ideology, the politics of gender difference are clearly articulated in the authority invested in the 'gate-keeping' activities of critics, publishers, editors and so on, who choose not to define the work of women practitioners of modernism in the past and contemporary women postmodernists as eligible for certification.

In Robert Adams' text, for example, *AfterJoyce: Studies in Fiction After Ulysses* (1977), a typology of a new 'great' tradition is established which seeks to situate postmodernist texts in a new canon. Adams suggests that this new canon which has replaced the great tradition can most easily be described as "a sheaf of alternatives", and he declares that the following writers epitomise this new 'great' tradition:

One could spread a number of them out as quickly as a deck of cards -the camp novel (James Purdy's *Malcolm*), the rhetorical novel (Kenneth Burke's *Towards a Better Life*), the mosaic or checkerboard novel (Huxley's *Point Counter Point*), the archetypal novel (Queneau, *St Glinglin*), the obstacle novel (Nabokov's *Pale Fire*), the dream-novel (Beckett's *Molloy*), the design-novel (Pynchon's *V*), the burlesque or parodic novel

(Barth, *The Sot-Weed Factor*), . . . the mythological novel (Updike, *The Centaur*), the depersonalized novel (Robbe-Grillet, *Jalousie*), the palimpsest novel (Durrell), and the game novel (Calvino) . . .<sup>47</sup>

This type of listing is not uncommon in literary critical accounts which seek to contextualise postmodernist works in relation to modernist works, and illustrates how literary discourse operates in defining authoritative accounts. Indeed, what is uncommon is to find the work of any women postmodernists situated in this type of context.

Eagleton insists that the power of critical discourse in the process of establishing literary canons is a question of:

the power-relations between the literary-academic institution, where all of this occurs, and the ruling power-interests of society at large, whose ideological needs will be served and whose personnel will be reproduced by the preservation and controlled extension of the discourse in question.<sup>48</sup>

Many feminist literary critics have argued that it is the hidden gender politics of critical discourse that creates the absence of women's writing in literary canons. Adrienne Munich, for example argues that:

Critical discourse has tended to be more misogynist than the texts it examines. Tagged with a patriarchal interpretation, canonical texts pass into the culture validated by what the Institution of Reading has understood. . . . Ideally, a feminist critique would question not only the inadequate representation of other voices in the western literary canon but the inadequate explication of received tradition. The blindness of patriarchal criticism to female-authored works does not mean that its acuity to subjects it has called its own is thereby sharpened.

On the contrary, the defensive strategies that males use to avoid what has become a main subject for feminist critics - the 'invisible' sexual politics of literature - have lamed their interpretation of the canon as well. To privilege certain forms as great, certain themes as important and certain genres as major has required traditional criticism to disregard or elide those very aspects in the 'great' texts that are incongruent with patriarchal gender definitions.<sup>49</sup>

Arguably, such writers as Robert Adams, Philip Stevick and Larry McCaffery considered above try to construct a male dominated cultural hegemony which is surely at odds with their own determination to debunk all forms of cultural hegemony.

I would suggest however that it is possible to construct a more valid account of the postmodern debate than presently exists in current scholarship. For to read mainstream postmodernist criticism, as Rebecca O'Rourke suggests, it is almost "as if within the dazzling and inventive range of fictional writing there is an ungainly, dowdy body of texts labelled women's writing which, unclaimed, is at best consigned to the margins and footnotes of literary history".<sup>50</sup> Once the critical discourse which establishes the canons of both modernism and postmodernism is analyzed for its 'policing' and 'certificating' activities, a much broader map of literature emerges.

The gap between the twin peaks of modernism and postmodernism begins to look very different when some of the fictional texts of such writers

as Nathalie Sarraute, Anais Nin, Marguerite Duras, Monique Wittig, Doris Lessing, Brigid Brophy, Muriel Spark, Christine Brooke-Rose, Margaret Drabble, Jean Rhys, Fay Weldon, Angela Carter, Maggie Gee, Joyce Carol Oates, Erica Jong, Kathy Acker, Marilynne Robinson, Ursule Molinaro, Grace Paley, Maxine Hong Kingston, Ursula LeGuin, Joanna Russ, Marge Piercy, Toni Morrison and Ntozake Shange amongst others are included within the boundaries of the postmodernist map. It is not my intention to consider all of the above writers, nor necessarily would I claim (though others might) that postmodernist techniques appear exclusively or even dominantly in all their works. However, I would hope in the rest of this chapter and those that follow to indicate some of the techniques which clearly surprise and disorientate the reader in a fashion that could be described as postmodernist but at the same time carry in many instances, political dimensions congruent with a diversity of feminisms.

The exclusion of virtually any serious studies of the postmodern texts of these women writers does suggest that in the minds of the literary establishment, the achievements 'pre-' and 'post-' Joyce can be characterised by Bonnie Zimmerman's cryptic comment that, "By the time postmodernism disrupted twentieth-century realism, it was generally accepted that men were writing the Great American Novels and women were typing them".<sup>51</sup> Even if this quip says more about the attitude of the literary establishment than



about the actual state of affairs, it nevertheless highlights the nature of the sexual/textual politics of the postmodern debate.

One of the crucial issues argued in this thesis is how, irrespective of the many competing and overlapping issues within postmodern theory, the debate over postmodernism can be essentially recognised as the manifestation of the disruptive power of the politics of feminism into a previously privileged domain. The recent work of feminist critics such as Linda Hutcheon, Helen Carr, and Meaghan Morris on issues of postmodern culture demonstrates that the indifference to women postmodernist practitioners on the part of male critics can be viewed as a defence tactic. Arguably, these studies, which I would hope to see as in some way related to my own project, confirms, as Iain Carr has suggested, "the positive effect of the power of the previously unspoken entering the languages of the present".<sup>52</sup>

In order to contextualise the debate concerning the nature of postmodern fictional techniques and strategies and the questions raised by contemporary literary theory and critical practice, it will be illuminating to examine these issues in relation to specific writings by women which exemplify postmodern practice. At this point, having drawn attention to critical view points which seek to discuss postmodernism in a more equitable fashion than the accounts considered in my previous chapter, the question

must now be posed 'What might the postmodern map look like, if the contribution of women writers was as clearly signposted as that of the male writers?'

### Remapping Postmodernist Literature

In the preceding argument, I have demonstrated how prevailing notions of postmodernism based on what might be termed a dominant model of literary postmodernism are flawed and inadequate because of the critical indifference to women postmodernist writers. I now aim to establish the presence of women postmodern fiction writers and to make visible the aesthetic techniques and strategies they use in constructing literary postmodernism. This discussion will establish a context for a more detailed examination of the works of Joyce Carol Oates, Brigid Brophy, Muriel Spark, Christine Brooke-Rose and Angela Carter which are analyzed in the following chapters.

In the fiction written by women postmodernists, the traditional fictional elements of both modernist and realist aesthetics undergo a "a sea change" in which character, plot, narrative, and genre are swept into new configurations. Mainstream literary critics have constructed forms of critical practice which uphold certain perspectives as being the "laws of the text", but as Zimmerman declares, "as women write their selves, so do they

destroy the laws"<sup>53</sup>; the conjunction of feminist critical practice with postmodernist fictions written by women begins to unravel the power basis of traditional literary criticism.

Unlike many of the male postmodernists, women's postmodernist fiction does not tend to lament the brokenness of experience as a sign of the decline of Western civilization. Instead it offers an acceptance of dislocation as a major part of life, and indicates that the displacement of traditional ideals might permit new ways of dealing with the construction of reality.

One of the most outstanding early examples of postmodernist fiction writing by women can be found in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962), which uses journals, fragments of story plots, newspaper clippings and dreams in an intentionally unsuccessful effort to get at reality. *The Golden Notebook* represents the multi-faceted, irreducible, shocking, shifting, contradictory nature of experience itself, in its personal, physical, sexual, political, public, and psychological manifestations. It questions the use of both realist and modernist literary conventions and incorporates metafictional discussions of both into various levels of the narrative discourse. The plurality of concerns with which this novel is engaged resist easy categorisation, but nevertheless it is perhaps this very multiplicity of clashing modes and genres that differentiates *The Golden Notebook* from realist and modernist novels.

Jenny Taylor has suggested that whilst Lessing's novel is structurally enigmatic, then nevertheless:

In examining the conditions of its own production and consumption, and, in the process, exploring the boundaries of fiction itself, it works complexly as a fictional, historical and discursive text.<sup>54</sup>

*The Golden Notebook* is composed of various sections, some as conventionally realistic linking passages, some in the form of diary entries, some in the form of chapters of a novel apparently being written by the writer of the diary's entries, herself a novelist called Anna Wulf. Other devices include pastiche, straight reflection, flashback, mini short stories, extended novel-within-novel passages, news bulletin collages, dream invocations, and passages written as though for the camera. Such devices are not merely literary games-playing, but are used as serious strategies to probe the limitations of the dominant belief systems of Western culture.

The novel does not reject the techniques of modernism, but rather incorporates them into the text by acknowledging them as reference points from which to depart. For example, there are passages of interior monologue in *The Golden Notebook*, which would seem to indicate that Lessing continues to use modernist techniques. However, unlike Dorothy Richardson's use of the stream of consciousness technique to represent reality, Lessing seems to find this notion too restrictive for expressing the



clash of a multiplicity of competing realities which she attempts to articulate. There is little sense of life flowing on and on in *The Golden Notebook*, on the contrary, Lessing's examination of the tensions between the orthodoxies of marxism, Jungian psychoanalysis, and patriarchal notions of women's role in society, reveals the gaps, discontinuities, randomness and incoherence of experience.

Similarly, in Lessing's structuring of the novel through a number of notebooks, there is clearly a debt to Gide's device of the inclusion of Edouard's journal in *The Counterfeiters*. But the Black, Red, Yellow, and Blue notebooks kept by Lessing's Anna Wulf, a character from the frame novel *Free Women*, whilst having a metafictional function like Edouard's journal in Gide's novel, also suggest that even this strategy is insufficient to break the hold of realism. Lessing's comments in the preface she wrote for the reissue of *The Golden Notebook* ten years after its initial publication, suggest how the use of the notebooks by the Anna Wulf character is necessary to deal with the contradictory and competing strands of reality:

She keeps four, and not one because, as she recognises, she has to separate things off from each other, out of fear of chaos, of formlessness - of breakdown. Pressure, inner and outer, end the Notebooks; a heavy black line is drawn across the page of one after another. But now that they are finished,, from their fragments can come something new, *The Golden Notebook*.<sup>55</sup>

Lessing's interest in the theme of unity, which also runs through the novel,

is not a plea for a rational, unified sense of self; indeed it is precisely this sense of identity which Lessing seems most interested in probing.

The postmodernist techniques at the level of formal innovation in *The Golden Notebook*, resist readings which try to naturalise the novel into reflecting a coherent, explicable universe. Instead it overflows with different modes of writing that point at techniques for representing reality 'differently'. Lessing's novel, in its manipulation of a variety of literary devices to achieve unconventional effects, opened up the fictional space of postmodern fiction for many women writers.

Paradoxically, the fate of Lessing's character Anna Wulf, whose notebooks are full of unfinished letters, unpublished stories and novels, also anticipates the unnoticed, undiscussed, unplaced fiction of postmodern women writers by the critical establishment. As women writers express their own experience and find their own voices in the postmodern condition, they effectively transform traditional literary form and language; as Helen Carr argues "they make the sign produce new meanings for them".<sup>56</sup> The disruptive techniques at work in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* are similarly found in much of the postmodernist fiction written by women. In many instances, these disruptions go beyond technical devices and are utilised to agitate patriarchal structures of language and thought.

One aspect of this strategy can be found in the way in which a

number of postmodernist women writers share an interest with modernist writers in drawing upon the Greek Classics. However, in the work of Christa Wolf and Christine Brooke-Rose, for example, there is a recognition that this material is one reference point amongst many that has functioned to keep women outside the mainstream of literary culture. Both Wolf and Brooke-Rose, amongst others, have produced postmodernist literary texts which seek to problematize the engendered nature of Greek myths.

Christa Wolf's *Cassandra* (1984) consists of the novel of that name, accompanied by four essays which take the form of a two-part account of a trip to the ancient sites of Greece, a work diary and an open letter. These separate but overlapping texts draw on the potential offered by these different modes of writing to explore the question that Wolf poses, "Who was Cassandra before anyone wrote about her?".<sup>57</sup> Wolf thus rewrites literary history in the form of a deconstruction of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* and his depiction of the Trojan war. In her novel, Wolf reinscribes the silenced world of women by giving the figure of Cassandra another discourse to speak, other than the voice which is destined to speak and to never be believed. The narrative which Wolf gives to Cassandra is one which seeks to represent the events surrounding the Trojan war from the perspective of the women rather than the warriors.

The texts of Wolf's *Cassandra* operate at a dual level in combining

social and political commitment with aesthetic practice, for as Linda Hutcheon argues:

. . . Wolf links both men's writing about women (Aeschylus' about Cassandra) and their silencing of the world of women (Homer's) to the patriarchal structures of both thought and government that have created both the oppression of an entire gender and the potential destruction of humanity (the arms race) - then and now. Troy becomes a metaphor of contemporary society.<sup>58</sup>

Similarly, in *Amalgamemnon* (1984), Christine Brooke-Rose inscribes and then questions the works of Herodotus, whose *Histories* are used to juxtapose the classical past of literature, philosophy and history with the everyday events of an imaginary present as articulated through the mass media of late twentieth century civilization. The narrative discourse in Brooke-Rose's *Amalgamemnon* highlights such techniques in the discursive reflections of Sandra/Cassandra:

Soon he will snore, in a stentorian sleep, a foreign body in bed. There will occur the blanket bodily transfer to the livingroom for a night of utterly other discourses that will crackle out of disturbances in the ionosphere into a minicircus if light upon a page of say Herodotus and generate endless stepping-stones into the dark, the Phoenicians kidnapping Io and the Greeks in Colchis carrying off the king's daughter Medea, creating in adnace as yet another distance which I'll have carefully to deconstruct tomorrow by letting him abolish all those other discourses into an acceptance of his, although sooner or later the future will explode into the present despite the double standard at breaking points.<sup>59</sup>

Whilst the major focus in Brooke-Rose's novel is on how linguistic



structures can be utilised to subvert illusions of authenticity, she also probes how language may be used to deconstruct the nature of the opposition between the dominant and the subordinate, the powerful and the powerless, the masculine and the feminine.

The rewriting of literary history is a central interest for many feminist scholars, and arguably, there are strong affinities between the concerns of feminism and the practices of postmodernism, as for example in the inter-textual nature of postmodernist women writers' work outlined above. The texts of Christa Wolf and Christine Brooke-Rose not only demonstrate how postmodernism may be differentiated from modernism in their reappraisal of the Greek classics, but also incorporate political dimensions of feminism in their challenge to the patriarchal nature of such myths.

In contrast to the above type of novel, many postmodernist texts by women writers are placed in highly identifiable contemporary social and cultural contexts, and there is often an insistence on using the data of ordinary life, frequently overlooked by high art. These texts may well abandon the structures of reality which were formed elsewhere and by others, to trace the absurdities of domesticity, the fragmentation of female life, the circularity of female time, the construction of female subjectivity, and the possibilities of female sexuality within postmodernist strategies and techniques. Elizabeth Meese, in her book *Crossing the Double-Cross: The*

*Practice of Feminist Criticism* (1986), argues that "The kinship of deconstruction with post-modernism, and its theoretical potential for reading anything, open the field of possibility for approaching contemporary feminist texts".<sup>60</sup> It is my view that some of the most compelling novels are those which explore the potential offered by postmodernist techniques at the level of form, combined with the political insights of feminism into issues such as the representation of gendered subjectivity.

In Marilynne Robinson's novel *Housekeeping* (1981), for example, housework is the central activity and metaphor for controlling life, a control that the narrator and her aunt choose to abandon. The novel uses postmodernist techniques to deconstruct traditional notions of women's role as housewife, by placing the reader in the position of reading the conventions of housekeeping 'against the grain'. Perhaps it is not surprising that mainstream critics have neglected Robinson's novel, for as Elizabeth Meese suggests, the innovative nature of this novel requires a critical reading process that is responsive to its double encoding:

Tradition, as a guide to interpretation, does not easily accommodate or unlock Robinson's *Housekeeping*. . . . Through the women in *Housekeeping*, Robinson composes both feminist theory and fiction; by making the strange familiar, the reverse effects occur as well. She maps a shadowy territory between difference and sameness, preparing us for an existence predicated on hope and defined only by uncertainty.<sup>61</sup>

Robinson details the facts of domesticity in women's lives, but the text states, "All this is fact. Fact explains nothing. On the contrary, it is fact that requires explanation".<sup>62</sup>

The narrator Ruth and her sister Lucille are brought up by their aunt Sylvie, after the suicide of their mother Helen. But aunt Sylvie's perception of how women and girls should live, is not the same as their neighbours in the small-town America of Fingerbone. The aunt Sylvie character plays out a role as a housewife, but in doing so departs from conventional notions of what this role means. Robinson's portrayal of this character is quite unlike traditional depictions of a woman as housewife, and contrasts sharply with Virginia Woolf's character Classisa Dalloway in *Mrs. Dalloway*:

Sylvie in a house was more or less like a mermaid in a ship's cabin. She preferred it sunk in the very element it was meant to exclude. We had crickets in the pantry, squirrels in the eaves, sparrows in the attic. Lucille and I stepped through the door from sheer night to sheer night.<sup>63</sup>

Robinson blurs the boundaries between the inside and the outside of the home, so that the wild life of the garden forms the interior decoration of the house itself.

In an episode where the neighbours bring casseroles and coffee cakes for them because they think the family are deprived and need charity, the norms of housekeeping are juxtaposed against aunt Sylvie's practices:

They sat on the edge of the couch with their offerings in their

laps and made delicate enquiries about Sylvie's can and bottle collection. . . . The parlour was full of the newspapers and magazines Sylvie brought home. They were stacked pretty neatly, considering that some of them had been rolled, perhaps to swat flies. Nevertheless, they took up the end of the room where the fireplace had been. Then there were the cans stacked along the wall opposite the couch. Like the newspapers, they were stacked to the ceiling. . . . Of course, we could have made other arrangements, if we had planned to entertain, but we did not. The visitors glanced at the cans and papers as if they thought Sylvie must consider such things appropriate to a parlour. That was ridiculous. . . . Who would think of dusting or sweeping the cobwebs down in a room used for the storage of cans and newspapers . . . ? Sylvie only kept them, I think, because she considered accumulation to be the essence of housekeeping, and because she considered the hoarding of worthless things to be proof of a particularly scrupulous thrift.<sup>64</sup>

Robinson's text *Housekeeping* demonstrates the postmodern concern for language and its differential signifying systems. Indeed it could be suggested that Derrida would find this an exemplary novel from which to illustrate his notion of 'differance.

It is now accepted that meaning can be created only by differences and sustained only by reference to other meanings. In Meese's reading of *Housekeeping*, she argues that:

Robinson's approach to meaning within fiction suggests how we might compose meaning in life. Our own strategies of interpretation, attribution, and assertion parallel those of the narrator and the author, with whom we share problems of deepest personal and philosophical import: what was, what is, what matters, and why. In pursuit of such complexities, Robinson seems implicitly to challenge the tradition of the novel of manners, and particularly manners as windows to



morals, to value. Hers is the feminist's most pressing axiological concern - what is valued and why?<sup>65</sup>

Thus, in this text, Robinson positions the characters of Ruth and Sylvie as simultaneously inside and outside the cultural norm; they are female and they give due consideration to the traditional female domestic activities; but they do their housekeeping 'differently'.

The way in which Robinson structures the concerns of feminism and the techniques of postmodernism in her novel, places her work in an interesting position in relation to modernism, particularly with regard to women modernist writers. In its concern with the limitations of the conventions of realism, Robinson's novel clearly shares an interest in formal innovation with that of the modernists. However, in her politicizing of stereotyped notions of women's domestic lives, and her problematizing of the socially constructed nature of motherhood, childcare and the nuclear family, *Housekeeping* also foregrounds the politics of feminism. In many ways, her novel may be seen as a direct response to some of the issues Virginia Woolf raises in her non-fiction writing but did not deal with directly in her own novels.

In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Woolf conjures up an imaginary novel entitled *Life's Adventure* by a fictitious writer called Mary Carmichael, which she uses as a metaphor to discuss how the everyday realities of

women's lives might be represented in the novel. Woolf notes:

. . . the majority of women are neither harlots nor courtesans; nor do they sit clasping pug dogs to dusty velvet all through the summer afternoon. But what do they do then? and there came to my mind's eye one of those long streets somewhere south of the river whose infinite rows are innumerably populated. With the eye of the imagination I saw a very ancient lady crossing the street on the arm of a middle-aged woman, her daughter perhaps . . . . if one asked her what her life has meant to her . . . . longing to pin down the moment with date and season . . . . she would look vague and say that she could remember nothing. For all the dinners are cooked; the plates and cups washed; the children sent to school and gone out into the world. Nothing remains of it all. All has vanished. No biography or history has a word to say about it. And the novels, without meaning to, inevitably lie. . . . All these infinitely obscure lives remain to be recorded.<sup>66</sup>

It is almost as if Marilynne Robinson has written the novel that Virginia Woolf imagined, but in *Housekeeping* the interior world of women's lives takes on a somewhat different interpretation to Woolf's sketch. For whilst Robinson delineates the shopping expeditions, the preparation of meals, the stacks of dirty dishes, and all the other minutiae of household chores, in *Housekeeping* the aunt Sylvie character leaves the plates unwashed, the floors unswept, and the beds unmade, and instead takes her niece Ruth out into the world and on to the open road. For unlike Woolf's respectable old lady, whose clothes are put away each year in camphor, Robinson's aunt Sylvie is a drifter, a tramp or what is euphemistically known as a 'bag lady'.

*Housekeeping* parodies the bourgeois norms of the housewife instilled

by the dominant white, male culture. When there is a serious flood in Fingerbone, the devastation of the private world of female homemaking is measured ironically on a par with the havoc created in the public domain:

That flood flattened scores of headstones. . . . And then the library was flooded to a depth of three shelves, creating vast gaps in the Dewey decimal system. The losses in hooked and braided rugs and needlepoint footstools will never be reckoned.<sup>67</sup>

In Robinson's text, the narrative deals with extraordinary, unlikely and unusual events which are deployed throughout the novel as the most commonplace occurrences, and there is often the use of unrealised tenses to narrate what has not happened, what did not occur, what someone did not say.

Whereas the characters aunt Sylvie and Ruth represent female Otherness, Ruth's sister Lucille epitomises the female norm, which Ruth and aunt Sylvie have *not* achieved, and do *not* want to achieve. It is this distinction between the sisters which slightly tips the balance between the various feminist elements of the novel, in favour of a feminism which embraces the notion of difference between women, rather than a feminism which celebrates gender as the mark of unity. Robinson's skilful handling of the character Lucille's desire for the norms, values and beliefs of the dominant culture is an important factor in this novel. For in dealing with the appeal of conformity, the temptation of stereotyped notions of femininity,

and the allure of succumbing to female destiny, Robinson deconstructs the power of ideology and shows its workings. This is handled in the text, by utilising the technique of absence:

. . . Lucille in Boston, at a table in a restaurant. . . . She is tastefully dressed. . . . Her water glass has left two-thirds of a ring on the table, and she works at completing the circle with her thumbnail. Sylvie and I do not flounce in through the door, smoothing the skirts of our oversized coats and combing our hair back with our fingers. We do not sit down at the table next to hers and empty our pockets in a small damp heap . . . and sort out the gum wrappers and ticket stubs. . . . My mother, likewise, is not there, and my grandmother in her house slippers with her pigtail wagging . . . does not examine the menu with studious interest.<sup>68</sup>

If women's presence in our culture is marked by their absence, then this text similarly marks its presence in the body of postmodern fiction by its gaps, silences, and omissions.

There are a number of texts that have not been easily accommodated except as feminist polemics which may be considered postmodernist. These are books that on the surface often seem to be conventional *bildungsroman*, indeed, confessions so personal that fact and fiction cannot be distinguished. Some texts, for example Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1973), and Lisa Alther's *Kinflicks* (1975), appear ostensibly to be memoirs, but are fictional constructions which deliberately undercut and subvert literary conventions. Both *Fear of Flying* and Kate Millett's *Flying* (1974) have been viewed as factual stories of their authors' lives; Jong's text written as a novel and



Millett's as autobiography.

Both texts have been heavily criticised for allowing their 'personal confessions' to outweigh aesthetic issues of literary genre. Yet both these texts also fit within the postmodernist typology of the entry of the Real Author into the construction of the text, as epitomised for example in Chapter 13 of John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and John Barth's *Letters*. Since this device is widely considered to constitute one of the characteristics which differentiate postmodernism from modernism, it would seem to be valued differently by mainstream critics when women writers utilise such a mode.

Doris Lessing commented on how the reviews of *The Golden Notebook* misinterpreted the novel by thinking that it was a personal documentation of the author's artistic activities. Lessing has stated that:

. . . it was a highly structured book, carefully planned. The point about that book was the relation of its parts to each other. But the book they wanted to turn it into was called *The Confessions of Doris Lessing*.<sup>69</sup>

Perhaps the novels of Jong and Alther may be more clearly distinguished as postmodernist on the basis of their attempts to incorporate the modes of popular culture and the features of commercial best-sellers.

In *Fear of Flying*, and its sequel, *How to Save Your Own Life* (1977), which also contains an author writing a novel called 'Candida Confesses',

there is a tri-level narrator Erica/Isadora/Candida which creates an ironic distance that undermines illusions of the reality of any one voice. Jong further stresses that her texts are fictional constructions by constantly stepping outside the narrative to undercut its authority, in such comments as "I had written myself into this hackneyed plot"<sup>70</sup>, and "Surely you don't suppose that I'm telling the literal truth here either?"<sup>71</sup>, and "I started believing I was a fictional character invented by me"<sup>72</sup> and "I knew I did not want to be trapped by my own book".<sup>73</sup>

As in other postmodernist fictions, the Isadora character searches for some fiction, some story, or some narrative to make sense of a senseless reality, whether it be psychoanalysis, the famous zipless fuck, or, the most traditional of meta-narratives, writing itself: "That was how we parted. Loss piled on loss. My life spilling out into the street, and nothing but a slim volume of verse between me and the void".<sup>74</sup> Continuing to use postmodernist techniques, Jong moved on, like a number of other postmodernist writers, to write a parody and pastiche of the techniques of eighteenth-century self-conscious narrative in *Fanny* (1980), a feminist rewriting of Richardson and Fielding.

A strategy frequently employed by women postmodernist writers is the splitting of the main character between an 'I' (woman as subject) and a name (woman as object) for, as Simone de Beauvoir argued as early as 1949

in *The Second Sex*, "women are split (often by literature and the media) between conscious self and reified other".<sup>75</sup> This technique of 'splitting' is found for example in I/Myra in Marilyn French's *The Women's Room*, I/Evelyn Hilary O'Rooley in Brigid Brophy's *In Transit* (1969), and I/Jane in Margaret Drabble's *The Waterfall*.

Margaret Drabble's work is not generally considered to be particularly innovative, but her text *The Waterfall*, departs from the mimetic realism of most of her novels. In this text, Drabble conflates the conventions of realism with postmodern techniques. *The Waterfall* at first seems to be a traditional novel about a love affair and utilises conventional plot and story line for the first fifty pages or so of the text. But at this point, the narrative is disrupted to reveal that the 'story' is a fictional construction of a first-person narrator. The text alternates between first- and third-person narration, jumps between fact, fantasy and reality, has narrative disruptions which create tensions, anomalies and incongruities which are not resolved, and offers two contradictory explanations of the central female character, Jane Gray's experience, neither of which are adequate.

There are continual interruptions in the narrative where the 'I' character rejects and denounces the preceding account of the 'story' of Jane Gray, her feelings for her baby, her relationship to her cousin Lucy and her husband Malcolm, and her reflections on her past. The 'I' character

comments "It won't, of course, do: as an account, I mean, of what took place", and insists that "it's obvious that I haven't told the truth".<sup>76</sup>

The narrative of *The Waterfall* contradicts preceding sentences, repudiates the content of whole chapters, alters in tone from lyrical romanticism to caustic cynicism, in an attempt to cast the experience of the 'Jane Gray' character into a 'fictitious form' that she can accept, even though she insists that all of the explanations offered are "Lies, lies, it's all lies. A pack of lies".<sup>77</sup>

Part of the postmodernist games-playing of the novel is revealed in the way in which this text deliberately acknowledges its artifice, its construction of its fictional world, especially in its discussions about its form and narrative technique. The narrator toys with different ideas of the novel's ending:

Perhaps I should have killed James in the car, and that would have made a neat, a possible ending . . . Or I could have maimed James so badly, in this narrative, that I would have been allowed to have him, as Jane Eyre had her blinded Rochester. But I hadn't the heart to do it, I loved him too much, and anyway it wouldn't have been the truth because the truth is that he recovered.<sup>78</sup>

The narrator also plays with the idea of ending the narrative with James's impotence, "the little, twentieth century death"<sup>79</sup>, but finally an open ending is chosen, one that is irresolute, inconclusive and above all, "isn't artistic".<sup>80</sup>



As a perceived postmodernist text, *The Waterfall* incorporates unresolved ambiguities, narrative disharmonies and disruptions, contradictions of plot and story line, and unreliable narrators, to create a fictional discourse which does not offer any single, unified account of the character Jane Gray. Despite the apparent trappings of a conventional realism, Drabble's *The Waterfall* splices together divergent, contradictory and inconclusive views of the events of the novel, thus commenting on the novel form itself. These are features which prevailing accounts of postmodernist literature highlight in order to differentiate postmodernism from realism. Such features also appear across a wide range of modernist texts although arguably not to such a degree in any single novel.

However, it would be a mistake to view the techniques of postmodernist writing as somehow having universal relevance to all women writers, without also considering the context of race, class, and sexual preference. The literary canons of both realist and modernist novels, as traditionally classified, have excluded the existence of black writers, as both these practices were founded on the cultural conventions of a dominant white culture. More recently of course, these canons have been challenged and have widened to include previously neglected writers. Therefore, in discussing the strategies and techniques used by black women writers, it is important to view their work against the backdrop of both race and gender

textual politics.

Susan Willis argues that "Black women's writing is not a mere collection of motifs and strategies, but a mode of discourse which enables a critical perspective upon the past, the present and sometimes into an emerging future".<sup>81</sup> Prevailing notions of postmodernism, as I have indicated in the previous chapter, not only tend to exclude writers on the basis of gender, but also neglect writers of colour too. By repeatedly constructing postmodernism as the province of almost exclusively white, male writers, many critics have underestimated the level of social and cultural political critique in postmodernist literature.

In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) the narrative sets up the world of middle-class white childhood through the parody of a 'Janet and John' reading primer, and juxtaposes it against the first person narrator, Claudia, who has to construct her black female identity against this bourgeois norm. Morrison uses the postmodernist technique of intertextuality at a formal level to criticise the dominant structures of white Western culture which construct fictional accounts of 'once upon a time they all lived happily ever after' stories:

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? . . . See Mother. Mother is very nice.

Mother, will you play with Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh, Mother, laugh. See Father. He is big and strong. Father, will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, Father, smile. See the dog. Bowwow goes the dog. . . . Look, look. Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They will play a good game. Play, Jane, play.<sup>82</sup>

The opening section of the novel contains three repetitions of the same passage from a child's reading primer, but in the second section the punctuation is removed, and in the third section both the punctuation and the spaces between words are deleted. Although the language of the reading primer posits itself as neutral, value free and of universal significance, this textual world is one in which there is no space for those who are different and somehow 'other'.

The 'Jane' in Margaret Drabble's novel *The Waterfall* has more in common with the 'Jane' in the reading primer, than all the black women and little girls in *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison's novel calls into question all those 'grand' narratives which posit the subjectivity of black women as doubly Other, including the work of white feminists which until very recently has flattened out the differences between women by privileging the issue of gender to the neglect of race.

The strategies and techniques of Morrison's novel are quite unlike any one modernist novel, although it could be perhaps argued that the interleaving of key phrases from the reading primer throughout the text, has



a similar function to that of the modernist use of the leit-motif as a structural device. However, these key phrases are markers of a deconstructive nature, rather than signals of epiphany. For the pretty house, the laughing mother, the strong father, the happy girl and the playful friend are only figments of imagination in a fictional world that may exist for some people, but not for the poor Southern black characters of *The Bluest Eye*.

In particular, the figure of the happy little girl at the centre of a nuclear family is a fictional construct that bears little relation to the lives of some children. The reality that the figure Pecola Breedlove experiences is a painful and poignant series of events which shape her subjective notion of herself as a black child whose difference and otherness from everyone eventually overwhelms her. Her sense of herself as Other is marked by her desire to have blue eyes, instead of brown. For then, she feels, when white people looked at her, they would see themselves reflected in her blue gaze, and she would no longer be marked as different.

In this novel Morrison is concerned with exposing how ideological structures both support dominant world views, and blind people to their workings. The laughing mother of the reading primer is juxtaposed with the character of Mrs. Pauline Breedlove, a black domestic in a white family's house, mother of two children for whom she increasingly has no time, and married to wife-beater Cholly who feels his black manhood is being



emasculated. Pauline Breedlove's responsibilities at the Fisher household give her access to luxuries which she cannot afford for herself and her own family, and to the experience of a white, middle class lifestyle that can never be hers:

She became what is known as an ideal servant, for such a role filled practically all of her needs. When she bathed the little Fisher girl, it was in a porcelain tub with silvery taps running infinite quantities of hot, clear water. She dried her in fluffy white towels and put her in cuddly night clothes. Then she brushed the yellow hair, enjoying the roll and slip of it between her fingers. No zinc tub, no buckets of stove-heated water, no flaky, stiff, grayish towels washed in a kitchen sink, dried in a dusty backyard, no tangled black puffs of rough wool to comb. Soon she stopped trying to keep her own house. The things she could afford to buy did not last, had no beauty or style . . . . More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man - they were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep, the early morning and late-evening edges of her day, the dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely.<sup>83</sup>

More importantly, Morrison depicts how Pauline Breedlove has access to a form of power in her role as a domestic that is denied her as a black woman.

A number of black feminist critics have argued that when black American women writers explore the construction of subjectivity in their texts, their use of an 'I' character has to be framed within the historical context of the slave narrative:

If the slave narratives begin by positing the 'I', they do so dramatically to wrest the individual black subject out of

anonymity, inferiority and brutal disdain. The 'I' stands against and negates the perception of the black person as indistinguishable from the mass, as slave, as animal. The 'I' proclaims voice, subject, and the right to history and place.<sup>84</sup>

*The Bluest Eye* explores the tensions between the powerful and the powerless through Pauline Breedlove's growing assimilation into her position as someone who can wield a limited amount of power in servicing the needs of the white family:

Here she found beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise . . . . She reigned over cupboards stacked high with food that would not be eaten for weeks, even months; she was queen of canned vegetables bought by the case, special fondants and ribbon candy curled up in tiny silver dishes. The creditors and service people who humiliated her when she went to them on her own behalf respected her, were even intimidated by her, when she spoke for the Fishers. She refused beef slightly dark or with edges not properly trimmed. The slightly reeking fish that she accepted for her own family she would all but throw in the fish man's face if he sent it to the Fisher house. Power, praise, and luxury were hers in this household. They even gave her what she had never had - a nickname - Polly. It was her pleasure to stand in her kitchen at the end of a day and survey her handiwork. Knowing there were soap bars by the dozen, bacon by the rasher, and reveling in her shiny pots and pans and polished floors.<sup>85</sup>

The part of the novel which deals with the characterisation of Mrs. Pauline Breedlove breaks into the narrative discourse of the preceding section, and is introduced with phrases from the reading primer which foreground the plural aspects of her identity as young girl, lover, wife, mother, servant, and church warden. Morrison juxtaposes an omniscient narrative about the



character Pauline, with sections of italicised free speech which are written from Pauline's point of view. In Morrison's postmodern narrative techniques, there is a meshing of post-structuralist and feminist theories through which the reader is presented with multiple fragments of information about the construction of Pauline Breedlove as a character in the fiction, and the plurality of her identity as a black female subject.

Recent work by black feminist critics suggests that there are instances where the affinities between postmodernism and feminism provide a fruitful potential for developments in black women's writing, and I would argue that Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* is a successful example of such a strategy. For as Mae Gwendolyn Henderson argues:

As gendered and racial subjects, black women speak/write in multiple voices - not all simultaneously or with equal weight, but with various and changing degrees of intensity, privileging one *parole* and then another. One discovers in these writers a kind of internal dialogue reflecting an *intrasubjective* engagement with the *intersubjective* aspects of self, a dialectic neither repressing difference nor, for that matter, privileging identity, but rather expressing engagement with the social aspects of self ("the other[s] in ourselves"). It is this subjective plurality (rather than the notion of the cohesive or fractured subject) that, finally, allows the black woman to become an expressive site for a dialectics/dialogics of identity and difference.<sup>86</sup>

Similarly, Bonnie Zimmerman suggests that this device of subjective plurality in the works of women postmodernists is used to reflect the "communal sense of self, in particular the notion of 'sisterhood', that is a

central tenet of feminism".<sup>87</sup> Zimmerman declares that in texts such as Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980), and Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982), the notion of sisterhood is created through the juxtaposition of fragments from many women's lives. Thus in Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo*, the narrative is constantly interrupted by incorporating folk tales and remedies, recipes, letters, poems, journal entries, and invoking the presence of Billie Holliday and Bessie Smith. There are affinities here with the modernist experimentation with multiple points of view, but in Shange's novel, for example, the incorporation of elements of black folk and popular culture form a critique of modernism's cultural élitism.

Novels by black women writers which utilise postmodernist techniques are quite clearly a major aspect of how the postmodern condition and its politics are to be understood, since as Carolyn Brown argues:

The fragmentation of the production of discourses, the questioning of the phallocentrism and eurocentrism is part of the postmodern condition. Politics within the postmodern has to be thought differently. The question of politics in the postmodern does not exclude those issues of subordination and oppression, but attempts to consider them in more complex formations, differently.<sup>88</sup>

I would argue that recognition of the work of previously excluded writers and hitherto muted genres within the framework of postmodernism is one aspect of how postmodernist literature articulates its political dimensions.



One of the key points at which postmodernism can be differentiated from modernism is in its relation to mass culture and popular fiction. It could be argued that the élitism associated with modernism's faith in 'high art', positioned popular fiction as a subordinate, or peripheral mode; whereas in postmodernism, these mass cultural formulaic genres have shifted from the periphery to become one of the dominant forms of postmodernist writing. This shift has an important cultural context and is linked, in my view, to the way in which previously marginalised groups are challenging the hegemony of the dominant power group.

Postmodernist criticism and feminist criticism have both rethought literary forms in wide-reaching ways. The concept of literature has been substantially deconstructed, so that genre areas such as the romance, science fiction, thrillers and detective novels are increasingly accepted as valid forms for critical analysis. There are a number of works by feminist critics which are widely acknowledged to have a formative role in reappraising popular culture. Amongst these studies are Elizabeth Wilson's *Only Halfway to Paradise* (1980), Tania Modleski's *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (1982), Marjorie Ferguson's *Forever Feminine: Women's Magazines and the Cult of Femininity* (1983), Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984), and the numerous publications of Janice Winship and

Angela McRobbie. Adrienne Munich argues that "In a literary tradition in which there are few recognized women writers, feminist critics assert their power rather than their victimhood by revising traditional wisdom and altering the meaning of the canon".<sup>89</sup>

The writer Joanna Russ suggested in the early seventies that women writers would turn to popular fiction genres in order to find fictional strategies that might be more amenable to women's cultural representation than either those of modernism or realism. Indeed, Russ' article 'What Can a Heroine Do - Or Why Women Can't Write'<sup>90</sup> anticipates a number of issues concerning the juncture of feminist writing and the blurring of genres in postmodernism, that have only recently been raised by postmodernist critics.

Russ highlights the limitations of both realism and modernism and suggests that women writers would break with these conventions to produce texts that would go beyond:

. . . innumerable variants on FALLING IN LOVE, on courtship, on marriage, on the failure of courtship and marriage. HOW SHE GOT MARRIED. HOW SHE DID NOT GET MARRIED (always tragic). HOW SHE FELL IN LOVE AND COMMITTED ADULTERY. HOW SHE SAVED HER MARRIAGE BUT JUST BARELY. HOW SHE LOVED A VILE SEDUCER AND ELOPED. HOW SHE LOVED A VILE SEDUCER ELOPED AND DIED IN CHILDBIRTH.<sup>91</sup>

It was argued earlier how literature is defined essentially by the perspectives of the mainstream critical discourse. It would appear, then, that the

parameters of women's writing which Russ ironically highlights are not the actual boundaries of such writing, but the space allocated by mainstream critics.

Leslie Dick has suggested that one way of devising a model for postmodernism is to think of it as producing:

. . . a space for what has been described as 'crossover, hybridisation, and inter-zoning', between . . . different subcultures, different genres, and different oppositional and transgressive artistic practices, a space for raiding, scavenging, subverting and reviving the forms and narratives of writing we love.<sup>92</sup>

This space of difference is certainly exploited by a number of women writers, and they have produced a variety of texts which wreak havoc with traditional borderlines of literary convention. Genre boundaries are flaunted in many postmodernist women writers' texts, for example, gothic forms of subtexts have been used by Margaret Atwood in *Lady Oracle* (1976), Joyce Carol Oates in *Bellefleur* (1980), Angela Carter in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman* (1972) and in her re-writing of fairy tales in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979).

In *Lady Oracle*, for example, Margaret Atwood incorporates the use of the woman's romance in the form of a costume gothic, together with fairy stories, Disney cartoons, *True Love* magazines and photoromance books. The lingering norms of realism are severely undermined both by the ironic



feminism of the narrator Joan Foster/Louisa Delacourt, and the substantial sections of the ongoing romantic fiction, commonly known as a 'bodice ripper', *Stalked by Love*. It is the clash of conventions belonging to different discursive practices which mark *Lady Oracle* as a postmodernist novel. Atwood's narrative displays the postmodernist technique of metafiction, in that it reflects and comments upon its own progress, but at the same time it incorporates the sub-generic costume gothic within a parody of the confessional mode of realism.

Yet Atwood goes beyond a mere display of technical devices. In juxtaposing the conventions of realism and postmodernism with feminism, she reveals the formative fictions Western culture has produced for women. There is a clear line of feminist analysis in *Lady Oracle* which links Atwood's earlier novel *The Edible Woman* (1969) to Susie Orbach's work in *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1978) and other feminist studies that are concerned with eating disorders and female body image. I would argue that the use of postmodernist literary conventions, as for example in Atwood's work, are not necessarily at odds with those aspects of feminism that seek to challenge social pressures on women to conform to stereotyped notions of the 'perfect' body. Indeed, this is an area in which the alignment of feminism and postmodernism is far less problematical than many prevailing accounts would suggest.



Many women postmodernists pursue an interest in rewriting the thriller, and the detective story. For example, Maggie Gee's *Dying, in Other Words* (1983) is a postmodernist murder-mystery novel, which in foregrounding its own textuality subverts the meaning of conventional novels in this genre. Gee incorporates an Author's note, which in giving instructions on "How Not To Read This Novel . . ." <sup>93</sup>, insists that the novel is not a realistic novel, or a serious novel, and indeed is not even quite a novel. The text declares that it has nothing to do with conventional fictional props, and states that "fables and cautionary tales and jokes are so much quicker than fiction, and the end result is the same . . ." <sup>94</sup>

Gee's novel insistently pursues the flaunting of its own artifice, through killing off Moira Penny, the author of the novel *Dying, in Other Words*, at the beginning of the text, and tracking her death through the journalism of Les Hawtry, a character in Penny's novel. The character of Les Hawtry in this Chinese-box world of a novel-within-a-novel, writes his own account of the life of Moira Penny, but this reportage is conflated with Moira Penny's deliberations on what she should do with the character of Les Hawtry, and how he imagines himself:

Les saw himself as an ironist in a trench-coat with a turned-up collar, a keen-eyed taciturn stranger who rode into town after sundown and left before dawn with a coded notebook full of priceless human foibles and folly, too rare to deploy in his short official reports. <sup>95</sup>

Gee's fictional games playing constructs a dishevelled narrative, in which the various characters of the boarding-house in Oxford vie for authorship of the novel *Dying, In Other Words*. In this murder-mystery, there is no guarantee of a single, closed ending, or characters which are clearly victim, murderer, detective, sleuth, reporter, witness and so on, and the plot turns in on itself to deconstruct conventional notions of this genre. Finally, it is demonstrated that this novel is a postmodernist discourse on the limits of language and that the social process of entry into and exit from the symbolic order is constructed through language.

Pornographic subtexts have been incorporated in Brigid Brophy's *In Transit* (1969) and Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School Plus Two* (1984). Indeed Leslie Dick considers Kathy Acker to be "the exemplary postmodernist writer now".<sup>96</sup> Dick's analysis of Acker's work highlights the strategies and techniques that a considerable number postmodernist women writers have utilised since the 1960s:

Her work effaces the distinction between high and low art, it explodes literary hierarchies, so that, in her books, you can't tell if you're primarily reading a work of pornography, or soap opera, pulp fiction, or high modernism. . . . Plagiarism is fundamental to her writing practice. . . . The mixed media aspect is clear in *Don Quixote*, for example, which veers through political satire to doomed love story, to drama, to history lesson, etc., and in *Blood and Guts in High School*, which is interspersed with drawings, Maps of Dreams, etc.<sup>97</sup>

Certainly in *Blood and Guts in High School Plus Two* (1984), the co-

presence of various modes of writing incorporate dialogues between Shakespearean characters and leaders of the IRA, letters to contemporary literary critics and dead women authors, conversations with French revolutionaries and parodies of such discrete writers as Genet, Hawthorne and Pauline Reage.

However, I would argue that Kathy Acker's work is not so much an exemplary but rather an extreme instance of women's postmodernist writing. Some feminists, perhaps, would seek to discredit Acker's work for its brutality, violence, overt depictions of sexual acts, especially sado-masochism, and crudity. Yet Acker's insistence on being viewed as part of the punk movement, and thus at one of the furthest reaches against mainstream culture, surely implies that to totally disregard her work would be a reactionary gesture on the part of feminism.

Science-fiction, or more appropriately, speculative fiction has been used by Doris Lessing, who turned to this mode in her *Canopus in Argos* series, as did Marge Piercy in *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) and Angela Carter in *Heroes and Villains* (1969). The mode of speculative writing is more crucially used in Ursula LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975).

Russ' novel *The Female Man* is also her most feminist and most explicitly postmodernist; it probes issues concerned with the construction of



subjectivity through the juxtaposition of a woman standing at the crossroads of past, present and future(s). Four separate but intermeshing figures, Jeanette, Joanna, Janet and Jael, together with an 'I' character, are used to deconstruct definitions of the female gender stereotypes. The text incorporates witty metafictional commentaries on society and cultural notions of gender difference and on the implications of its own role within culture. As Roz Kaveney writes, Russ's novel "stretches traditional forms of the novel, and especially of the SF novel, to breaking point . . . it combines its literary experimentation with its radical politics . . . [and] takes stock SF material and deconstructs it".<sup>98</sup> *The Female Man* can be seen as a representative postmodernist text that operates between genres, yet it cannot be adequately summed up as science fiction, although it is that.

This reappraisal of genre writing in many ways epitomises the reappraisal of the concept of literature and the 'master' narratives of literary canons that are part of the ongoing project of feminist literary criticism. The prevailing notions of postmodernism, and its relationship to the narrow model of modernism, can now be seen to be a critical fabrication constructed by male critics, and as such both these accounts are more than just intellectually limited. The works of the postmodernist women writers discussed in this chapter indicate that current models of postmodernism *are* flawed and inadequate in their omission of women writers.



The variety of writing considered in this chapter, ranging from critiques of racism (Toni Morrison), social satire (Margaret Drabble), pornography (Kathy Acker and Brigid Brophy), detective story (Maggie Gee), science fiction (Joanna Russ) to reinterpretations of Greek classics (Christa Wolf and Christine Brooke-Rose) and novels of intertextuality (Marilynne Robinson), all insist upon some disruption of the text and of the writer/reader relationship through the use of techniques which are widely considered key characteristics of postmodernism. In highlighting how these fictional texts may be viewed within the frameworks of feminism, postmodernism and modernism, I have attempted to demonstrate that postmodernist women writers need not be considered as literary late-comers, but rather as important and vital figures too long neglected by critics of the postmodernism debate. The new cartography proposed here has no straight edges, indeed its boundaries need to be fluid and permeable to respond to both the complexities of the relationship between postmodernism and modernism, and the diversity of feminisms epitomised by the multiplicity of women's postmodernist writing.

The difficulties critics have experienced with defining the relation between modernism and postmodernism which I have pointed to in this chapter, will be elaborated with specific reference to the works of Joyce Carol Oates in the following chapter. The positioning of Oates' work

throughout the period under consideration in this thesis has always been perceived as problematical in so far as it appears to resist easy classification into the categories of feminist, realist, postmodernist or modernist. My aim in the following chapter is to highlight the contradictions informing the works of critics who adopt too programmatic an approach to her work. I hope to suggest that a more productive reading of her fiction is possible when it is placed within the context of models of modernism and postmodernism in which the work of women writers is not considered peripheral but of central concern.

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4. Rebecca O'Rourke, 'Doris Lessing: Exile and Exception,' in *Notebooks/Memoirs/Archives: Reading and Rereading Doris Lessing*, ed. Jenny Taylor (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1982), p214.
5. Cora Kaplan, 'Feminist Criticism Twenty Years On,' in *From My Guy to Sci-Fi: Genre and Women's Writing in the Postmodern World*, ed. Helen Carr (London: Pandora Press, 1989), p17.
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12. Molly Hite, *The Other Side of the Story: Structures and Strategies of Contemporary Feminist Narrative* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p11.
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14. John Fekete, 'Vampire Value, Infinitive Art and Literary Theory: A Topographic Meditation,' in *Life After Postmodernism* (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp72-73.
15. Ibid, p73.
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17. Stephen Heath, 'Difference,' *Screen* 19 (Winter 1978-79): 53.
18. Catherine Belsey 'Constructing the Subject: Deconstructing the Text,' in *Feminist Criticism and Social Change*, eds. Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt (London: Methuen, 1985), p45.
19. Larry McCaffery, ed. *Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press Inc. 1986), pxxv.
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22. Ibid, p175.
23. Barbara Creed, 'From Here to Modernity: Feminism and Postmodernism,' *Screen* 28 (1987): 22.
24. Iain Chambers, *Popular Culture* (London: Methuen, 1986), p216-217.
25. Craig Owens, 'The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism,' in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press Ltd, 1985), p61.
26. Ibid, p59.



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46. Ibid, p203.
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48. Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, p203.
49. Adrienne Munich, 'Notorious signs, feminist criticism, and literary tradition,' in *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, eds. Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn (London: Methuen, 1985), p251-2.
50. O'Rourke, 'Doris Lessing: Exile and Exception,' p211.
51. Zimmerman, 'Feminist Fiction,' p176.
52. Chambers, *Popular Culture*, p214.
53. Zimmerman, 'Feminist Fiction,' p177.
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57. Christa Wolf, *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays*, trans. Jan Van Heurck (London: Virago Press Ltd, 1984), p273.
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61. Meese, *Crossing the Double-Cross*, p68.
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81. Susan Willis, 'Black Women Writers: Taking a Critical Perspective,' in *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, eds. Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn (London: Methuen, 1985), p220.
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83. Ibid, p117-118.
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85. Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, p118.
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89. Munich, 'Notorious signs,' p244.
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92. Leslie Dick, 'Feminism, Writing, Postmodernism,' in *From My Guy to Sci-Fi: Genre and Women's Writing in the Postmodern World*, ed Helen Carr (London: Pandora Press, 1989), p213.
93. Maggie Gee, *Dying, in Other Words*, p5.
94. Ibid, p5.
95. Ibid, p27.
96. Dick, 'Feminism, Writing, Postmodernism,' p208.
97. Ibid, p208.



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## Chapter Four

### Joyce Carol Oates: a Postmodern Practitioner

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Everywhere the old either-or begins to break down.

Susan Griffin, *The Way of All Ideology*<sup>1</sup>

A recurring issue in this discussion of postmodernism, feminism and literary criticism has been the nature of critical discourse and its apparent limitations when dealing with postmodernist fiction written by women. It has been argued throughout this study that one of the problems with many critical studies which attempt to differentiate postmodernism from modernism is that of utilising a model which does not allow for the complexities of the relationship between the two. Further, it would seem that throughout mainstream accounts of postmodernism typified by the critical writings of Gerald Graff, Harry Levin, Philip Stevick, Larry McCaffery, Ihab Hassan, John Barth and Ronald Sukenick amongst others considered in Chapter Two, there runs a form of critical practice which perpetuates a process of valorisation based on gender differences.

Ellen Friedman and Miriam Fuchs have suggested in the Introduction to their recently published text *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction* (1989) that:

[The] neglect of women innovators is partially a legacy of modernism as interpreted through its male critics. . . . Despite their pioneering work, women were cut out or subordinated in the first assessments of early twentieth-century experimentalism, fixing the response to succeeding generations of women. However, this neglect is also partially a legacy of the last decades of feminist criticism, which has hunted subtexts and muted texts to uncover a feminine discourse while overlooking the texts by women experimentalists who may be writing that discourse in deliberate, open, and varied ways.<sup>2</sup>

In the preceeding chapter I have attempted to formulate an alternative approach to postmodernism by focussing upon the postmodernist strategies and techniques that appear in the work of a wide range of women writers, and considering such fiction in relation to the reading positions offered by the very recent work of a number of feminist critics such as Helen Carr, Leslie Dick, Carolyn Allen, Linda Hutcheon, Patricia Waugh and Meaghan Morris. In pursuing such a line of argument, I would hope to have demonstrated that whilst the alignment between postmodernism and feminism may appear problematic in so far as postmodernism has seemed to be historically a very masculine preoccupation, the critical recognition of women's postmodernist fiction over the same time-span creates a somewhat altered perception of postmodernism.

It is my view that a constructive critical space can be achieved at the interface between feminist critical practice and postmodernist literary texts

by women writers. In the following critical exposition a number of texts by the American author Joyce Carol Oates are analyzed from this perspective. Oates' fiction writing manifests a wide range of postmodern techniques yet has been marginalised within the context of the postmodern debate.

Joyce Carol Oates, possibly one of the most prolific writers in the States, has been highly regarded by critics since the publication of her earliest works in the 1960s. Her work has been consistently reviewed both in the States and in Britain; it is surprising therefore that discussion on the nature of postmodern fictional practice does not adequately reflect the contribution made by this writer.

An exploration of the work of this postmodernist practitioner will be constructive, since much of Joyce Carol Oates' work tends to mystify and confuse critics and reviewers, despite the generally favourable response that her work has found. Oates has published both novels and short story collections, plays and poems, and yet if there is one dominant theme in the body of criticism and reviews of her work, it is that whatever she writes, critical attempts at categorisation are inevitably thwarted.

Many reviewers are perplexed when trying to classify Oates' works; critics are not quite sure whether a collection of her short fiction is a group



of stories or a novella, her novels rarely fit nicely into attempts to classify them as either gothic, naturalistic, realistic or fabulist. Indeed this confusion extends to one scholar categorising a volume of Oates' fiction as a work of 'translation'<sup>3</sup> of the literature of 'Fernandes de Briao,' when it is actually nothing of the sort. Whilst this collection of twenty-two short stories entitled *The Poisoned Kiss* (1975) does contain some pieces that, in treating eroticism, dreams and fantasy are somewhat of a departure for Oates, this is hardly grounds for believing that the volume has not been written by Oates herself. Although of course the inclusion of a note by Oates disclaiming the existence of an author named 'Fernandes' may or may not be taken at face value, especially since near the end of this collection there is a story entitled 'Plagiarized Material.'

This story is not only ostensibly by 'Fernandes de Briao' but about a masculine fabulator named Cabral who epitomises the extreme of artistic solipsism. The character Cabral prides himself on writing iconoclastic prose fiction in which he strives, above all, to achieve formal purity. Cabral describes his own writing as a form of deconstruction that:

. . . cancels out the tradition in which it is written. It is not magic, but anti-magic. It has no meaning. It *is*. It is not even "mine." As you read it, it is not "yours" - and, in fact, as you read it, "you" cease to exist. . . . All my writing is

designed to prove that "writing" (and reading) does not exist; "writers" (and readers) subsequently do not exist. The world releases a stench; the world is not equal to any subjective, specific, anti-magical assault upon it. That is why my writing reduces the world to words and, ultimately, words to silence.<sup>4</sup>

In producing anti-art, Cabral finds himself in a linguistic universe where the free play of the signifier turns in on itself, and plagiarizes his own works. He reads the work of literary critics who appear to celebrate his work, only to find that they are lifted from his own essays, which have never been published. He writes a new set of poems, but discovers whilst the manuscript is at the printers that words, images and whole lines of his appear in the newly published work of a Polish poet.

These coincidences multiply until eventually "There was a single week in January during which Cabral discovered three future works of his, in quite separate journals, each with a title that resembled the titles in his notes . . . each with a clear, logical advancement of the work Cabral had outlined and each . . . most horrible truth of all . . . each superior to the work Cabral himself would probably have written"(p178). Finally, Cabral fulfills the premises of his own fiction and obliterates his own identity by ceasing to exist as a literary figure and as a character.

Oates' story would appear to be operating at a number of levels that are amenable to a postmodernist interpretation. At one level, Oates is utilising the postmodernist technique of exploring the fiction making process

through the fiction itself in the manner of many of the male authors considered in Chapter Two. Then there would also seem to be a degree of intertextuality in that Oates' narrative discourse is a 'Latin' American world which seems to take the work of Borges as the subject matter of its interior dialogue. Finally, Oates' story can be read as a postmodernist parody and pastiche of metafiction itself that exposes the dangers of nihilism inherent within this form. In her 'Afterword' in *The Poisoned Kiss* Oates insists that her stories are not imitations of other (male) writers' works, and in contrast to endorsing nihilism she writes "I believe that writing should create a world, sanctifying the real world by honoring its complexities"(pp187-188).

Both 'Plagiarized Material' and the whole volume *The Poisoned Kiss* would seem to fit within the framework of the aesthetic model of postmodernism I have been discussing in the preceeding chapters, and yet there are also aspects which are of interest to feminist critics. Initially, it may seem that this work of Oates' has little to offer feminist literary critics, especially given the fact that the controlling perspective is that of the masculine fabulator 'Fernandes.' Indeed, this is a device Oates also uses in *Expensive People* (1968), *The Triumph of the Spider Monkey* (1976) and *The Mysteries of Winterthurn* (1984), so it is not uncommon to find a male figure at the centre of Oates' fictions. Yet although Oates' work appears to point towards a male literary tradition, I would suggest that there are also



affinities with a female tradition, specifically that of Virginia Woolf.

Oates' work raises the question of a female aesthetic which is of crucial interest to many feminist critics attempting to formulate the specifics of women's writing. In presenting her work as if it were by a male author, and in directing the narrative discourse through a masculine voice, Oates may be working within the 'androgynous' mode that Virginia Woolf described in *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf's notions of androgyny which are articulated in the last chapter of her book follow her reflections on creativity and the woman writer, as she wonders:

Perhaps to think, as I had been thinking these two days, of one sex as distinct from the other is an effort. It interferes with the unity of the mind. . . . Why do I feel that there are severances and oppositions in the mind, as there are strains from obvious causes on the body? What does one mean by 'the unity of the mind'?<sup>5</sup>

Woolf's exploratory investigations into the nature of sexual difference and the degree to which difference resides in biological, emotional, or mental conditions, or indeed combinations of all three, have been the subject of much discussion within feminism by critics such as Gayatri Spivak, Jane Marcus, Lilian Robinson, Elaine Showalter, and Elizabeth Meese, all of whom write from quite different feminist standpoints.

Elaine Showalter, for example, finds Woolf's notions of the ambivalence of sexual identity to be a negative element of her work.



Showalter writes:

Androgyny was the myth that helped her evade confrontation with her own painful femaleness and enabled her to choke and repress her anger and ambition. . . . And beyond the tragedy of her personal life is the betrayal of her literary genius [sic], her adoption of a female aesthetic that ultimately proved inadequate to her purposes and stifling to her development.<sup>6</sup>

Whilst Showalter evidently admires Woolf's work greatly, her desire to establish a unitary category of women's writing that celebrates the nature of femininity results in positioning Woolf as somehow outside the female tradition. In my view, Woolf's achievement resides in her exploration of what it means to be 'female'; her calling into question the whole issue of male and female sexuality and its relationship to the cultural construction of masculinity and femininity.

It is this aspect of Woolf's writing in *A Room of One's Own* which I feel creates a continuity between modernism and postmodernism, and in particular allows Joyce Carol Oates to be positioned within a tradition of women writers as well as in relation to male writers. Oates' use of the masculine narrator 'Fernandes' does not necessarily have to be read as "an escape from the confrontation with femaleness or maleness"<sup>7</sup>, but may also be viewed as a literary strategy of engagement rather than denial. Oates presents her use of a male discourse in *The Poisoned Kiss* as just such a technique, as she explains in her Afterword to this volume of stories:

There seemed to be a great pressure, a series of visions, that demanded a formal, esthetic form; I was besieged by Fernandes - story after story, some no more than sketches or paragraphs that tended to crowd out my own writing. . . . Fernandes retreated when his story seemed complete. A kind of harmony or resolution must have been established, and the manuscript came to an end. (p188)

If Oates' words are read in conjunction with Woolf's in *A Room of One's Own*, there does seem to be a strong affinity between the two which also permits a distinction be made between modernism and postmodernism.

Woolf's discussion of the creative process of the woman writer offers a particularly fruitful perspective from which to view Oates' writing, when she suggests:

. . . if one is a woman one is often surprised by a sudden splitting off of consciousness . . . when from being the natural inheritor of . . . civilization, she becomes on the contrary, outside of it, alien and critical. Clearly the mind is always altering its focus, and bringing the world into different perspectives. But some of these states of mind seem . . . to be less comfortable than others. In order to keep oneself continuing in them one is unconsciously holding something back, and gradually the repression becomes an effort. But there may be some state of mind in which one could continue without effort because nothing is required to be held back.<sup>8</sup>

Oates' stories embody just such an 'critical' vision; as a writer she is a natural inheritor of the literary tradition, but as a woman writer she is also in an alien position. Like Woolf, she is aware of the mind's different perspectives and writes about the demands of the creative process and of the pressures it can produce. But unlike Woolf, at least in this instance, Oates



does not hold back and writes 'as if' she is Fernandes de Briao.

It is the use of this device, together with the other strategies discussed above in relation to Oates' 'Plagiarized Material,' which I feel distinguish postmodernism from modernism and point to the affinities between postmodernism and feminism. At the same time, however, such an analysis is only one interpretation, but it does allow a sense of how the strategies and techniques of modernist and postmodernist women writers, and the diverse standpoints of feminist literary criticism overlap so that the boundaries between them are permeable rather than fixed and unyielding.

In effect then, this chapter will focus essentially on various questions and problems raised both by the diversity of Joyce Carol Oates' texts and the diversity of critical opinion relating to some of those texts. I shall then move on to demonstrate, along the lines of the above discussion, that Oates' texts may be appreciated more productively if they are viewed as operating within a postmodernist framework. Research so far has shown a wide variation of thematic and formal approaches to her work; there are a small number of critical volumes, but the bulk of critical opinions are most frequently expressed in unpublished theses, uncollected essays and reviews in American periodicals. Scholarship in Britain is virtually non-existent despite the fact that her new fiction does get reviewed in the major national newspapers. Yet Oates is regarded in America as one of the major

contemporary women writers and enjoys a reputation as a 'literary figure', as a 'popular writer' and as a 'best seller'.

Reviewers of Oates' first book *By the North Gate* (1963) compared her with Eudora Welty, Willa Cather, Katherine Anne Porter and William Faulkner, and subsequently her texts have been likened to Stendhal, Flaubert, Melville, Zola, Dreiser, Norris, Crane, Flannery O'Connor, Salinger, and Nabokov, among others. It will be shown how various attempts to categorise Oates' work have tended to somehow or other miss the mark. A review of her novel *Expensive People* (1968) criticises the writer thus:

A little expedition Miss Oates made into suburbia, under the title of *Expensive People*, was a distinct misstep; she doesn't have the delicacy of touch required for satire, or the cool control necessary to manipulate successfully a vein of irony.<sup>9</sup>

It would seem that Oates' work has begun to deteriorate with *Expensive People*, yet Bernard Bergonzi's comments on this novel suggest the opposite stance:

Miss Oates is an intelligent writer with considerable mimetic skill, if not, on the face of it, much originality. Her previous books were written in a turgid, sub-Faulknerian manner; by contrast *Expensive People* is stylistically more relaxed and sharper. Here the mentors seem to be Salinger and Updike and Nabokov. In particular Miss Oates uses Nabokovian tricks in manipulating the relation of the narrative to ordinary reality; *Expensive People* is really supposed to be a true story written by Richard Everett, and he keeps reminding us that it isn't mere fiction.<sup>10</sup>

Bergonzi clearly appreciates Oates' novel, yet despite relating the textual



strategies used in *Expensive People* to the fictional artifice of Nabokov, Bergonzi does not then go on to perceive how Oates has a style of her own. In contrast to Bergonzi who maintains that Oates lacks originality, David Madden argues the opposite and insists:

I am unable to explain in aesthetic terms the mystery of Miss Oates's genius for sustaining the intensity of her vision and for creating such totally alive characters and situations. I know of no other young novelist who succeeds in creating life with an apparent absence of art. She seems to make criticism irrelevant; it elucidates her work very little beyond offering an introduction. . . . Joyce Carol Oates is a phenomenon, an original, a natural - not a mentor, as Joyce, Morris, Hemingway, and sometimes Fitzgerald and Faulkner are.<sup>11</sup>

Both Bergonzi's review and Madden's book were published in 1969, and it is instructive to note that both critics position Oates' fiction predominantly in relation to modernist rather than postmodernist writers, most of whom are male, thereby adding to the process by which critical discourse displaces women writers.

Oates' novel *them* (1969) was described in a review the year it was published as "a type of naturalism saved from the simple cataloguing of disasters by the author's ability to transform the mysteries of experience into vital characterizations".<sup>12</sup> It has also been described by Joanne Creighton, writing in 1979, as "a very troublesome book to assess because of the difficulty of knowing exactly how far the parody of the naturalistic mode and resultant irony extend".<sup>13</sup> Although a gap of ten years separates these

critical comments, during which time major studies attempting to formulate aesthetic models of postmodernism were published, both these critical viewpoints fail to comprehend the postmodernist nature of this novel.

Steven Barza similarly attempts to deal with the proposition that it is feasible to think of Oates' work as a throwback to naturalism, for:

Like the Naturalists, Oates masses her fiction with detail, shows lives being formed by the steady accretion of day-to-day experience . . . But here the similarities end. Oates is a contemporary voice. Her Naturalism is a Naturalism for her time . . . Character's reactions are always subtly askew . . . She has claimed as her territory these deviations from the norm . . . The Uncertainty Principle has arrived at the human laboratory.<sup>14</sup>

Yet, even in appraising Oates' work in the light of naturalism, Barza argues that it cannot be concluded that there is a valid alignment:

For all her kinship with the Naturalists, then, Joyce Carol Oates radically disrupts their assumption of normal stimulus-response connections. People feel things when they should not, do not feel things when they should and do things without meaning to. Their reactions are inverted, disproportionate . . . Her kinship with Zola, Dreiser, Norris and Crane pertains to tone and approach. The incongruities she explores could be in other hands the stuff of comedy or farce.<sup>15</sup>

Writing in the same year as Creighton, Barza nevertheless highlights how Oates' *them* operates through a distinctive set of literary strategies and techniques even though he also fails to place the novel within a postmodernist framework.

Yet as I pointed out earlier, one of the key characteristics of



postmodernism is the way in which elements of modernism and other modes of writing may be incorporated within postmodernist fictions. Linda Hutcheon suggests that "postmodernism . . . permits contradictory interpretations: these forms of aesthetic practice and theory both install and subvert prevailing norms - artistic and ideological. They are both critical and complicitous, outside and inside the dominant discourses of society".<sup>16</sup> Hutcheon's argument thus allows for the contradictory nature of a postmodernist fiction like Oates' *them*, and offers one strategy amongst others from which to produce a critical interpretation.

Similarly, when David Lodge writes on Oates' collection *The Goddess and Other Women* (1974), the resulting criticism is less than incisive:

Most of the stories make considerable play with various kinds of narrative distortion and displacement - deliberately blurring or omitting the connections between different time-planes, between thought and speech, reality and fantasy. Here, in view of the very large claims made for Miss Oates's literary achievement, I feel obliged to express certain doubts. Is all this calculated indirection really functional, I wonder, or is it quite often a way of concealing a story's soft centre from scrutiny by keeping the reader short of information.<sup>17</sup>

It is interesting that this review by Lodge pre-dates his critical text *Modes of Modern Writing* (1977), since the techniques which Lodge questions in Oates' work, are of a similar nature to the postmodern techniques he illuminates by other writers in that volume: techniques which

he does not hesitate to describe as postmodern.

In his discussion of Oates' fiction 'The Girl', which appears in *The Goddess and Other Women*, Lodge concludes:

Is the director telling the truth, and does the girl believe him, and in any case is her "salvation" authentic or spurious? There is no way of answering these questions from the text, and no basis, therefore, from which it can be criticized. This kind of writing puts a considerable strain on the reader's interpretative energies which it is easy to mistake for the difficulty of major modern art, but which is I suggest, something rather different and less necessary. When she is writing in a less fancy style . . . Miss Oates is more impressive.<sup>18</sup>

I think it is quite instructive to move forward some seven or eight years, to see Lodge's review of Oates' novel *A Bloodsmoor Romance* (1983).

It is more than mere coincidence that Lodge's review is sympathetic here, especially since the ground rules for critically appraising postmodern works have now been established:

*A Bloodsmoor Romance*, has claimed a latitude wide enough to embrace the historical, the sentimental, the Gothic and the comic. In short, what may seem to British readers a perversely hybrid production becomes more comprehensible when viewed against its native literary background. *A Bloodsmoor Romance* is indeed, on one level a very elaborate, knowing and sophisticated joke. But the joke would pall long before the end if it did not also maintain the basic appeal of naive romance. Here is excellent literary entertainment, as generous in quantity as it is rich in invention, information and wit.<sup>19</sup>

Oates' novel *A Bloodsmoor Romance* has also attracted some attention by feminist critics. Elizabeth Lennox Keyser, for example, provides a reading



of the novel which attempts to place Oates' work within a tradition of women writers and to highlight how Oates' appropriation of the romance is of interest to feminist critics. Keyser suggests that Oates' is not indulging in mere parody when she invokes the conventions of sentimental fiction, but through her technique of blurring the boundaries between high art and popular fiction, Oates actually subverts cultural norms. Keyser argues that "what appears an outrageous parody of women's sentimental fiction actually supports the efforts of feminist scholars to exhume and examine it".<sup>20</sup> As I have suggested earlier, I feel that the alignment between feminism and postmodernism is less problematic than may appear by only focussing upon the work of male authors.

Other critics place much of Oates' work within the genre of classic gothicism, as does this review by Sharon Jeannotte of some of the stories in *The Goddess and Other Women*:

For the heroines of these stories, the world is a place filled with terror and pain, and one's villains can no longer be confined to dark moors or castle battlements. They are all around one: sometimes they are even within one and can only be placed at a distance by means of a psychic barrier between reality and fantasy, the conscious and the unconscious. Joyce Carol Oates, modern practitioner of the Gothic genre, has seen how the victim and the villain can merge into a moral blankness, a state of consciousness infinitely more disturbing than the artificial horrors of an earlier time.<sup>21</sup>

Jeannotte highlights in her article that three of Oates' major preoccupations

as a writer are sex, violence and vulnerability, and she points out that these themes were central to the gothic novel. Although Jeannotte does not explicitly recognise Oates' volume of stories as postmodernist in their use of the conventions of the gothic mode to explore the social constructions of femininity, she does nevertheless attempt to formulate an interpretation of Oates' work that is sensitive to both technique and content.

In my view Jeannotte's interpretation of Oates' *The Goddess and Other Women* offers an insight into the stories which Lodge fails to do, in so far as she positions Oates within a tradition of women writers that stretches back to the eighteenth century and novels such as Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho*. The use of the gothic mode by women writers is of great interest to feminist critics. For example Ellen Moers in *Literary Women* (1976) examines how women novelists from Ann Radcliffe, Emily Brontë, Mary Shelley, Djuna Barnes, and Carson McCullers have drawn upon the mode of the gothic, to explore issues of female subjectivity that are at odds with prevailing stereotyped notions of womanhood.

Rosemary Jackson in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981), similarly illustrates how the conventions of the gothic mode by women writers may be used to subvert social norms and provide "virulent invectives against patriarchal society".<sup>22</sup> Oates' stories in *The Goddess and Other Women* confront the realities of contemporary North American life, in which

"the horror of the 'natural' has frequently proven to be more compelling than any construct of the imagination and the lines between what is real and what is not have become blurred to the point where a term such as 'protection' has come to imply violence, where 'saving' may be interpreted as spending, and where 'catch-22s' abound".<sup>23</sup> In my view Oates' successfully combines the use of postmodernist techniques with the political commitments of feminism to highlight and probe the problems that many women face in sexual relationships when they are perceived by men to be either sex objects or remote goddesses.

It will be useful to examine one of the few book-length studies of Joyce Carol Oates' writing, which is comprehensive and wide-ranging in its own way, to try to establish the resistance of her texts to critical appraisal. J V Creighton, in her book *Joyce Carol Oates* (1979) comments on the anomalies she finds in Oates' work, and how these anomalies "raise problems in interpretation and sometimes prevent Oates' work from communicating effectively with an audience".<sup>24</sup> In Creighton's view, Oates' work does not find the 'participatory' readership she deserves; since on the one hand her fiction "appears to appeal at an emotional level to one audience while being directed rhetorically to another".<sup>25</sup>

In this volume, Creighton opens her commentary with biographical details of Oates' life, then proceeds to a discussion of some of Oates' novels



and short stories, with specific focus on plot, character and action. Creighton classifies Oates' early texts as generally falling within the mode of naturalism yet also finds that "An odd coupling of a modernist conception of character with traditionalist form is a basic feature of her art".<sup>26</sup> Creighton finds "an apparent disharmony of subject and form and of emotional impact and thematic statement at the heart of much of Oates' works".<sup>27</sup> It is evident that whilst Creighton admires much of Oates' work, this admiration tends to be expressed only in connection with the harmonious, un-contradictory, 'realistic' elements in Oates' texts and fails to recognise that the concept of 'reality' is in any way problematical.

In her discussion of a number of texts, Creighton argues that "Some readers find it hard to care about or believe in a character who seems to lack all reality . . . In other words, Oates' characters sometimes fail to coalesce as credible creations or fail to arouse the reader's empathy and concern".<sup>28</sup> It does seem that where she finds contradictions or uncertainty in Oates' work, Creighton appears to be at a loss to produce a satisfactory meaning. Thus, of *them*, Creighton complains that:

Perhaps it is being simplistic to insist that writers sort out their ambivalence when all they can do is 'strive to know', work through their own inchoate experience of writing and, as Virginia Woolf put it, 'record the atoms as they fall', but nonetheless, paradoxical irresolution, however modern a condition, is deeply unsettling to many readers, especially if it is found in a novel which appears in other ways to be



conventional and straightforward.<sup>29</sup>

It appears that Creighton is utilising a critical position which rather than engaging with the multiplicities of the text, reveals a theoretical and conceptual unwillingness to construct meaning from the available discourse of the text.

Oates' novel *The Assassins* (1975) is described as "Technically intricate and thematically complex", yet Creighton goes on to say that "this novel is unfortunately not as illuminating as a reader would wish . . . the novel is too easily misread or incompletely understood".<sup>30</sup> Here, Creighton distinguishes *The Assassins* from the earlier naturalistic texts of Oates, yet she fails to engage with the problematics of the text. Creighton continues her discussion of *The Assassins*:

The book is so depressing partly because there is no hope for any of the characters caught as they are in their various neuroses and psychoses . . . one must insist that the Petries - a ranting psychotic, a suicidal public figure, a frigid schizoid, a drifting mystic - are not ordinary run-of-the-mill people. One could accept their eccentricities and their problems more readily if one could care about them as people; if there seemed to be some redeeming humanity about them or some hope for them that would inspire concern and compassion. But it is hard to care about these excessively eccentric and unattractive people.<sup>31</sup>

This passage raises a number of objections arising largely from the emotive value judgements that Creighton insists on employing. Her interpretation of the characters in this text as "not ordinary run-of-the-mill people" reveals a

confusion between a literary device, ie characterisation and its use in this text, and its relation to people in 'real life'. In addition it also presumes a taken for granted consensus about the nature of 'reality' and the nature of people as human beings within society. Furthermore, one is forced to ask what Creighton means by "ordinary run-of-the-mill people", and if it is necessarily the task of a writer to use characterisation for this purpose only. Creighton appears to be demanding that the comforts of the classic realist text should similarly be available in Oates' text, and she demonstrates effectively the limitations of a critical discourse which neglects a discussion of the possibilities of the text itself.

The weaknesses of Creighton's anecdotal form of criticism are highlighted in her insistence that "this novel is, moreover, both difficult to understand and open to a wide range of interpretation" and finally, "the ambitious scope and intricate structural and symbolic complexity of this experimental novel are impressive, but the reader is not given enough guidance to appreciate and enjoy its emerging design".<sup>32</sup> The form of criticism that Creighton practices cannot explicate the complexities and contradictions of the text under discussion, because it is silent at precisely those junctures where it should speak. In adopting this stance to a text which is "open to a wide range of interpretations", this critique reveals its primary purpose of extrapolating a single, privileged meaning.

The central problem raised by the foregoing extracts of criticism of Oates' texts is that although they aim to offer a full analysis of their chosen material, they inevitably conclude by concealing more than they reveal. In most cases, the critic's personal feelings receive more attention than is useful, and because of an over-riding tendency towards description, frequent attacks are made on Oates' failure to guide the reader to the proper, correct interpretation. The confusion, consternation and dismay evidenced in the writings of many of the critics of Oates' prolific output, stem largely, it would seem from a basic critical mis-appraisal.

There frequently seems to be an insistence on describing her oeuvre as either naturalistic, or realistic, or experimental, or gothic, or fabulistic, and seeing certain texts as in some way inexplicable, or out of step with the genre definition already chosen by the critic. Given the extremities within her writing on the one hand and the prodigious output on the other, this confusion is to some extent understandable. However, by locating her works within the framework of a postmodern context, these contradictions can be accommodated. Certainly many of her texts are problematical to categorise. Readerly expectations are jarred and unsettled by the disconcerting refusal of both short stories and novels to fulfil the conventional strategies of any one mode of writing.

Similarly, those texts which consist of both short and long narratives



and which initially appear to have more affinity with the strategies of modernism cannot successfully be categorised as modernist discourse either. Yet these problems may be overcome, if her texts are regarded as occupying an aesthetic and critical space, where a multiplicity of meanings may be produced; her works, often not quite a novel, not quite a group of stories, may be seen as epitomising the aesthetics of postmodernism.

If contemporary fiction has, since the 1960s, moved from a literature of exhaustion to a literature of replenishment as John Barth suggests, and if much contemporary writing which may previously have presented critical difficulties of categorisation, has now been staked out and signposted as *postmodern*, then perhaps within the uneven cartography of this contemporary fiction Oates may be seen to be enjoying a particular postmodern eclecticism by writing all over the aesthetic map and thereby eluding conventional classification. Given Oates' tendency to write texts 'as if' they were something other than they appear to be, to produce *trompe l'oeil* fictions, to play textual games with her critics and reviewers, it is illuminating to recall her quotation of the Sufi saying that the universe is "endless play and endless illusion"; but as she points out "at the same time, most of us experience it as deadly serious".<sup>33</sup> Some of the titles of Oates' texts, for example *With Shuddering Fall*, *By the North Gate*, *Upon the Sweeping Flood*, *A Garden of Earthly Delights* and *The Wheel of Love* often



taken from English Renaissance poems, are almost comically inappropriate to what she writes about.

If Oates' work is considered in the context of postmodern fictional practice, then even her very early texts can be seen to operate within this sphere. One of Oates' earliest novels, *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967), shows the self-reflexive strategies associated with postmodernism. Here, the character Swan-Steven is talking to his cousin Deborah, shortly before his suicide, and comments:

'I don't want to be a character in a story, in a book. I don't want to be like someone in a movie. I don't want to be born and die and have everyone watching - reading along. Everything decided ahead of time - ' (p391)

In the volume *The Wheel of Love* (1970), there are characters who see themselves in terms of characters from other books, as in this comment by the character Simon: "Once I was Huckleberry Finn, but now I am Roderick Usher"(p83). In Oates' novel *them*, the central character Jules perceives himself as a fictional character. In his youth Jules:

. . . thought of himself as a character in a book being written by himself, a fictional fifteen-year-old with the capacity to become anything, because he was fiction. What couldn't he make out of himself? (p79)

Elsewhere in the text, this same character comments to himself "This looks like Chapter One"(p235), and "'This is Jules in Texas' he thinks to himself"(p286).

Oates' novel *Expensive People*, is one which has attracted a lot of attention, much of it somewhat perplexed and bewildered, as outlined earlier. These responses can be understood to some extent, especially when the question of the marketing of her work is given some attention. For example, a text which has the obvious characteristics of a popular paperback destined for mass distribution is not generally expected to probe the whole question of fictionality, including meta-fictional reviews of itself and incorporating its own literary criticism. Yet this is the situation with the 1970 Fawcett Crest paperback version of Oates' text *Expensive People*. Its cover denotes a work within the 'romantic' fiction genre, the quality of paper and print and so on, certainly characterise *Expensive People* as a book with mass market appeal, but the mode of writing contradicts its generic qualities.

*Expensive People* is constructed as if it was a true story written by Richard Everett, and throughout the text this figure insists continually that the story he is telling is not mere fiction. He discusses how to write a memoir, quoting from and commenting on books and articles that offer advice to the would-be writer. He tells the readers what they are likely to find in his memoir:

I do indeed promise violence, yes. VIOLENCE . . . VIOLENCE (this is for people standing at *Browse & Leaf* shelves in clean suburban libraries). I offer to them also ECSTASY . . . MORAL ROT . . . ANGST . . . KIERKEGAARD . . . and other frauds that bring a sardonic smile to your lips and mine, my university-

educated readers, but that will snare lesser folk. FLAGELLATION interests some, those who know what it means, those who suspect what it means, and the great nation of those who want to look it up in order to use it three times and make it "theirs".

(All this is taken from an article called 'Just What Is Reader Interest?') (p88)

Anticipating critical comments that it is difficult to 'care' about Oates'

characters, the narrator in *Expensive People* remarks how:

I am wringing for all it's worth the 'device of emotional preparation,' that is, letting the readers come to know the characters. Will they give a damn about some poor bastard who is killed on page one? They will not. They are hard-hearted and cynical. But move that poor bastard's death to page 300, build a story around him, and they will care if you've done your job and they have any tears left to be wrung out of their skulls, those selfish bastards. (p89)

The narrator presents reviews of his memoir such as might appear in *The New York Times Book Review*, *Time Magazine* and any one of the major literary quarterlies, all of which successfully pastiche actual reviews of *Expensive People*. *Time* says for example "Everett sets out to prove that he can outsmatré Sartre but doesn't quite make it. . . . Of course it has all been done before, and with superior skill, by John O'Hara and Louis Auchincloss, and if and when Everett learns the lyric cry of rapture and horror which these authors call forth he will perhaps be worthy of our attention"(p134).

But it is perhaps the parody of the review in one of the literary quarterlies that is the most effective, especially in the light of Bergonzi's



comments discussed earlier:

And now we turn from Nabokov's scintillating anal fantasies to the crude oral fantasies of one Richard Everett, in a first novel called *Expensive People*. Worthless as sociological material . . . ludicrous as drama . . . embarrassing as prose . . . *Expensive People* is nevertheless valuable as a fabulous excursion into the realm of the orally obsessed . . . Author Everett, obviously an amateur, failed to make the best use of his oral theme by his crudity of material . . . It is this lack of skill that sets him apart from Nabokov, whose every sentence is calculated, whose every image calls up at once from the deepest reservoirs of our souls Freudian responses of the sort that make Great Literature. (pp135-136)

It may also be apposite to include a few remarks from the actual review of *Expensive People*, that appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1969:

As an essay in the macabre *Expensive People* is not a complete success . . . An over-ripe infant prodigy, now eighteen, tells the story of his life until he was eleven and shot his mother. A rich and beautiful woman who writes books, has lovers, gets her son's IQ upped from 153 to 161 and fakes for herself a romantic émigré childhood may well deserve to die, but her son's compulsion to kill her is not made altogether convincing. Nor is his rattling and tricky narrative, with its parentheses, its colloquies with the reader, its cunning anticipation of reviews and its contrived child's eye-view.<sup>34</sup>

Yet when Oates' novel *Expensive People* is set within a framework of postmodernism, it is possible to view this novel as a somewhat different light. I would argue that far from being merely a novel of literary tricks, *Expensive People* may be read as a serious critique of the 'American Dream' especially as it emerges in the lives of wealthy suburbanites. Oates uses postmodernist techniques to satirize how the world of the rich, white middle-



class is often dependent upon the economic exploitation of the working class population, and how the happy nuclear family promoted by advertising images suggests an ideal that can rarely be realised.

Interviews with Joyce Carol Oates indicate that from the inception of her writing career, she has never felt fettered or constrained by literary conventions. In essence, she does view herself as writing within a postmodern sensibility although many of her works would not necessarily be associated with the Barth, Barthelme, Coover, Katz, Sukenick, Federman, Pynchon and Vonnegut school of postmodernist writers. In one interview, Oates comments on remarks that some of her texts are extremely conventional whilst others are radically experimental:

. . . it seems to me there is a certain self-consciousness about anyone who sets himself up as an 'experimental' writer. All writing is experimental. But experimentation for its own sake doesn't much interest me; it seems to belong to the early '60s, when Dadaism was being rediscovered. In a sense we are all post-Wake writers . . . I try to write books that can be read in one way by a literal-minded reader, and in quite another way by a reader alert to symbolic abbreviation and parodistic elements. And yet, it's the same book - or nearly. A *trompe l'oeil*, a work as if.<sup>35</sup>

Oates' commitment to innovation would seem to be balanced out by an equal commitment to create meaningful, socially engaged fictions. Her postmodernist fictions do not reject the achievements of modernist writers, so much as celebrate their literary expertise.

There is often a sense in Oates' work of a tendency to take the materials of other modes of writing in order to use them for her own purposes. Yet as I pointed out earlier this reuse of other literary texts was also a feature of modernism. In my earlier discussion of the aesthetics of postmodernism, I attempted to differentiate between the modernist and postmodernist strategies and techniques by setting these devices within the restructuration framework of Fredric Jameson. By viewing the modernist technique of the palimpsest within such a model, it may be argued that its use in the work of H D, Gertrude Stein, Kafka, Mann, T S Eliot, Pound, and Joyce functions as a dominant characteristic of modernism. Yet this technique does not feature to any extensive degree in the novels and short stories of women modernists such as Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, Djuna Barnes, Ivy Compton-Burnett, and Emily Holmes-Colman.

The extent to which postmodernist writers also incorporate other literary texts within their work would seem to indicate that this device is one which is shared with modernism and thus continues as a dominant convention. However, as I pointed out earlier, postmodernism differs from modernism in its tendency to collapse the hierarchical distinctions between high art and popular culture by incorporating previously despised trash modes rather than revered classical works. Moreover, postmodernist writers often view the works of the modernist themselves as available material for

recycling, thus highlighting the different contexts of modernism and postmodernism. This technique is drawn upon by women postmodernists such as Margaret Atwood, Joanna Russ, Kathy Acker, Brigid Brophy, Toni Morrison, Maggie Gee and Angela Carter as I hopefully have indicated in my discussion of some of their fictions in the preceding chapter.

Many of Joyce Carol Oates' works similarly make use of prior literary texts and formulaic modes of writing. For example, *The Bloodsmoor Romance* utilises Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*, the costume gothic and the sentimental romance; *Mysteries of Winterthurn* poaches the style and structure of a nineteenth-century detective story; *Expensive People* and *The Triumph of the Spider Monkey* make use of the popular confessional novel; *Wonderland* is written over the top of Lewis Carroll's stories; *Cybele* rewrites the myth of Cybele and Attis in the form of a murder mystery novel; and *Bellefleur* incorporates American mountain legends, European folk tales and the conventions of the historical family saga.

Whilst Oates frequently acknowledges her debt to modernist writers, she refutes the notions of the writer as an artist/hero struggling in isolation to wrest a new literary aesthetic from the shards of a decaying civilization. Indeed, Oates explicitly articulates a very different vision of her own project as a writer, and one which she would hope to share with others. Instead of



the myth of the isolated artist, she envisages a shared cultural continuum of literary creativity:

As long as the myth of separate and competitive "selves" endures, we will have a society obsessed with adolescent ideas of being superior, of conquering, of destroying. The pronoun "I" is as much a metaphor as "schizophrenia", and it has undergone the same "metaphor-into-myth" process. Creative work . . . should be greeted as a communal effort.<sup>36</sup>

Oates would seem to contend that the perpetuation of the myth of an isolated writer, perfecting a discrete aesthetic object uncontaminated by its social, cultural, political, economic and historical context, is not only a corruption of the actual literary process but also morally unsound.

It is possible to identify an affinity here between Oates and women modernist writers. Reading Oates' views in conjunction with those of Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf would seem to indicate a shared concern over this issue. Woolf wrote in *A Room of One's Own*, that "books continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately".<sup>37</sup> Whilst Oates' fiction operates from a very different basis to that of Woolf or Dorothy Richardson, especially in her avoidance of in-depth explorations of a character's inner consciousness, it does perhaps have more in common with Djuna Barnes and the prose of Gertrude Stein.

In Stein's essay 'What is English Literature' she too expresses a sense of continuity with other writing:



What is English literature, by English literature I mean American literature too. . . . There is a great deal of literature but not so much but that one can know it. And that is the pleasant the delightful the fascinating the peaceful thing about literature that there is a great deal of it but that one can all one's life know all of it. . . . There it is right in you right inside you right behind you. Perhaps in front of you but this you do not know. . . . However very likely there is, there is at any rate going to be more American literature. Very likely.<sup>38</sup>

Oates obviously has an additional connection with Stein in so far as she also participates in an American as well as an English tradition. Stein also makes an interesting observation on the nature of the 'tradition' which is of relevance to this discussion here. Stein writes:

There are two ways of thinking about literature as the history of English literature, the literature as it is a history of it and the literature as it is a history of you. Any one of us and anyway those of us that have always had the habit of reading have our own history of English literature inside us, the history as by reading we have come to know it.<sup>39</sup>

Stein's concept of the literary tradition and the different ways of thinking about what 'it' is, and how it is known, helps illuminate Oates' sense of participation in a literary process which shapes her writing, as much as she shapes it.

Oates' concept of literature would not seem to be at odds with the views of many feminist critics, such as Elizabeth Meese, Elaine Showalter, Ellen Moers, and Linda Hutcheon who similarly argue for the importance of a sense of context and literary community. Although, of course, Oates'

notion of a community of both female and male writers would cut across the standpoint of radical separatist feminism. Yet I would argue that such isolationist tactics are out of keeping with the heterogeneity of our multicultural, multi-racial contemporary society, as Michèle Barratt suggests in her new Introduction to *Women's Oppression Today* (1988).

Oates' sense of a shared continuum of literature which is open to revision, reconstruction, and revitalisation is particularly evident in her collection of short stories *Marriages and Infidelities* (1972). This volume would seem to bear out Oates' view that literature is not an discrete enterprise produced in some sort of cultural vacuum, but rather a discursive space in which works may be unique but not 'original'. For Oates, other literary models may on occasion be highly visible, and at other times virtually invisible.

Although she does not directly refer to Gertrude Stein's comment about literature being a part of oneself, Oates writes that "If I were to suggest, in utter seriousness, that my fiction is the creation of thousands upon thousands of processes of consciousness, synthesized somehow in me, I would be greeted with astonishment or disbelief, or dismissed as being 'too modest'".<sup>40</sup> By viewing Oates' work within a framework of postmodernism where her fiction may be seen in relation to other postmodernist and modernist writers, and by exploring the connections between her work and

that of other women writers and feminist critics, Oates' *oeuvre* may be seen to be far less confusing, problematic, and unreadable than the critics whose views I considered earlier would suggest.

A number of short stories from the collection *Marriages and Infidelities* are especially relevant to this discussion of Oates' fiction, her own views on her writing practice, and the complex relationship with postmodernism, modernism, and feminism in which her work stands. Oates emphasizes her belief in the collaborative nature of literature in this volume, but also invites speculation about the issues of literary autonomy and the uniqueness of the literary text. For Oates takes a number of well known works by Chekhov, Henry James, Kafka, and James Joyce and in rewriting and retelling them from her own perspective, she calls into question the male literary tradition and the role of the woman writer.

In the rewriting of 'The Lady with the Pet Dog,' 'The Turn of the Screw,' 'The Metamorphosis', and 'The Dead', Oates' sense of a close relationship with other writers is very tangible, but at the same time her 'infidelities' also take on significance. Oates' draws upon the postmodernist technique of intertextuality to reimagine and restructure these stories, through a process in which formal elements, style, narrative strategy, patterns of imagery, and characterization are distorted, inverted and reconfigured. With these stories, the source of intertextual literary models



for Oates is of course very clear, and would seem to suggest that Oates' primary community is that of male writers. Whilst Joyce, Kafka, James and Chekhov are the most visible tradition in which her works would seem to be situated, there are other dimensions to her work in *Marriages and Infidelities* that although less visible are nevertheless equally important.

The positioning of the woman writer as both inside and outside of the mainstream of literary culture often creates a situation in which women's writing appears to be cut off from history. Those stories in *Marriages and Infidelities* which have a clear relation to male writers, as mentioned above, have often been discussed by critics of Oates' work partly because, I would suggest, there is a ready made framework for critical discussion. However, there are other stories in this volume, two of which I propose to examine shortly, which have been relatively neglected and I feel that this is because they do not appear to have such direct connections with other writers.

Virginia Woolf, discussing the difficulties confronting the woman writer who attempted to discover her own place within the traditions of literature, commented that:

. . . we think back through our mothers if we are women. It is useless to go to the great men writers for help, however much one may go to them for pleasure. Lamb, Browne, Thackeray, Newman, Sterne, Dickens, De Quincey - whoever it may be - never helped a woman yet, through she may have learnt a few tricks of them and adapted them to her use. . . . Perhaps the first thing she would find, setting pen to paper, was that there



was no common sentence ready for her use.<sup>41</sup>

Woolf's comments help illuminate the significance of Oates' choice of the title *Marriages and Infidelities* for her collection of short stories. Oates most clearly demonstrates her sense of alliance with the literary tradition of male writers, but then sabotages this 'marriage' by choosing to adapt them to her own purposes by a series of literary 'infidelities'.

However, by 'thinking back through our mothers', it is possible to discover a sense of historical context in which to position Oates and to consider how her use of literary techniques may link her to other women writers. In the previous chapters, I have indicated that in attempting to distinguish postmodernism from modernism, it is important to acknowledge the work of women modernists together with that of Joyce, Lawrence, Kafka and the other male writers of the modernist canon. By placing Oates' fictions in relation to the work of women modernists, especially Gertrude Stein, it would seem that whilst there are clearly some affinities between postmodernist and modernist literary practice, there are also discontinuities.

In the two stories '29 Inventions' and 'Scenes of Passion and Despair' from *Marriages and Infidelities* which I shall examine next, Oates draws upon some of the key characteristics that are widely considered to epitomise postmodernism. Oates' utilisation of such techniques as flat characterisation and the avoidance of psychological depth, extreme fragmentation of the

narrative discourse together with excessive spatial and temporal dislocations, the use of cliché and passive resignation in the narrating of extraordinary events, and conversely the depiction of the ordinary and everyday rendered strange and alien, together with a high degree of narrative unreliability, would arguably place these two fictional pieces squarely within the aesthetic model of postmodernism discussed in Chapter Two.

However, when these stories are viewed in relation to modernist literary techniques then the contradictory nature of postmodernism becomes more obvious. If the use of the stream of consciousness technique as exemplified by the fictions of Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf are taken as representative of one of the dimensions of modernism, then Oates' stories may be seen to be quite different. The characters in her stories are typically flat, and there is an avoidance of psychological depth. Similarly, the use of myth in the work of H D may be seen as a typical strategy of modernism. But Oates' reuse of the writings of the past clearly differs in that rather than using myths to create a structure which may give meaning to her fiction, she rewrites other fictions, often by the modernists themselves, to demonstrate that the notion of meaning and the construction of 'reality' are arbitrary fictions which are always susceptible to change.

However, Woolf's statement about the struggle of women writers to shape the sentence to their own use, provides a key to how Oates' draws

upon the strategies of Gertrude Stein in the structuring of her writing. In the following two stories, Oates' techniques have a strong affinity to Stein's close examination of the structural properties of spoken and written language and how words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs produce thoughts and emotions in the reader. Stein's use of the techniques of linguistic repetition and accumulation and her innovatory treatment of sentences and paragraphs would seem to be the strongest 'invisible' connection between Oates' fictions and those of modernist writers.

In making this connection visible, I would suggest that Oates' writing may be fruitfully approached by feminist critics such as Elaine Showalter, Shari Benstock and Molly Hite who are concerned with documenting women's writing as a tradition in its own right. Further, those feminist critics who are interested in the innovatory fiction of women writers, such as Linda Hutcheon, Rachel Blau Duplessis, Susan Rubin Suleiman, Elizabeth Meese, Helen Carr, Leslie Dick, Carolyn Allen, Ellen Friedman and Miriam Fuchs might similarly find Oates' work to be of significance, both in terms of postmodernism and its relation to the innovations of modernist women writers.

I propose now to move on to examine two stories from the volume *Marriages and Infidelities*, '29 inventions' and 'Scenes of Passion and Despair' which have been relatively neglected in discussions of Oates' work.



In the following critical commentary, by demonstrating how postmodernist techniques depart from the conventions of realism, the complex relations between postmodernist and modernist strategies will be revealed. I would suggest that these stories exemplify postmodern fictional aesthetics and demonstrate some of the ways in which postmodernism and modernism overlap.

### **'29 Inventions'**

The formal strategies of '29 inventions' point clearly in the direction of a text which is engaged in probing the whole question of fictionality. The title is particularly pertinent: for not only is the prose made up of 29 discrete numbered sections or fragments, which vary in length from as long as two pages to a minimal fragment of just one word, but the title delineates most precisely and explicitly the nature and process of fiction.

By directing our attention to the text as imaginative construct, the 'inventions' which constitute our reading experience dramatise insistently the fictionalizing quality of our perceptions of 'reality'. The materialist/idealist dichotomy of reality as 'out there' or 'in here' is superseded by a dazzling plurality of possibilities, so that 'reality' in this text becomes whatever the



narrative voice chooses it to be.

The text continually subverts and stifles the tendency to believe in it by undermining our sense of 'what is really happening'. We note that the first section is enclosed in direct speech marks, thereby establishing a degree of verisimilitude, someone has actually spoken these words. So we read on, in search of the character to whom we can ascribe these lines; perhaps the next section will fill in the details for us.

The next section however, challenges these expectations for we are told that "I have not invented her, not all of her. Most of the words are hers".<sup>42</sup> Yet, a little later in section 6 the narrator tells us "... I will invent most of her"(p85). Traditional readerly expectations are thus undermined by stressing the fact that fiction consists of inventions, fabrications and so on. Conventionally, we read as though we do not suspect that a fiction consists of 'imagined' characters and events; even though we know this, we operate from the principle of a 'willing suspension of disbelief'. In effect, this convention stems from our desire to be given a story to believe in, a story that will allow us to escape from our own 'reality', a story that will, at the same time, suggests by its 'art' that our own 'reality' may likewise be as satisfactorily ordered.

It could be said that the text of '29 Inventions' is simply structured as a conventional story of recall, with the first person narrator attempting to

remember details of an episode in the past. However, this is not precisely the case for the unreliability of the narrative discourse distorts conventional techniques of characterization and narrative voice to such an extent that our perceptions of 'the story' are constantly subject to redefinition.

At times, we cannot attribute dialogue with any certainty to either the first person narrator or to the character who, for the majority of the text, is identified only by the feminine pronoun, for the discourse slides precariously between the two. Structurally, the numbering of the 29 sections dislocates any tendency towards imposing chronological coherency. By fragmenting the prose in this way, we are explicitly reminded of our selection processes in fictionalizing the reality of our own lives. The narrative discourse oscillates continually between an insistence on certain information and its negation, so that there is a perpetual contradiction about the actual course of events which supposedly take place.

One of these contradictory areas is that which runs between section 13 and section 17, where narrative reliability is offered and then withdrawn. In section 13, the first person narrator informs us that:

I saw her out on the street once, walking fast. . . . She looked like a stranger . . . She didn't notice me . . . The girl didn't notice me, but if she had she would not have remembered me, because a woman does not matter to another woman. (pp87-88)

Yet section 14, immediately contradicts this statement:

At the street corner she paused and turned to look at me. A full, ironic stare . . . She stared at me and her eyes narrowed a little in recognition . . . She stared at me . . . She reached out and took hold of my wrist and dug her hard little nails into it. (p88)

These textual contradictions blur the distinction between fact and fantasy, reality and illusion, so that it is impossible for us to state unequivocally which of the two versions really happened. Sections 15 and 16 offer a similar contradiction; the opening of section 15 begins "I follow her home"(p88). But this is negated by the opening of section 16 which flatly states "I don't follow her home"(p89).

The changes in the verbal tenses of these four sections are significant, for temporal dislocations operate within the narrative contradictions. Section 13 is written in the simple past, as is section 14, but these two sections contradict one another, as discussed above. In section 15, the discourse shifts between the simple past and the simple present, so that events which have been described already as having taken place are then narrated in the present tense and offered to us with a tonal flatness that obscures the impossibility of such events happening:

I saw her on the street, I followed her home at a distance. . . . I follow her home . . . I follow her up the stairs. I float up behind her. I am inside her skull . . . I put the key in the lock . . . I paint the kitchen white and then splatter the ceiling and walls with grease . . . I tack that calendar on the wall with the pastel Virgin Mary on it . . . I brush the girl's hair for her until it is bristling with electricity. (p89)



Despite the fact that we have been warned by the title that the text is composed of 29 inventions, we still attempt to make sense of these events by trying to fit them into some sort of logical pattern. Yet we cannot accept that these events have any basis in the reality of the fiction, for the text subverts readerly expectations by refusing to concur at any one point with conventional techniques of narrative structure.

Section 16 and 17 capitalize thoroughly on the contradictions of the preceding sections for the first two sentences of section 16 negate the events of section 15 and jar upon each other because of the discrepancy between the verbal tenses:

I don't follow her home.

I saw her on the street but I didn't follow her. (p89)

We advance cautiously, perhaps the narrator has finished playing cat and mouse with us, perhaps we can relax now that we know finally that the narrator did see the as yet unidentified female character but did not, in fact, follow her. Perhaps we will accept that the preceding sections are literally some of the 'inventions' that the title alludes to, now that the narrator seems to have decided to tell us what really happened.

But no: section 17 contradicts the contradictions yet again, at the same time reaffirming the validity of parts of section 15, the end of which tells us that:

She stares at herself. She touches her face. *I am disappearing*, she says aloud. (p89)

The final lines of section 17 confirm that the narrator did not follow the young woman home, but only followed her "for a block, then gave up. Let her go"(p90). Yet if that is what actually took place, we cannot satisfactorily explain how the narrator knows the sequence of events that follows:

Let her go home and climb the stairs and unlock the door and herd the panting kids inside and rush into the bathroom where she can be alone, pressing her hand to her heart. *I am disappearing!* she cries out at her reflection in the mirror. (p90)

This reversion to traditional omniscient narrative technique transgresses the internal laws that have so far operated within the text. For the narrator is, in effect, asserting simultaneously that the young woman was alone in the bathroom and that the narrator was with her. Our attempts to discriminate which is the 'reality' and which is the 'invention' are frustrated again and again by the unreliable narrative discourse. Yet nevertheless there are sufficient incentives to continue trying to 'resolve' the plot, and this is how the text successfully hooks us into the fiction.

There is a duality in the role of the narrator in the text which creates a tension between the narrator as character and the narrator as creator of the fiction. When the narrator as character is recalling details of the still

unidentified female figure, as in section 3 for example, conventional characterisation techniques are used:

Her face: young and yet not youthful. Premature lines on the forehead from too much frowning, too much fear for her departing heartbeat. She did have very light, fine blond hair. I remember that. (p84)

Yet in section 15, the text slides into unstable narrative, and the narrator as fictionalist takes over, and in the process draws attention to the fictionalising act itself:

She is not the way I remembered her . . . Her hair is bleached. Dark brown at the roots. No, no, that can't be right - she wouldn't have blond eyebrows then, and she does have blond eyebrows; I remember that. Too blond. Flimsy and anemic [sic], that kind of blond. So the hair isn't bleached. Erase that. Change that. (pp88-89)

Similarly, the sudden introduction of two children in section 17 seems more to be the product of the unstable discourse intervening in the text, than a simple comment by the narrator as character. The appearance of the two boys is triggered off by the last sentence in section 16, "And what about the children?"(p90). Section 17 picks up on this cue and furnishes the woman with a family background:

I didn't mention the children -  
I invented her with bracelets, even loops of gold in her ears on that day, sandals, a short white shirt, a red pullover blouse, clean hair. All right. But she had two kids with her. Two boys. (p90)

Yet we are never quite sure whether or not these children are really in the



narrative, for in section 27 these boys appear with the narrator as character, "I run along the street with the two children, eager to be free, to get the hell away from everyone"(p95).

The oscillation between stable and unstable narrative increases dramatically from section 22 onwards, culminating in a slide between the identity of the narrator and that of the woman (who has been named eventually in section 21 as Mrs Pelletier):

I was sitting there, blond and panicked, leaning forward but not staring at Dr Geddes . . . but at the woman sitting behind him taking notes. Was she a nurse? A secretary? That is the best chair in the room, back there. Outside there is an air hammer. It hammers inside your skull. It is like a heartbeat. But which heart is it - hers or mine? At first she complained about her heart beating too faintly, then too loudly. Which is which? Did I make it up, or did I forget something she said in between? (p96)

The need for cross-referencing backwards and forwards in the text increases in direct relation to the instability and contradictions of the narrative, for section 21 negates the information we were given in section 2. When the two sections are scrutinised in juxtaposition, we see that the narrator has replaced the woman, she has in effect become the character Mrs Pelletier:

She is forever sitting forward in that chair . . . She is forever leaning forward to talk to my friend, a psychiatrist. To her, I am a stenographer, a nurse. (pp83-84)

The text deploys specific temporal dislocations which undermine our attempts to impose a 'logical' sense of linear time.

Yet there are suggestions scattered throughout the text which should have warned us; the numerous references to calendars indicate that our notions of 'time' are relative: in section 12, there is:

A calendar on the wall, but no one believes in the future. No one has bothered to turn the page over; the end of the month was last Friday. Time yawns here. Outside the window there is nothing. (p87)

Section 15 mentions a calendar too:

I tack that calendar on the wall with the pastel Virgin Mary on it, heart exposed, hand lifted in a blessing. (p89)

Section 18 again refers to the calendar in Dr Geddes' room:

Dr Geddes . . . behind his desk. The desk is small and battered. Other doctors use it. It is Dr Geddes's on Tuesdays, until late afternoon; for all I know someone else comes in at night and uses it. The calendar isn't his - now someone has turned the page over. It is June. (p91)

Section 24 locates the time as July, thus offering some temporal stability; the narrative has progressed from June to July, in the linear sequence we expect.

We therefore read section 28, which locates the time as September, quite unsuspectingly; the fears of the character Mrs Pelletier, that she may be killed by her husband are proved true, and this is the tragic but 'satisfying' conclusion to the story:

The husband was picked up for murder. The wife was killed, stabbed with a kitchen knife. Dr Geddes tells me all this when we meet by accident, months later. It is September. (p98)

Yet section 29 instantly undermines and negates the previous discourse, for the opening lines are:

September never came.  
It is still July. (p98)

The text thus draws attention to the problematical question of the endings in fiction, by offering us a double-ending, where time is, in effect, turned back. However, even this double ending does not close the text, for the narrative discourse then proceeds to erase the fictional characters it has invented:

And so I erase them both. I kill them both. They are gone.  
They never existed. (p99)

And it finally shifts into a disconcerting mixture of the future and present tenses:

The next time I drive through this neighborhood the clinic itself will have been torn down: good riddance! In the sunlight the city itself is shimmering and unclear. The rubble vibrates, the pavement vibrates. Is that a crack in the street? The parking lot attendant's little cabin tilts suddenly, about a yard on one side. It is the end of this city. The city is caving in. (pp99-100)

Ultimately, the narrator erases herself:

I am erasing them all . . . . Myself, I am dying. I am disappearing. I can hear my heartbeat moving away from me. I am a process that is dying, disappearing, moving away. Of all of us, only you remain. (p100)

This text recognizes the problematical nature of endings in fiction, and offers



an alternative method of closure by 'deconstructing' its own ending.

The text of '29 Inventions' takes as its rationale the notion that stories are 'made up' by their narrators. But this ending seems to suggest that the narrator does not create the text, the text creates the narrator; so that when the text is complete, it is handed over to 'you' the reader to decide what shape the inventions ultimately take.

In many ways, this text operates on the level of the detective story, by offering sufficient incentives to continue trying to resolve the plot, despite being intensely contradictory and ambiguous. It could be argued also that the repeated doctor/patient motif within the story is essentially a clue to the possibility of interpreting the textual discontinuities as signs of psychological disturbance in the narrator. But this is too easy a solution, and close attention to the text displays that the irregularities and disruptions are on the level of the narrative and not on the level of narrator as character.

The textual disruptions of Oates' story would arguably fit within the framework of the model of postmodernist aesthetics that I discussed in Chapter Two. Thus, in the above reading of '29 Inventions' I have hopefully demonstrated how Oates' textual practice might be considered as an example of literary postmodernism. However, Oates' use of the technique of repetition and accumulation together with exploded syntax and unattributed dialogue, is also suggestive of the work of Gertrude Stein. Both

writers would seem to share a common project of subverting conventional modes of discourse, especially that of realism.

Yet Stein typically pushed her experiments with language to their utmost and arguably made her work inaccessible to the majority of readers. Indeed, one of Stein's biographers, John Malcolm Brinnin, commented on the apparent gulf between Stein's work and her readers:

Adrift in the interstices of her free-playing world of suggestion, and taunted by fragments of "reality" that loom and disappear before they can be grasped, [they are] apt first to become weary and, soon after, rebellious. Her audience tends finally to consist only of the few individuals who can tolerate literature reduced to a series of tensions generated by the impact of participles, verbs and pronouns . . . . Because she offers no references by which bearing can be taken, Gertrude Stein cannot be "solved," she can only be accepted. . . . Among writers in English she was alone in her attempts completely to forego the support of history and knowledge, and has remained alone.<sup>43</sup>

Although the interpretative strategies of literary criticism have advanced considerably since the publication of Brinnin's text, his point that Stein's works are intensely resistant to critical assimilation remains largely the case. In contrast I would argue that in Oates' story under discussion here, whilst demonstrating its connections with modernism through the influence of Stein's experimental techniques, there is a suggestion that some degree of recognizable plot and characterization are necessary if innovative fiction is to retain its readership.

### **‘Scenes of Passion and Despair’**

The second of Oates’ texts examined here is ‘Scenes of Passion and Despair’, in which conventional narrative strategies are undermined not only by the device of fragmenting the fiction into 14 numbered sections which subvert our expectations of the continuity of prose but also by introducing discontinuous characterization. In this short text, the characters have no names at all, which raises the issue of uncertainty that any or all the sections refer to the same characters; particularly when a sequence of events may be repeated without significant alteration in a number of sections. We must constantly raise the question, is this the same event but different characters or a different event with the same characters?

Not only is there the issue of ambiguity in relation to the continuity of the characters, but there is the additional disruption of dislocations in time and space which frustrate our desire to know when and where the ‘action’ of the plot is located. These formal strategies show up more clearly if the text is analyzed simultaneously for that which is apparent on the surface of the text and for that which is excluded or omitted. This process is necessary in order to appreciate the difference between first and subsequent readings, that reveals a technique which moves beyond that of montage. The text needs to be analyzed not simply by piecing sections together for a total



effect, but by conceptualising a relationship between the separate sections.

In section 1, there is an apparently conventional narrative technique, which uses the third person feminine pronoun, and alternates between the continuous present tense and the simple past tense.

Essentially, we read of a woman on her way to meet someone; there is a sense of urgency and anticipation, and we understand that the someone is a man. Her self-questioning, her doubts and anxieties about her clothes and whether or not he "wants her", suggests strongly that the woman is going to meet her lover, and that the meeting has to be secret, for why else does she reflect on her need to "take the cowpath, why not dare the road?".<sup>44</sup> The verbal shifts from the simple present to the continuous present and back to the simple past, together with brief fragments of interior monologue bring us in very closely to the woman. We can 'see' her as she hurries along and we can 'see' inside her thought as we hurry along with her.

The narrative is located satisfyingly enough, however, in time (it is the end of June, half an hour before dawn) and in place (she is hurrying along a path beside the Hudson River towards a farmhouse) and does contain sufficient elements of plot (she is meeting a man at the farmhouse) to entice us to read on.

Despite the lack of transitional verbs at the beginning of the last

paragraph in this section:

Wonder. His voice, his surprise. Hips jammed together,  
bodies cool and yet slippery as if with the predawn dew...  
(p182)

we faithfully fill in the omissions for ourselves. The man is pleased to see her, he tells her of his pleasure at her early morning visit, they make love. We are pleased with ourselves too; we suspected a lover because of the clandestine nature of the meeting and we enjoy making the fiction more 'real' by adding life-like interpretations.

Section 2 begins to fulfil our expectations of prose continuity and the chronological narrative suggests that we are about to be presented with a textual love story. The hips that were jammed together in Section 1 are most probably the same hips that are now "jammed together in languid violence"; it is still June, our 'characters' make love and talk together about the woman's husband, beneath a khaki coloured blanket in the farmhouse bed.

But section 3 returns to a woman running along a pathway, a woman who "hates the man she is running toward..."(p183). We look back and discover that no mention was made whether this woman 'loves' her lover. Perhaps this is another woman altogether? There is a lack of narrative progression, so that the plot is not being moved forward, which therefore leads us to query whether it is the same woman who has been mentioned in

sections 1 and 2.

However, section 4 reinforces the sense of continuity we have been trying to build up. We return to the jamming and grinding of hips in the farmhouse bed:

Twenty toes together at the foot of the bed, under the khaki cover! Such loving toes! (p184)

But now we discover that the man in this section does not love the woman:

. . . the shadow inside his head isn't loving; she fears it growing bigger, darker; she shuts her eyes hard to keep it from oozing into her own skull, because she has always tried to be optimistic about life. (p184)

The 'story' we are building up about this pair of lovers and an absent husband begins to be thrown into confusion and uncertainty because of the unreliability and instability of both the narrative discourse and the narrator.

This sense of uncertainty is increased again in section 5 where the text shows the woman as "she runs, her brow furrowed with some strange stray memory of her mother and an ice pick - "(p184). These details repeat those mentioned in section 3, thus tentatively confirming the female character is the same woman in each of the sections. Yet, the shifting of verbal tense undermines our sense of what 'has happened' and what 'is happening'. These textual strategies produce a degree of uncertainty, which is exacerbated by the final two sentences in the following fragment. Here the future tense is employed in a prophetic manner which is disconcerting.



The narrator is unreliable about both present reality and past reality, but is adamant about the future:

The husband will not get sick, will not kill himself, will not kill the lover or even find out about him; he will only grow old.

She will not need to wear black or to be faithful. She will grow old. The lover will not even grow old; he will explode into molecules as into a mythology. (p185)

The contradictions in verbal tense in Section 6 again frustrate attempts to classify and order the sequential narration of events. The woman, or at least a woman, has already climbed up the path to the farmhouse. These events are being narrated in the process of happening now, yet we cannot accept that they are happening now if they have already happened before. But perhaps the text is using a 'flashback' technique and will now provide us with a continuation or further explanation of the plot about the pair of lovers.

However, our expectations are denied yet again, for the text does not offer a development of the scene in the farmhouse bedroom but offers instead an episode which is in complete contradiction to the love scenes in the previous sections. Instead of meeting her lover and enjoying a romantic love-making session, the woman is suddenly and brutally raped by an apparent stranger. The text is making an explicit analysis of the sexual politics of relations between men and women. This act seems inexplicable

in the apparent context in which it appears until we begin to realize the extent of our error in trying to organise a coherent, linear narrative when the text is quite distinctly composed of numbered fragments that are separated clearly from one another by more than half an inch of white space. If we did not insist on imposing conventional narrative techniques on a text which is not structured in this way, then we would not find the text so bewildering.

Shall we assume then, that the un-named female character in this section is not the same as the female character in the previous sections? If we decide that this is indeed a different character, then the shift from love-affair to rape may not be so disconcerting on the level of narrative, and we can accept that the events are happening in a different context. Or can we? We had decided that this character is not the same woman as in the previous sections, and therefore the tendency is also to think that the man must be a new character too. Perhaps the text is juxtaposing a love affair with a rape in order to question the way in which we use fictions about romantic love to conceal the issues of power, domination and control inscribed within the nature of sexuality?

However, this is not quite the case for as the woman sees the man's eyes, we realise that he cannot be a stranger:

... and she sees a swirl of eyes, yellow-rimmed, the small hard dots of black at the centre of each eye somehow familiar and eternal, even the dried mucus at the inside corner of each eye

absolutely familiar, eternal- (p186)

We discover the significance of the apparently paradoxical and contradictory sentence in the next paragraph, "*I don't know him at all*"(p186), when we cross-refer backwards to the dialogue in section 2 which contains the same sentence. The italicised and unpunctuated phrase repeats the typographical device used in all the previous sections for representing the woman's thoughts, and this phrase has been used previously in relation to the husband. Thus, despite the contradiction between the 'eternal familiarity' of the man and the woman's thought of "I don't know him at all", the text implicitly suggests that the man raping the woman in this section is her husband and that the characters are indeed the same throughout.

The text stresses the obscenity of this rape by describing the scene as a grotesque travesty of the sexual episodes in the earlier sections. Whereas the lovers unite joyfully in a "grinding and jamming of hips in languid violence", the woman is now subject to:

A body jammed against hers. A bent knee, the strain of his thigh muscles communicated to her body, his wheezing, panting, his small cries overpowering hers, his grasping, nudging, glowering face... (p186)

The itemizing of the lover's features is parodied in this section, isolating parts of the body with the microscopic detail of a zoom-lens close up. We cannot help but make the comparison between section 2:



Her lover's hands, chest, stomach, his face, his soft kindly mouth, sucking at her mouth... (p182)

and section 6:

... his leathery skin jammed against her skin . . . the bridge of his nose suddenly very important, lowered to her face again and again . . . swollen veins in his throat, his eager grunts, his groveling above her, the stale fury of his breath, his hands, his straining bent knees... (p186)

Sections 7 and 11 retain sufficient fictional conventions to allow us to piece them together as part of the 'story' of the adulterous love affair.

However, the interposition of sections 8, 9 and 10 resist such integration. In section 8, there is a temporal and spatial shift; it is late winter, a 'he' and a 'she' are in a car parked on the river bank by the edge of a big park. This pair of characters cannot be the same as the previous characters for "they are both eighteen"(p187), whereas the woman and her husband have been married for eleven years. It is possible though, that the scene is a flashback to the pre-marital lovemaking of the husband and wife. The 'plot' of this fragment reiterates the 'plots' of the other sections where a man and a woman are making love, yet here the relationship is perceived as a banal and sordid act, as something which has to be endured rather than enjoyed:

On the radio is WKBT's "Sunday Scene," a thumping tumult of voices and their echoes, yes, everything is wonderful - everything is desperate - he begins his frantic nudging . . . she discovers herself lying in the same position again, making the

same writhing sharp twists with her body, as if fending him off and inviting him closer, she moves in time with the music, and then they are sitting up again and he is smoking a cigarette like someone in a movie. Small fixed uneasy smiles. They will marry, obviously. (pp187-188)

At first, section 9 appears to be a progression from section 8, for we are still with a couple in a car, making love, but no, this pair of lovers are different "after all, they are a lot older than eighteen"(p188).

In section 10, we seem to have moved out of the twentieth century altogether, for the plethora of details describing the clothing of the couple suggests the fashions of the nineteenth century; the handmade shoes, white cotton stockings and long blue dress of the woman, and the man dressed in a waistcoat, certainly give this section a period feel, somewhat of a 'pastoral' setting. This pair of lovers take a delight in what they are doing. We feel that they are behaving in the 'romantic' way lovers should behave, unlike the embittered and brutal relationships the text has previously offered us.

Yet the innocence and joy of this love scene is abruptly demolished by the introduction of an element of voyeurism. The use of a traditional third-person omniscient viewpoint to allow us to 'see' what the narrator 'sees' obscures the fact that we are 'voyeurs' too, that we are entering vicariously into the scene. Even though it is 'only' children hiding in the bushes who "have to stand up to see more clearly what is happening -

"(p188), we do not easily accept that the lovers should 'really' be observed by a third party.

The text of section 11 shifts back again to the pair of lovers in the earlier sections. We have enough references to confirm that it is the same couple: they are in bed, it is before dawn and the grimy blanket is mentioned again. However, the naturalising of the plot in these minimal realistic details lulls us into a false sense of readerly security, and leaves us unprepared for the sudden shift to the surreal quality of the woman's perception of her lover:

... she feels his loosening hair - Ah, clumps of his thick brown hair come away in her hand! . . . and now, as they kiss so urgently, she tries not to notice the way his facial structure sags, *dear God, the entire face can be moved from one side to the other, should she mention it?* (p189)

This juxtaposing of the 'real' and the 'surreal' disrupts our reading process, for the combination of the two different modes cannot be assimilated into a reading pattern based on conventional fiction.

There is a similar collision between the 'everydayness' of the woman's concern that the man has not bothered to shave and the 'bizarre' fascination with his eyes:

And he didn't bother shaving again. He could have shaved before going to bed, guessing, hoping she might come this morning, before dawn. . . . The eyeballs can be pushed backward . . . and then they move slowly forward again, springing slowly forward, in slow motion, not the way you



would expect eyeballs to spring forward. . . . (p189)

This juxtaposition operates not only on the level of the 'real' and the 'surreal' but it is also used to denote how notions of romantic love conceal the wide swings of mood and imbalances of feeling that exist in relationships between women and men, as the following passage demonstrates:

... her constricted throat gives out small, gentle, fading, souring sounds of love, but she feels the toughness of his skin, like hide, and the leathery cracks of his skin, and down at his buttocks the cold little grainy pimples, like coarse sandpaper, and one hand darts in terror to his head as if she wanted to grip the hair and pull his head away from hers... (pp188-189)

The disparity between 'love' and 'terror' stems perhaps from the woman's fear that there is "something fraudulent about him"(p188)<sup>45</sup>, that her lover is not who she thinks he is.

The text places us in the same position too, for without the conventional narrative device of 'naming' characters, we do not 'know' who any of the characters are. And if we refer backwards again, we find that the descriptions used in this section, which we think apply to the lover, have been used before in section 6 where they seemed to describe the character who may be the husband. We cannot be certain now, whether or not the man in this section is different from the man who raped the woman in section 6.

The clichéd phrases of romantic love are mercilessly revealed as trite and commonplace:

*I love you*, he is muttering, but she seems to recognize the pitch and rhythm of his voice, she has heard this before, in a movie perhaps... (p189)

the word "but" counteracts the value of what is being said, for there are countless films that deal with romantic love, with the obligatory moment of truth, when the hero confesses his love for the heroine. Yet at the same time, it is impossible to be absolutely certain whether the text is implying that the woman has heard those particular words before, or whether she has heard the man uttering the words in a film. However, whichever final interpretation we place on this fragment, what emerges is a distinct stress on the illusory aspect of romantic love.

The text of section 12 displays the greatest degree of unreliability and effectively frustrates not only all sense of any chronology of events we may have built up but also resists efforts to establish plot and story line. Initially, there does appear to be a chronological narrative progression from the scene in section 11 to the woman's return to her home, where, after having spent the early hours of the morning in bed with her lover, she now "cleans herself of him outside and inside"(p189).

Yet there follows an immediate contradiction which undermines and negates all the previous sections that we have been trying so assiduously to

piece together. The shift from this statement in the first clause of the next sentence: "No, she is not cleaning herself of him" to the second clause in the same sentence "but preparing herself for him"(p189) denies the reality that has constituted our reading experience. It is now not just a matter of narratorial unreliability but of textual negation. Although we have read that certain events have happened to certain, almost unidentifiable characters, all the preceding sections are wiped out, by this regression.

It now becomes apparent that this textual regression or denial of the 'story' operates so effectively because it is trading or relying on our conventional reading habits. The story that we have pieced together can only be wiped out because it is we who have insisted on making a composite picture out of discrete 'scenes'. In this way, the text draws attention to the fiction making process itself, by showing how we have been making up the story for ourselves, and ultimately, confronting us with the fictions that we make up about our own lives. Yet it is only because the text first offers the possibility of comprehension by maintaining a degree of narrative consistency, that it can then be denied.

However, section 12 continues unremittingly to negate itself, for the following paragraph negates the preceding statement that the woman is getting herself ready for her lover, by insisting:

No, she is not preparing herself for anyone. She is simply



standing in the bathroom staring at herself. (p189)

This textual negation is further reinforced by the temporal and spatial dislocations that occur throughout this section. The woman in this section was initially described, "At home, upstairs in the white Cape Cod" (p189), which ties in with the description of the marital home of the woman we have been unsuccessfully trying to establish as the same woman throughout.

Yet the narrative now shifts without transitional explanation to another home and another bathroom (possibly or probably the family home), for the feminine pronoun that has been used to denote a woman, now denotes a girl of fourteen, who is, like the woman "just staring in the mirror"(p190) at herself. The significance of this dislocation can be measured by the stasis of the girl's state of mind in contrast with the frenetic tumultuousness of the woman, or women, in the earlier sections. For this girl who is just staring at the reflection of her naked body in the bathroom mirror is:

... reluctant to leave the bathroom; she is not preparing herself for anyone, she is just standing on the fluffy blue rug from Woolworth's, she is not thinking about anything at all, she is reluctant to think. (p190)

There are several possibilities of meaning to this section. Perhaps, if the woman character has been the same throughout each section, then the present tense description of the woman preparing herself to meet her lover

the next day is the 'real meaning'. The preceding sections could then be the various scenes that the woman visualises for herself; variations on the following morning, depending perhaps on the mood of her lover and influenced to some extent by her feelings of guilt because she is deceiving her husband.

Alternatively, section 12 is a discrete fragment that plays with various alternative futures of the young girl. Or it could be that all the variations of each section have happened to one woman, but at the point where she is washing away the semen from her lover, she wishes that she was still the young girl of fourteen who has not yet become involved in sexual relationships.

A further possibility could be that this section is a condensation of aspects of all the female 'characters' in each of the fragments; a dissolving away of the barriers of individuality and individual experience. By juxtaposing the perceptions of the young girl who is not preparing herself for anyone and those of the post-coital woman who feels only that:

God, her body aches. There is an itchiness too, probably an infection. That tiny bubble in the blood, exploding into splashes of excited colorless water, probably infected. His swarming germs, seed. The stain on her clothes. (p189)

The text does not reveal disillusion and cynicism, so much as a willingness to explore the less 'romantic' aspects of sexual relationships.

It is important at this point to make the distinction between external spatial/temporal displacement at the level of narrative and the internal spatial/temporal displacement at the level of character experience or perception. Section 13 presents a problematic duality of dislocation and displacement, for the text jumps abruptly from female perceptions of sexuality to male perceptions, and the temporal and spatial displacements occur with the perception of the male character rather than outside, in the body of the text.

The lexical structure of the opening lines challenges conventional interpretive techniques by using language to create an impossible reality:

Eight years old, the man finds himself again at a kitchen table, he glances up in surprise to see that it is the kitchen of his parents' house, and he is reduced in size - no more than eight years old! (p190)

The text confronts more specifically here, the desire to arrange events into a coherent order. An immediate response would be to insist that the man cannot be both a man and an eight year old boy simultaneously; he must be one or the other. The statement would be acceptable if it were phrased thus for example: eight years old again, the man finds himself at a kitchen table . . . indicating a simple flashback technique, one that is unproblematic on the temporal level.

It is almost as though the 'unconscious' of the text has surfaced or



broken through the consciousness of the male character, who has so far been 'suppressed' throughout the narrative discourse. This section is the only fragment which deals specifically with male perceptions of sexuality and it is significant that these perceptions are filtered through the actions and thoughts of a prepubescent boy. For the boy is carrying out an experiment with modelling clay on the mechanics of sexual intercourse to discover what penile penetration might feel like. This experiment is accompanied by grave misgivings and a great deal of anxiety; the modelling of the female figure is described in language which connotes crude sexual imagery:

With a pencil he pricks holes for the eyes and fashions a smiling mouth, pinches a little nose out, on the chest he pinches out two breasts, makes them very large and pointed, and between the legs he pokes a hole. (p190)

He has made, in effect, the stereotype of female sexuality; a passive, smiling, large-breasted woman: the 'ideal' woman that fills the centrefold of soft-porn magazines.

The adult male character's attitude to sexuality cannot be separated from that of the boy, for the adult's sexuality is determined by the perceptions of the boy at this stage:

He is aware of his father in the cellar, aware of the clock whirring... and suddenly a raw, sick sensation begins in him, in his bowels, and he is transfixed with dread. . . . He picks up a tiny piece of clay and makes a small wormlike thing and tries to press it against the figure, between her legs. It falls off. Perspiring, he presses it into place again and manages to

make it stick. It is a small grub-sized thing but it makes sense. He stares at it and his panic subsides, slowly. He feels slightly sick the rest of the day. (pp190-191)

The dislocations and displacements of the earlier sections are synthesized in section 14. Here the couple making love are in the farmhouse but "the two of them might be lying anywhere, making love anywhere"(p191), then the text goes on to list the locations that have been described earlier in the separate fragments:

the walls of this farmhouse might fall away to show them on a river bank, in the sunshine, or in a car, at the edge of a large state park. (p191)

And since it is the woman who thinks this, our suspicions that the female character has been the same woman throughout seem to be confirmed.

Yet the scene takes on a different dimension with the woman's sudden shift to a mechanical, distanced attitude to the lovemaking. Why should she have to 'instruct' herself to continue caressing her lover? Why does she feel:

... a ticklish sensation as if she is going to cough, but instead of coughing she whispers *I love you* ... (p191)

and why is it that:

... the lead-grey sky and the lead-grey water are enough to convince them that this act is utterly useless, but who can stop? (p191)

and how can we explain the sudden appearance of the wide-brimmed straw

hat a few feet away from her on the grass (when she is inside the farmhouse), and the fact that the man still has on his waistcoat?

We cannot remain passive readers with this text, for we are constantly manipulated into solving and re-solving the problems the fiction presents us with. It is as though we have been presented with a fictional jigsaw; we move the discrete fragments around as if they were jigsaw pieces and try to match up the flat sides and round corners to fit into an interlocking pattern, despite the 'invisibility' of the last piece that would allow us to finish the picture.

However, a possible pattern has been visible all the time. We have not been able to see it for it has been placed in the most visible position of all, in the title of the text, 'Scenes of Passion and Despair'. The sudden "mocking scream" which "freezes" the couple together is made by a character who enters the fiction as a "stranger" but who, nevertheless, "seems to know them" (p192). This paradox may be explained if we assume that a film is being made, that this pair of lovers who are "so awkward together, being strangers themselves"(p192) are acting in a film scene. The woman must continue caressing her lover and cannot cough when she wants to, for otherwise she will ruin the filming of the 'scene'. And similarly, the farmhouse walls could quite easily "fall away" if the building is only a film set.



But what of the woman's feelings that the sexual act she is engaged in, is "utterly useless, but who can stop?"(p191). As the narrating of the story dissolves into the filming of the scene, it seems that what we are 'seeing' through the eye of the camera is a 'blue movie', a pornographic film. The 'action' is held up by the entrance of the stranger, who:

... eyes them cynically. He squats, a more experienced lover, and arranges and rearranges arms, legs, the proper bending of the knee; with the palm of his practised hand he urges the man's head down, down, just a few inches more, yes, hold it like that . . . (p192).

The performance of these 'lovers' evidently lacks the verisimilitude necessary to persuade viewers of the film that what they are seeing is 'really' sexual intercourse and not just simulated copulation.

As the filming resumes, the text makes an understated, though profoundly damning, critique of the objectification of women's bodies in pornographic films:

*Bring that camera in close! In close!* The itching raw reddened flesh between the woman's thighs, the moisture and the patch of hair, so forlorn with dampness, a monotonous detail; the camera itself slows with exhaustion and lingers too long upon this close-up, lacking the wit to draw back swiftly and dramatically. (p192)

Whilst Oates' subtle use of pornography is not as overt as some other writers, for example Kathy Acker in *Blood and Guts in High-School Plus Two* (1984), it is nevertheless an instance of the incorporation of a 'trash-

mode' characteristic of postmodernism. Furthermore, Oates' work suggest a far more critical approach to the issue of pornography, and the exploitation of women.

The text of 'Scenes of Passion and Despair' utilises the cinematic techniques of montage to juxtapose different scenes on the same thematic principle, but in doing so it also subverts conventional fictional strategies. An analogy can be made here between the techniques of film and the strategies of fiction. For the over-loading of pornographic films with too much realistic sexual detail, eventually produces a saturation point where more and more extreme scenes have to be devised in order to satisfy the increasingly insatiable demands of the viewer. Similarly, the over-loading of fiction with realistic or naturalistic details, does not necessarily produce a greater approximation to real life; other techniques which operate from different principles offer alternative methods of making sense out of the fictions which are our lives.

My primary aim in the above discussion was to attempt a reading of Oates' stories '29 Inventions' and 'Scenes of Passion and Despair' that might disclose some of the elements which constitute the complex relations of postmodernism and modernism. As part of that process I have hopefully highlighted how Oates' work also belongs within the tradition of innovative women writers, and would thus be of interest to some feminist literary

critics. In particular, I would suggest that Oates' fictional practice would fit within the political framework of critics such as Linda Hutcheon, Meaghan Morris, Teresa de Lauretis, Alison Light and Helen Carr. In the work of these critics there is sense in which they argue the political necessity of acknowledging that issues of gender need to be considered in conjunction with other social determinants such as race, ethnicity, class, sexual preference and religion.

One of the key features of postmodernism is a move away from binary oppositional thought towards the recognition of difference, multiplicity and heterogeneity. It is here that I would suggest the interests of some feminisms intersect with postmodernism. Whilst such an conjuncture may seem to diminish that aspect of feminism which seeks to celebrate gender as a category that unites all women, the privileging of gender has created antagonisms between women not least because of its apparent racism. In my view the standpoint of feminist multiplicity is better able than other modes to build bridges across gender, race, ethnic, and class divides.

Such a standpoint permits a less dogmatic and more analytical approach in which the intention is to call into question a given 'reality' rather than passively accept it. I would suggest that in bringing feminist and postmodernist discourses into conjunction with one another, Oates fiction



may be seen as an attempt which seeks to explore the tensions between them, rather than ignore them. Oates has written that in her work she feels it is important to deal with "the experience of being a woman in a patriarchal culture"<sup>46</sup>. I feel that her work makes visible how this experience is never straightforward and certainly rarely fits into pre-conceived patterns and conventions.

In their discussion of innovatory women's writing and the political aspects of disrupting textual conventions, Ellen Friedman and Miriam Fuchs have suggested that:

In exploding dominant forms, women experimental writers not only assail the social structure, but also produce an alternate fictional space, a space in which the feminine, marginalized in traditional fiction and patriarchal culture, can be expressed. Thus, the rupturing of traditional forms becomes a political act, and the feminine narrative resulting from such rupture is allied with the feminist project.<sup>47</sup>

Through juxtaposing the work of Joyce Carol Oates with that of postmodernist aesthetics, the work of women modernists and feminist literary criticism, I have attempted to show how the innovations of Oates' fiction may be considered as a form of subversion that challenges the sexual/textual politics of mainstream notions of literature. Oates' work demonstrates just one of the many aspects in which I would argue that postmodernism and feminism have interests in common. In the next chapter, I shall focus on the work of Brigid Brophy, Muriel Spark, Christine Brooke-

Rose and Angela Carter in order to explore other dimensions of these overlapping concerns.

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44. Joyce Carol Oates, 'Scenes of Passion and Despair,' in *Marriages and Infidelities* (First published USA, 1972; London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1974), p181. All subsequent page references are to this edition and will be included in the text.
80. Ibid, p188.
46. Leif Sjöberg, 'An Interview with Joyce Carol Oates,' *Contemporary Literature* 23 (1982): 277.
47. Friedman and Fuchs, *Breaking the Sequence*, p4.

## Chapter Five

# Women Writers and Postmodernist Writing

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We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us.

Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*<sup>1</sup>

Throughout this study, in raising the question of the conjuncture of feminism and postmodernism, I have argued that the majority of critical accounts of postmodernism are theoretically flawed. The current indifference of theorists of the postmodern towards the work of women postmodernists, especially in the area of postmodernist literature, results in a limited and inadequate model of postmodernism.

There are some significant interrelated issues that arise from this problem: mainstream literary criticism does not provide an effective theoretical basis for reading postmodernist literature and especially that written by women; critical accounts which seek to establish the significance of postmodernist literature, construct a model of postmodernism which fails to deal sufficiently with the work of women writers; whilst feminist literary criticism has engaged in rewriting literary history and reinscribing women writers to their appropriate contexts, the initial impetus has focussed mainly on realist texts.



In the preceding chapter I have demonstrated how these interrelated issues converge by analysing and identifying as postmodernist some of the fiction of Joyce Carol Oates. The texts examined demonstrated clearly that when the works of feminist critics place women's writing on the postmodernist map and when a critical exposition is made of such writing, then it is possible to recognise more fully the range and significance of postmodernist writing. The close textual commentary on Oates' texts thus provides a basis for the analysis of postmodernist texts by other women writers who have also responded to the issues of the postmodern condition.

I have argued earlier that when the boundaries of postmodernism are redrawn to include women writers, then it is clear that many of the interests of postmodernism and feminism converge. The fiction writing discussed in this chapter exemplifies the strategies and techniques that characterise the work of women postmodernist writers, and detailed textual analysis shows how the issues of aesthetics and politics are not treated as discrete factors. In particular, the texts of Brigid Brophy, Christine Brooke-Rose, Muriel Spark and Angela Carter, examined here, indicate that there is not just one mode of postmodernist fiction but many. These are women authors whose texts are distinctly postmodern in their focus on the forms, functions, limits

and possibilities of writing and in their scrutiny of the relationship between language, politics and power in the context of the dominant ideology of postmodernist culture.

While demonstrating the differences among the postmodernist fictional strategies of Brophy, Brooke-Rose, Spark and Carter, this study also highlights the similarities of their works in that they move beyond the fixed boundaries of any one genre; they challenge orthodox concepts of literature; raise questions of value judgements; reconceptualise the notion of high and low culture and thoroughly revise the parameters of dominant accounts of postmodernism.

In this concluding chapter of my study of postmodernism and postmodernist literature, I argue that women have been writing postmodernist fiction for the last four decades, and that the fictions by Joyce Carol Oates, analyzed earlier, are not an aberrant 1970s' experiment. Texts such as Muriel Spark's *The Comforters* (1957) and *The Hothouse by the East River* (1973), Brigid Brophy's *In Transit* (1969), Angela Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman* (1972) and *Black Venus* (1985), and Christine Brooke-Rose's *Thru* (1975) and *Amalgamemnon* (1984),

amongst others discussed here, demonstrate the limitations of the orthodox model of postmodernist literature.

### Brigid Brophy

Brigid Brophy's *In Transit* (1969) is a notable example of a novel which has departed from the norms of both modernism and realism, and yet, in true postmodernist style, operates in another relation to them both.

The traditional mimetic function in the text is reduced to such an extent that *In Transit* is a textual gallery of literary voices rather than an attempt to faithfully transcribe 'reality'. It cuts across genres to parody and pastiche a pornographic novel, a detective story, a medieval quest, a romantic love story, a Whitehall farce, an operetta, a Greek epic and the nature of literary criticism itself. The text is saturated throughout with quips, comments, quotes, references and authorial asides, all pointing to the fictive nature of the novel and its true subject, language. Its use of spatial form includes typographical disruptions, double columns and is constructed around the form of a Brahms' symphonic composition.<sup>2</sup>

Resisting both the conventions of nineteenth century realism and the techniques of the modernists, *In Transit* uses architecture as a metaphor to analyse the context in which the postmodernist writer constructs literature.

The narrator asks:

What's the nearest to twentieth century style? Why, that sort of pop-brutalist tabbying, those curds of canned plum-juice declining to integrate with custard, bits of jig-saw free-drifting in space, an amateur method of do-it-yourself exterior house painting . . . to disguise the silhouettes of Victorian buildings, to break up the outlines of their structure.<sup>3</sup>

The novel is rife with puns and reflections on the nature of language, and the setting of an international airport lounge provides an instance of an unsettling realm characterised by "a macaronic *bricolage* of the jargons and languages of contemporary society"<sup>4</sup>, where the central character of the text is swamped by "Italian, frenched, spoken with an angliccent".<sup>5</sup> The considerable use of linguistic parody and word play makes comparison with James Joyce's novels inevitable. The text incorporates references to Homer, John Donne, Tolstoy, Racine, Proust, Eliot, Joyce, Conan Doyle, Hugh Walpole, George Steiner and the actor Raymond Burr. Acknowledging the literary thefts, Brophy utilises the concept of intertextuality to undercut the tribute to James Joyce:

. . . a tribute to my great Triestine compalien, the comedi-chameleon, the old pun gent himself. I could loose on the Lounge his obituary: I am the voyce of one crying in the wilderness; reJoyce with me.<sup>6</sup>

Not only does Brophy's intertextuality refer backwards to the modernists, thereby recycling modernism as just one of many available literary sources, but there are also distinct links here between her novel of the 1960s, Elizabeth Smart's 1940s text *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and*



*Wept*, and Kathy Acker's 1980s text *Blood and Guts in High School plus two*. In Smart's text, verses from *The Song of Songs* are juxtaposed with small thefts from Shakespeare, Marlowe, Ovid, and Genet; whilst in Acker's three text volume conversations with Danton and Robespierre cut across letters to Charlotte Bronte and Susan Sontag, characters from Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* inhabit the same textual realm as figures from Pauline Reage's *The Story of O* and such Shakespearian characters as Romeo, Juliet, Portia, Shylock, Duncan and Macbeth.

Brophy exploits the resources of language, particularly the pun and the portmanteau word, as a strategy to displace traditional literary constructions of plot and character, and social constructions of gender and sexuality, rationality and irrationality. *In Transit* challenges the fundamental rules of Western thought in its questioning of the premises of dualism and binary thinking. Through its formal structure and textual word play, *In Transit* contests the arbitrary rules which govern language. It attempts to deconstruct the principles of Western logic, on a fictional level, primarily through its representation of its central character 'I'. This 'I' character is variously named Evelyn Hilary O'Rooley, Pat, Slim O'Rooley, Sir Patrice, Burleigh O'Rooley, Patricia, and Oruleus. This figure is neither male nor female, but is *both male and female*; thus existing in the novel as a textual contradiction.

As a fictional strategy, the notion of "contradiction" is seen as particularly postmodernist. David Lodge argues that:

One of the most emotively powerful emblems of contradiction, one that affronts the most fundamental binary system of all, is the hermaphrodite; and it is not surprising that the characters of postmodernist fiction are often sexually ambivalent: for example, Gore Vidal's sex-changing Myra/Myron Breckinridge, and the central character of Brigid Brophy's *In Transit*.<sup>7</sup>

This sexual ambivalence occurs also in Joyce Carol Oates' novel *Cybele* (1979) and in some of her stories in *The Poisoned Kiss* (1975), in Angela Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman* (1972), Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Marge Piercy's *Woman at the Edge of Time* (1976) and is often used by women postmodernist writers to challenge and re-evaluate gender stereotypes, especially the restrictive roles traditionally ascribed to women. In this sense, there would seem to be a degree of affinity between postmodernism and feminism, in so far as these fictions are not incompatible with the political aims of various strands of feminist theory which similarly call into question conventional notions of female subjectivity.

Indeed, Brophy is explicit about this issue in her comments about the form and structure of her novel:

*In Transit* is about a series of disintegrations of rulebooks, including the sexual stereotypes, ending with the question of whether Aristotelian logic might disintegrate, whether we are

mistaken in thinking that a thing cannot be both X and not-X, whether we are mistaken in thinking that the syllogistic argument is valid.<sup>8</sup>

In so far as Brophy's explorations of gender difference mark a distinction between the conventions of postmodernism and realism, they also highlight some similarities with modernism, especially with the work of Djuna Barnes, Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf.

The inability of the 'I' character to establish his/her identity is used by Brophy to probe the arbitrary conventions of language in a predominantly heterosexual society, and the ambiguities of fictional constructions:

How can I address you, interlocutor, when the only language I so much as half command is one in which the 'you' does not even reveal (stepasiding the problem of where you are) how many there are of you and what sex.<sup>9</sup>

As Patricia Waugh points out, the gender of the character 'I' is "thoroughly provisional, dependent upon the elusive 'other'".<sup>10</sup> Brophy's use of the second person form of address throughout *In Transit*, exploits the potential for ambiguity inherent in this shifty and empty linguistic sign.

One of the techniques Brophy uses to 'disintegrate' literary and cultural 'rulebooks' is to pastiche the pornographic novel. The pornographic subtext that occurs within *In Transit* is a parody of the infamous *The Story of O*, by 'Pauline Reage' (a text recycled again some years later by Kathy Acker). The narrator attempts to discover his/her sexuality by testing his/her

response to Brophy's 'pornographic' novel titled *L'Histoire de la Lange D'Oc*, and asks "What was this Oc to me: self - subject identified or submissively, supinely subjected object?".<sup>11</sup> Brophy raises the issues of the reification of woman as 'Other' through pornographic writings and images and draws attention to the politics of the text. The pornographic subtext is not utilised in order to titillate, and indeed identifies itself as pornography more by allusion than by graphic detail. Brophy inscribes this pornographic tale within the main text of *In Transit* and subsequently uses it to deconstruct male perceptions of women's sexuality.

Brophy's treatment of the lesbian revolution and O'Rooley's flamboyant suicide in the airport can be seen as typical strategies of postmodernist fiction. Brian McHale suggests that these elements of Brophy's novel can be characterised as falling within the carnivalesque mode of writing, and he argues that:

At the point where representations of carnival converge with carnivalised literature's Utopian themes we find the postmodernist *topos* of revolution. This is not political or social revolution, however, so much as it is ludic and sexual revolution, revolution *as* carnival . . . Dionysian outbursts of energy, anarchic and iconoclastic, such carnivalesque revolutions break out for instance, in Burrough's *Naked Lunch* and *The Wild Boys*, and Brigid Brophy's *In Transit*.<sup>12</sup>

The ludic impulse in Brophy's text is clearly illustrated by the textual handling of the anarchic lesbian revolutionaries who take over the Transit



lounge at the airport. Brophy's postmodernist novel would arguably be of interest to those feminist critics, such as Adrienne Rich, who seek to challenge unquestioned assumptions of female subjectivity as heterosexual, and to establish a literary space which is not hostile to explorations of lesbianism. The revolutionaries create organisational havoc with the bureaucratic mechanisms of the airport and Brophy creates textual havoc with the narrative of the novel, as for example, when a teach-in is announced during the third hour of the passengers' captivity:

It consisted of a talk on John Donne by pop-pip-joking tele-don Don Donovan, whom many of his students affectionately called Don John and who sometimes spoke of himself, indulging his sense of byrony, as Donny Johnny.<sup>13</sup>

The airport functions throughout the text as a metaphor for the fragmentary and dislocated nature of contemporary society, and above all as a comment on the weighty inheritance of outmoded conventions, especially literary conventions. The narrator reflects at one point on "how little twentieth century life is conducted in twentieth century surroundings. Indeed, our century hasn't yet invented its style only a repertory of cliché-motifs which aren't in fact functional".<sup>14</sup> However, the airport is one of the few contemporary architectural artefacts which is poised between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, and it thus represents a 'flight-from' as well as a 'flight-to'.

As Patricia Waugh points out "What the airport lounge offers, though, is flight, duty-freedom, escape from identity into language, existence as fiction".<sup>15</sup> *In Transit* is as much a fiction about the way in which the subjectivity of men and women is constructed through language, as it is about fictional conventions. The narrator interrupts the text in a parody of Brecht's device of the Alienation Technique to announce an 'Alienating Interlude' which informs the reader that "The Management trusts the clientele has by now observed that at least one of the hero(in)es immolated throughout these pages is language".<sup>16</sup>

Brophy's narrator raises the issue of fictional language, and how, in the postmodernist writer's response to fictional conventions, "I have to summon my weightiest resources of gravity to take you seriously".<sup>17</sup> Post-structuralist work on language, through Jakobson, Saussure and Derrida, Lacan and Foucault has called into question the nature of all discourse; feminist literary critics such as Linda Hutcheon, Helen Carr, Carolyn Allen, Patricia Waugh and Meaghan Morris have probed cultural discourse and the ways in which women writers challenge dominant notions of the literary tradition; the fictions of postmodernist writers re-evaluate the discourse of literary conventions.

Brophy declares that her text, *In Transit*:

. . . poses the question of whether the accepted Western

sentence structure . . . is also disintegrating. When I say that these rules are disintegrating, I mean that what is being questioned is, do they reflect any necessary truths, or are they entirely arbitrary?<sup>18</sup>

The postmodernist strategies and techniques that we find in Brophy's *In Transit* demonstrate several important issues. There is clearly a relation between Brophy's reflections on the 'sentence structure', Gertrude Stein's examinations of language in such essays as 'What is English Literature,' 'Poetry and Grammar,' and 'Portraits and Repetitions,' (in her *Lectures in America* and Virginia Woolf's explorations of the same subject in her text *A Room of One's Own*.

This shared interest would seem to indicate that the overlap between modernism and postmodernism is more complex than the studies of such critics as Graff, Kermode, McCaffery et al., whose works were examined in Chapter Two, would suggest. Whereas postmodernist literary critics have constructed a model of literary postmodernism in which their focus has been on American fiction primarily, and their examples have been drawn predominately from male writers, the neglect of this text of Brophy's at the point where the postmodernist literary canon was beginning to be critically delineated, weakens the foundations of the dominant postmodernist paradigm and reveals its hidden gender politics.

## Muriel Spark

Throughout Muriel Spark's novels, which span three decades from the mid 1950s through to the present, there has always been a tendency to deconstruct the postmodern condition, not simply on a thematic level but through the use of fictional strategies and techniques and the questioning of literary form. Spark's contradictory acceptance and simultaneous subversion of the novel, is foregrounded especially in *The Comforters* (1957), *The Driver's Seat* (1970), *Not to Disturb* (1971) and *The Hothouse by the East River* (1973). These texts disrupt conventional readerly habits and distort the conventions of both the realist and modernist novel. In these texts, Spark highlights the limitations of personal and literary language in her manipulation of literary conventions and by a deliberate courting of confusion which defies the easy imposition by literary critics of 'a single meaning'.

The technique of creating confusion and endemic uncertainty is employed by Spark particularly in relation to the juxtaposition of genre and conventional novel form. Spark's parodies of the classic 'closed ending' of the crime story in her novels *The Driver's Seat* and *Not to Disturb* undermine genre conventions by preventing a smooth narrative closure. Indeed, these two novels cannot truly be called 'crime' stories at all, even though *The Driver's Seat* does contain a 'murder' and *Not to Disturb* centres



upon the discovery of the dead bodies of the Baron and Baroness Klopstock and their secretary Victor Passerat. In both these texts, Spark disrupts linear notions of cause and effect which are traditionally utilised in crime stories, through inverting the plot mechanisms by which a crime story is recognised as such.

Thus, in *The Driver's Seat*, the narrative does not set up a plot where the murderer trails the victim or the detective seeks the murderer, but reverses the mechanism so that the murder becomes the object of the quest. The soon-to-be-killed woman Lise travels to Rome in quest of someone who will murder her by the end of the novel, trying out various men who may or may not be just the 'type' to murder a woman. Since *The Driver's Seat* alternates between the present tense and an unrealised, future tense, this temporal jarring prevents conventional readerly assimilation.

Similarly, in *Not to Disturb*, the text displays an overt inconsequential logic in its inversion of a 'crime of passion' story. Unlike traditional crime stories in which it is the details of the murder and/or its detection which are meticulously described after the event, in *Not to Disturb*, it is the discovery of the murders 'which will happen' that is fastidiously and painstaking rehearsed by the butler Lister and the other servants in the Klopstock's mansion.

Spark's novels produce just that "sense of logical uneasiness and of

narrative discomfort" that Umberto Eco finds in the self-contradictory constructs of postmodernist fiction. In Eco's discussion of the narrative constructions in postmodernist texts, he analyses how these fictions:

. . . arouse a sense of suspicion in respect to our common beliefs and affect our disposition to trust the most credited laws of the world of our encyclopedia. They *undermine* the world of our encyclopedia rather than build up another self-sustaining world.<sup>19</sup>

Eco's analysis provides us with a useful model in which to understand Spark's postmodernist techniques.

Spark's textual strategies allow fictional events to have implications and significances which in 'real' life can only be guessed at, since it can never be known how things will indeed 'end'. Patricia Waugh argues that initial readings of such novels, with their "exaggerated sense of an ending and technique of advanced significance, is like the second reading of a conventional novel".<sup>20</sup> In this sense, Spark departs from the traditional narrative resolution of the realist novel and the reflexive referencing demanded by the modernist novel, to create a text which inscribes the aesthetics of postmodernism and questions conventional understanding of such issues as fate and the concept of free will.

In Spark's *The Comforters* (1957) the postmodernist probing of the nature of characterisation is displayed through the simultaneous incorporation and erasure of character. The figure of Mrs Hogg is first established as a

credible character, then disappears, so that no textual vestige of her remains. But then, unlike some other self-cancelling postmodernist characters, the Mrs Hogg figure reappears, not simply on the level of plot, but on the level of ontological existence. The character of Mrs Hogg evaporates at the times when she is alone, and when she falls asleep and apparently only exists when she is in the presence of other people. This character exemplifies the flaunting of the fictionality of characterisation, which is emblematic of postmodernist fiction, and as such "She had no private life whatsoever. God knows where she went in her privacy".<sup>21</sup> The foregrounding of the function of character is a recurrent feature in *The Comforters* and indeed throughout all of Spark's other texts which are examined in this study.

Spark's techniques of disrupting the conventions of character and narrative is particularly evident in the self-reflexive construction of the character/heroine Caroline Rose in *The Comforters*. This character finds herself manipulated by the fiction she is in, and attempts to establish some sort of textual autonomy. Thus, the character of 'Caroline Rose' appears in the text, both with the credibility of a character in a realist novel and at the same time, with the self-consciousness of the perceiving subject of a modernist novel.

This contradictory characterisation is seen in the way in which Caroline simultaneously listens to the sounds of the typewriter, on which the

novel she is in is being composed, and has her thoughts appropriated by the author of this novel, who is of course Muriel Spark, writing *The Comforters*

On the whole, she did not think there would be any difficulty with Helena. Just then she heard the sound of a typewriter. It seemed to come through the wall on her left. It stopped, and was immediately followed by a voice remarking her own thoughts. It said: *on the whole she did not think there would be any difficulty with Helena.*<sup>22</sup>

The implications of this postmodernist strategy are such that it is almost too easy to dismiss the condition of such characters as somewhat mad or neurotic. But this type of reading is projecting a psychological realism on to characters which are not constructed from the conventions of realism, and are therefore not capable of being assimilated to such a reading.

The ironic self-consciousness of the Caroline Rose character demonstrates Spark's strategy of linguistic play at work:

'But the typewriter and the voices - it is as if a writer on another plane of existence was writing a story about us'. As soon as she had said these words, Caroline knew that she had hit on the truth.<sup>23</sup>

Thus Spark's characters explore the construction of 'reality' through their interventions in the fictional plots in which they exist, continually pushing at the boundaries in which they are inscribed. So that, again, the Caroline character argues:

"I won't be involved in this fictional plot if I can help it. In fact, I'd like to spoil it. If I had my way I'd hold up the action of the novel. It's a duty".<sup>24</sup>



*The Comforters* articulates on a fictional level, the type of questioning that is found throughout the postmodern condition both at the philosophical and more general cultural level. This postmodernist text raises the question of the role of language in the construction of human subjectivity and explores the extent to which we may be "trapped within language itself, within an arbitrary system of signification which appears to offer no means of escape".<sup>25</sup>

The Caroline Rose character disturbs the narrative of the novel by both being *inside* and *outside* the discourse of the text, and thus operates at the level of a double ontology discussed earlier in this study. The strategy utilised by this figure to resist being inscribed as a mere object of the text, is to construct a sense of herself as subject:

Caroline found the true facts everywhere beclouded. She was aware that the book in which she was involved was still in progress . . . By now, she possessed a large number of notes, transcribed from the voices, and these she studied carefully. Her sense of being written into the novel was painful. Of her constant influence on its course she remained unaware and now she was impatient for the story to come to an end, knowing that the narrative could never become coherent to her until she was at last outside it, and at the same time consummately inside it.<sup>26</sup>

Spark's text *The Comforters* would seem to demonstrate fundamental postmodernist techniques, in particular the textual strategies used in her treatment of character and narrative.

*The Comforters* can be contextualised within Brian McHale's typology of postmodernist fiction, in which the technique of foregrounding the function of characters in order to short-circuit the narrative levels is considered by McHale to differentiate postmodernism from modernism. He points out how characters in postmodernist fiction frequently "serve as agents or carriers of metalepsis, disturbers of the ontological hierarchy of levels through their awareness of the recursive structure in which they find themselves".<sup>27</sup> Possibly, however, *The Comforters* demonstrates elements of both modernist and postmodernist techniques and therefore resists classification in either mode.

This element of contradictory structural disturbance is found throughout postmodernist writing but a distinct example of this can be found in Spark's *The Hothouse by the East River*, where the characters Elsa Hazlett and her husband Paul, son Pierre and daughter Katerina, Princess 'Poppy' Xavier and Helmut Kiel/Mueller, are both dead and not dead, and their world both exists and does not exist.

Spark's text operates very much in the *trompe l'oeil* mode, in which the fictional techniques are utilised to construct a world 'under erasure'. The reader is initially persuaded to believe that the central character Elsa is mad and is giving her wonderfully patient and forgiving husband Paul, a very hard time indeed and is similarly baiting her analyst Garven Bey to the

point of distraction. Yet as the textual pattern emerges, it becomes clear that it is the husband Paul who is suffering from pangs of insanity. Wife Elsa and her best friend Poppy (Princess Xavier) - who incubates silk worm eggs under the folds of her pendulous breasts (but of whom madness is never suggested!), are gloriously and blissfully happy in their worlds and, if anything, have a tendency to be patronisingly benevolent to the tortured Paul and Garven.

The inconsequential logic of an *Alice in Wonderland* world juxtaposed with *Peter Pan* provides the structure for the inverted ghost story. When the characters Princess Xavier, Elsa and her family, attend the opening night of son Pierre's production of *Peter Pan*, (whose entire cast is paradoxically aged over sixty), Elsa and Poppy 'dress' for the occasion, in crepe evening dresses, furs, diamonds and rubies. The production is in an avant-garde theatre in the heart of Greenwich village where the majority of patrons are hippies, radicals, bearded artists and so on. The family's entrance is met with cat calls:

The theatre is already almost full. Someone in the audience has started to applaud as Elsa and the Princess appear. Then a few others applaud merrily. 'She left her tiara in the bank', says someone.

'Leave her alone', yells another voice. 'She's free to wear what she likes isn't she? Like you're free and I'm free'.

Elsa, settling in her seat, lets her white foxes fall from her shoulder.

'Those jewels real?' says someone.

Princess Xavier, who has been settled with difficulty in her seat between Garven and Paul, now makes further difficulties for them by rising. She turns to the audience and calls out, 'Our jewels are as real as you are'.

This wins further applause.

The Princess allows herself to be helped back into her seat, complaining, 'We've been far-out longer than they have'.<sup>28</sup>

The reader is placed in a contradictory position, for the whole scene is hypothetical; it is a simulacrum of what might have happened, if this event had taken place. Indeed, the characters would have been 'far-out' longer than the cat-calling audience, if they had not died some thirty years previously.

The strategy that Spark uses here disrupts and restructures the fundamental conventions of fiction, and rewrites these conventions in the act of challenging them. In this text, as in the others under discussion in this study, Spark's textual strategies coincide with that which the postmodernist writer Ron Sukenick describes as "the essential trope of fiction is hypothesis, provisional supposition, a technique that requires suspension of belief as well as of disbelief".<sup>29</sup>

It is apparent very early in this novel that the fictional world of *The Hothouse by the East River* is quite distinctly skewed, that it is only 'as if', that there is a courting of confusion which can not be reconciled. One of the principal strategies that operates at this level is the foregrounding of the nature of the character Elsa's shadow, which has the habit of behaving of its



own free will, and falling where it pleases:

And Paul, still standing in the middle of the carpet, then looks at her shadow. He sees her shadow cast on the curtain, not on the floor where it should be according to the position of the setting sun from the window bay behind her, cross-town to the West side. He sees her shadow, as he has seen it many times before, cast once more unnaturally.<sup>30</sup>

Elsa's aberrant shadow recurs throughout the text, a leit-motif which beckons the reader to remember that there is a textual strategy at play in this novel.

No one could possibly have such a shadow, we must remember this and not take too seriously the apparently 'realistic' world of New York and England in 1944:

He is standing in the middle of the room. She is sitting by the window, staring out over the East River. The late sunlight from the opposite window touches her shoulders and hair, it casts the shadow of palm leaves across the carpet, over her arm. The chair she sits in casts a shadow before her. There is another shadow, hers. It falls behind her. Behind her, and cast by what light? She is casting a shadow in the wrong direction. There's no light shining upon her from the east window, it comes from the west window.<sup>31</sup>

Spark juxtaposes two incompatible worlds and does not allow the reader to gloss over the disjuncture between the two. Spark establishes a textual world where any or all of the characters are mad, and at the same time, none of them are. The reader is left to wonder whether Elsa is truly mad, as her husband and her analyst believe; or indeed, if Elsa is sane, and her husband

and analyst are mad. The circling of the text between England in 1944 where Elsa and Paul first meet, and their subsequent life in New York, is fully credible if Elsa's aberrant shadow is ignored and the comments and statements that actually imply, or indeed state directly that these characters are dead.

For example, Chapter Eight opens with Paul's comment that "After the war ... Elsa and I are going to settle in America".(p147) Spark locates the text in late spring, 1944, and has all the cast of main characters present, Elsa, Paul, Colonel Tylden, Miles Bunting, Poppy Xavier, sitting in a train compartment about to leave St Pancras station, when:

A V-2 bomb hits them direct just as the train starts pulling out. The back section of the train, where they are sitting, and all its occupants, are completely demolished.<sup>32</sup>

The character Elsa tells Paul, "You died, too. That's one of the things you don't realise, Paul". "Don't be silly", he says. "I remember standing by the side of the track when they pulled your body out of the wreck. I remember too many things to be dead".<sup>33</sup> The text teases the reader into trying to make an impossible decision, did these characters die in 1944, and is the entire story a *trompe l'oeil*? or did either Elsa and/or Paul suffer from the effects of 'shell-shock' from the bombing to the extent that they now suffer from delusions and are ostensibly mad?

Spark demonstrates in this text the effects of postmodern

contradiction, where it may not be that a case of either one reading or another is the true interpretation, but is a case of both-and; they may both be true and not true.

After the son Pierre's theatre production of *Peter Pan*, the husband Paul says to Elsa, "Go back, go back to the grave, from where I called you".<sup>34</sup> Perhaps the reader should now be convinced that it is Paul who is mad, or deluded, that the whole story is his imagination, it is life as it would have been lived if his wife Elsa had not died in the bombing. "It's too late", Elsa says. "It was you with your terrible and jealous dreams who set the whole edifice soaring".(p113) To which Paul replies, "You're not real. Pierre and Katerina don't exist".(p113) The reader is challenged to make sense of this real/unreal world that is being constructed, and deconstructed by the processes at play in the text.

This tension is again renewed by Elsa's telephone call to her friend Poppy shortly after her conversation with Paul:

'Poppy?' she says. 'Well, Poppy', she says, 'Good morning, how are you? . . . Do you know the latest, Paul says I'm not real. He says I died long ago. That means that you're dead too, and Katerina and Pierre were never born. It means that Garven isn't real, either, else how could he have been my Guidance Director for a year and a half and my butler for all these months? Just think of Pierre's friends and Katerina's friends, just think of Paul's awful little analyst, Annie Armitage, and his colleagues; and my money isn't real either. What did you think of the review of Pierre's play? - The review in this morning's paper isn't real and the play wasn't

real, of course, but -'<sup>35</sup>.

Despite this telephone conversation being cut short by the husband Paul, the wife Elsa continues in a similar vein when the daughter Katerina telephones her shortly afterwards:

'... Now your father tells me I'm not real, I died one time and he brought me back from the grave... Yes, but he's said it before and now he's starting again... I'll call you later. Bye'.<sup>36</sup>

The oscillation between dead/alive, real/unreal, mad/sane is thus highlighted and consolidated by the questions that the character Elsa then poses to her husband Paul and her analyst Garven:

Paul comes back, followed by Garven.  
Elsa says, 'I just spoke to Katerina. Did you hear the conversation either of you?'  
'No,' says Garven.  
'No,' says Paul. 'Why?'  
'I just wondered if I was real, that's all. Imaginary people can't very well have telephone calls outside of their owners' imagination'.  
'Who said you were imaginary?' Paul says. 'I wish you were imaginary'.  
'Oh, good. Now we're all real, then?'  
He looks at her shadow. 'You've become real. That's the trouble', says Paul.<sup>37</sup>

Of course, Elsa, Paul and all the other characters, the locations and the conversations, are all imaginary in *The Hothouse by the East River*, they are postmodernist fictional constructions that pose fundamental contradictions within the textual discourse.



In considering the relations between modernism and postmodernism, Spark's *The Comforters* displays elements of both, but nevertheless does depart considerably from the conventions of realism. The other three of her novels under discussion here, *The Driver's Seat*, *Not to Disturb*, and *The Hothouse by the East River* could be considered to constitute a literary triptych. Each of the three novels is structured around a consideration of the literary text and call into questions the conventions of fiction as illusory systems, especially at the level of narrative harmony and characterisation.

All three disrupt realist notions of the well-rounded character, and also avoid the inward psychological depiction of character typical of modernists such as Woolf, Proust, and Richardson. In each of these novels Spark's fictional strategy disrupts the boundary between high art and popular fiction, thereby displaying one of the dominant features of postmodernism, by invoking the formulaic conventions of subgenres. *Not to Disturb* invokes elements of the gothic novel, *Hothouse* utilises the ghost story, whilst *The Driver's Seat* subverts the detective novel/murder story.

Many feminist critics have discussed how the conventions of realism may be considered too limiting for some women writers. Patricia Stubbs in her study *Women and Fiction* (1979) has also suggested that the subjectivism of modernist conventions may also be restrictive for contemporary women writers. In seeking to explain "the increasing importance of non-realist

narrative forms," in the work of contemporary women novelists, Stubbs proposed that "a break with the constraints of literary tradition becomes possible".<sup>38</sup> Spark's postmodernist fictional worlds would thus seem to be in accord with the new developments in women's writing that Stubb's finds necessary "if women are to be freed in literature from the closed world of private experience".<sup>39</sup>

### Christine Brooke-Rose

The focal point of most of Christine Brooke-Rose's texts, especially such novels as *Between* (1968), *Thru* (1975) and more recently *Amalgamemnon* (1984), is the way in which fiction carries out meta-linguistic explorations of its own status as discourse. Her concentration on the arbitrariness of the sign and its linguistic shiftiness evince the interplay of post-structuralism and postmodernism. The main dimensions of Brooke-Rose's postmodernism is through the constant flaunting of artifice and the role of language in both making fiction and making sense of the world.

Although many critics have argued that Brooke-Rose's texts are impossible to read in their reduction of both realist and modernist literary conventions to the bare minimum, the following critical analysis shows this not to be the case. Brooke-Rose's texts utilise postmodern strategies to

write hauntingly evocative fictions in which the surface texture of linguistic play need only be lightly scratched to reveal the multiplicity of perspectives on reality which construct the postmodern world.

One approach, taken in Waugh's *Metafiction*, is to pinpoint Brooke-Rose's use of the postmodernist strategy of 'intertextual overkill' as the major factor which dominates her novels and she suggests that it is this technique which makes them almost impossible to read and understand. In Waugh's discussion of *Between* for example, it would seem that the level of 'intertextual overkill' undermines the ultimate purpose of utilising such techniques. Waugh argues that:

It is impossible, finally, to construct any sort of context, and the international conference which takes place, the enlightened exchange of ideas, is made impossible by its very vehicle of communication: language. Specialized jargons encapsulate characters (signs on the page) in private worlds which they attempt to transcend by plugging into computerized translating machines which produce noises like the tuning of an old wireless.<sup>40</sup>

Whilst Waugh's approach to Brooke-Rose's work helps to confirm its place within a mapping of postmodernism, and this text certainly does present a complexity of strategies and techniques that interweave into a multiplicity of signs, it is not true to say that it is impossible to construct any sort of context in which the novel operates.

The context for this novel is language itself and its incommensurable

properties of constructing meaning and understanding and simultaneously deconstructing that knowledge. The narrative structuring of *Between* into layers of French, German, English and other languages is not simply a mimetic device to reflect the many languages which are spoken at the international conferences at which the novel's central character acts as a simultaneous translator. On the contrary, in deliberately narrating the text in more than one language, Brooke-Rose demonstrates the extent to which all discourse is essentially a ludic activity bounded by rules that are grounded only in themselves. Yet at the same time, discourse is a social activity and the roles of role maker and legitimiser are inseparable from power politics. Despite its apparent abstractness and minimalism, *Between* can be read as an immensely *social* novel; indeed, it is perhaps one of the strongest articulations of the concept of the postmodern to be found in literary postmodernism.

Whilst the interweaving of different languages undeniably restricts the accessibility of the text, this apparently elitist ploy is nevertheless used to demonstrate what it is to live on the borderlines rather than at the centre of a dominant culture. Aspects of nationality, language, culture, religion, work life, home life, sexuality, age, marriage, childhood that are assumed as natural and given within the dominant ideological system, are called into question in *Between*.



The competing linguistic systems of English, French and German are used as a critique of the political systems which converged into the destructiveness of the Second World War in Europe. The concept of identity and its construction in language is revealed in all its complexity through the interplay of French and German languages which articulate the implications of growing up with a dual-nationality during World War II for a child having a French mother and a German father. This little girl is *between* cultures, *between* nationalities, *between* histories, *between* languages, *between* systems, and as such is deprived of a place within the boundary divisions of either one culture or the other. Indeed, within the context of Western society, this child epitomises the postmodern condition of being 'both-and' rather than 'either-or', and Brooke-Rose's novel *Between* undercuts any complacency that this position may imply. Brooke-Rose uses postmodernist aesthetics to articulate a postmodern politics in which, for those individuals who are not defined as being within the centre of the dominant group, 'the personal' is indeed 'political'.

This novel juxtaposes the meaning of identity against the languages which construct this identity. The central character through which the multi-level, multi-language narrative is filtered, is never named, since in a sense she is always *between* names. After the end of the War, this unnamed character finds that it is not possible to 'name' her German background to

her French family. Similarly, on her marriage to an Englishman, she becomes absorbed into *his* name, thus losing her own identity. Her Catholicism is absorbed into his English Protestantism, so that her beliefs about contraception, for example, are delegitimised and are seen as 'unspeakably' primitive. Her eventual marriage annulment arrives from the Church of Rome, in time for her menopause, after her body can no longer *speak* of its fertility; the documents are all written in Latin, a dead language. The text forms a subtle critique of the way in which language gives and takes away a woman's identity, of its power to construct the words of love and marriage and deconstruct them by the formal rhetoric of divorce papers, of its ultimate arbitrariness.

Although there are superficial similarities between *Between* and *Thru*, in that both texts use the formal properties of postmodernist techniques to explore the nature of language, unlike *Between* where "we merely translate other people's ideas . . . no one requires us to have any of our own"<sup>41</sup>, *Thru*, is a text where "everyone has a voice".<sup>42</sup> *Thru* is a fictional discourse which privileges its mode as a text in order to stress its fictionality. This self-referential emphasis operates on the level of discourse and on the level of the material nature of the book itself. In McHale's discussion of the aesthetics and conventions of postmodernist fiction, the "technological reality" of the text is also a facet which distinguishes the

status of literary postmodernism. In realist fiction, the physicality of the book must be rendered functionally invisible, so that the format appears 'natural'.

It is against this "background convention of the page of solid print", that "the introduction of blank space has the effect of foregrounding the presence and materiality of the book, and of disrupting the reality of the projected world. Spacing we might say allows the book to show through the fiction".<sup>43</sup> Within the context of the materiality/spaciness of the text/book, Christine Brooke-Rose's text *Thru* can be seen to display the same textual dysfunctions as those commonly found in the work of writers generally considered as postmodernist.

In *Thru*, the text is sometimes justified only at the left margin, sometimes at the right; the type is sometimes arranged diagonally, or so that it must be read vertically upwards; it is printed as a square and as a circle: it represents two teaching classrooms, one a traditional classroom with rows of writing desks, where the words are arranged in a rectangular grid, and the other a lecture theatre, with words arranged in a series of broken arcs. McHale suggests that through this interruption of the material nature of the text, postmodernist worlds of words "are forced to flicker in and out of existence".<sup>44</sup> Brooke-Rose sets up a fictional world which constantly flaunts its artifice by collapsing and reversing traditional literary

conventions.

*Thru* plays with the concept of intertextuality, so that the text is a perpetual allusion to the fact that every discourse, including the text itself, is constructed of all manner of previous discourse. In the novel, Brooke-Rose incorporates the theoretical models of communication devised by Jakobson, Genette, Kristeva, and Barthes but simultaneously undercuts the notion of communication as an exchange. The text is narrated by an "unomniscient unprivileged unreliable narrator"<sup>45</sup>, that produces a situation in which the narrator and the narrated are interchangeable. On occasions there is "no narrator at all but a lacuna through which it is possible to fall into delirious discourse"<sup>46</sup>, so that in moving "from one disembodied voice to another"<sup>47</sup>, the text raises the question at all levels, "who speaks?".<sup>48</sup>

The text of *Thru* is constructed through the discourse of a number of narrators and authors. This creates the situation where the narrative disruptions created by two characters named as Larissa Toren and Armel Santores are irretrievably fictionalised. It could be that the composers of the text are the figures of the Master and his servant Jacques, stolen from Diderot's *Jacques le Fataliste*. If it is the Master who composes the text of *Thru*, then this places the figure of Larissa in an ambiguous position, for this character is also in the process of writing a text. The Master, as author, is aware that certain problems have arisen, and attempts to construct some sort



of logical solution:

It is clear that Larissa is producing a text. But which text? It looks mightily as if she were producing this one and not, as previously appeared, Armel, or Armel disguised as narrator or the narrator I disguised as Armel. That's not very clear.<sup>49</sup>

These textual disturbances of possible narrators of *Thru* inventing other narrators and at the same time being invented by them, undermine attempts to recuperate the novel by means of any critical commentary that relies on traditional literary conventions.

The ambiguity of *Thru* extends also to location and setting, which is inscribed and deleted, so that the text is one which is constantly under erasure. Brooke-Rose offers glimpses of realistic effects as bribes, which are subsequently withdrawn:

She is pale and sits  
Where?  
On the campus  
Can one sit on a campus?  
She sits on a castle terrace in Spain.  
Caramba not picaresque that's as dead as the dread-letter novel.  
In Slovenia, talking to the Count  
Titles have been abolished in Slovenia  
turning her back to you. It is a warm summer evening.  
The benches and tables are of wood, under a trellis of vine,  
facing the crenellated walls that hide the view of the valley.  
Scrub that. The bench and tables are of wrought iron, under  
the palladian colonnade, facing the flight of white stone steps  
that lead to the wide gardens wrought-ironed beneath the moon  
in patterns of clipped privet.<sup>50</sup>

Brooke-Rose's textual fabrications constantly emphasise that it is through the

use of language that versions of 'reality' are constructed. Her use of postmodernist strategies and techniques in her novels emphasises that since all discourse is intertextual, other possibilities must always be admitted, there may always be other versions and alternatives to the 'fiction' that is created.

By privileging the sign systems by which culture and society are defined, Christine Brooke-Rose not only makes a "critical commentary on the novel form itself: on its capacity to absorb, transform and question the discourses of which it is constructed"<sup>51</sup>, but also comments on the postmodern condition in which all traditional discourse is under question. Brooke-Rose's postmodernist fictional practice may therefore be considered to be part of the project of feminist critics such as Helen Carr, Carolyn Brown, Patricia Waugh, Linda Hutcheon and Meaghan Morris who similarly seek to challenge the dominant systems of culture and create other alternatives.

The fictional writing of Brooke-Rose calls into question the notion of mimesis and the assumption that there is a reality which precedes the fictional text; it also questions the separation between reality and the narration of that reality and suggests that there may be no reality apart from its narration. The underlying principle here, drawn from post-structuralist theories of language, is that "connections among things in the world do not exist apart from the language that states them. And the number of possible

linguistic constructs that might make those connections is indefinite".<sup>52</sup>

Brooke-Rose's interventions in the intertextual realm of literary texts slide across traditional boundaries towards a distinctly philosophical form of writing that plays within a theoretical discourse about its own possibilities. The fictions of Brooke-Rose share similar characteristics with those postmodernist texts in which the sharp distinctions between theory and imaginative practice become blurred so that imaginative texts become increasingly theoretical and theoretical discourse increasingly resembles literary texts.

For example, just as Derrida's essays, Kristeva's writings, Roland Barthes' later texts, or Ihab Hassan's dandyish polemics cannot easily be theoretically distinguished from the self-reflexive writing that characterises postmodern fiction, Brooke-Rose's fictions have increasingly incorporated theoretical discourse and at the same time recognize their context within the postmodern condition.

Brooke-Rose's novel *Amalgamemnon* places virtually all conventional fictional signposts 'under erasure' and in writing this novel only in the conditional or future tense, displays the postmodernist intrigue with "what language can do".<sup>53</sup> The postmodernist incorporation of myth as an intertextual discourse rather than a structural device to make order out of chaos, is evident in Brooke-Rose's utilisation of the Greek myth of

Cassandra, the prophetess destined to have the gift of prophesy but fated not to be believed. Indeed, the figure of Cassandra is also used to juxtapose the present condition and future possibilities of the gulf between women and men, Europe, America and the Third World, and the old world of the humanities and the new world of communications technology.

The novel has the postmodern condition as its context, specifically in that the central character Cassandra/Sandra is a humanities lecturer about to be made redundant. The impact of the new technology revolution on the university means that her training as a lecturer in dead languages "like literature, philosophy and history" has become irrelevant. The Cassandra character speculates on her role as a professional woman in particular and the concept of humanism in general, and upon the changes that the information revolution will bring about in education.

Brooke-Rose draws on the post-structuralist notion of the free play of language and its intertextuality as a fictional strategy in her novel. An unnamed voice in the narrative insists:

All words should be played with and names most of all, he'll answer but she'll say for fun yes, not all the time though, or you'd undermine the fragile fabric of communication. Why he'll come back quick as a flash, would you separate fun from communication? Well, because, well, no I wouldn't, and she'll laugh with him and cuddle up to him then add because there might be no ground to stand on if you didn't at all. And glancing up at his quizzical downward gaze she'll murmur, perhaps according to you there won't be?<sup>54</sup>



*Amalgamemnon* is, in a sense, a novel constructed upon what happens when someone has 'seen the writing on the wall'. If the message is that the electronic media is about to steal the present and turn the future into an information bank, then since all writings, messages, information, orders, texts and so on, are only so many moves in a language game, the text of *Amalgamemnon* participates in this game, in order not to be silenced.

The Cassandra figure plays with possibilities of escape, one of which is to take up the offer of an affair with the suave and portly man at the National Education Computer:

. . . who will wineandine me at expensive restaurants for the joys of deciphering the unfamiliar and tasting it with a palatalixing pause and a knowledgeable nod, which will be just like the teaching of literature I'll venture but he won't like that at all. Man will always eat, and drink, and take his pleasure he'll say, but soon he won't need to read about it as well, or even instead of. Will language ever give you the bouquet of this wine the flavour of this sauce the excitement of my desire at the mere touch of my knee against yours? It might I'd say, through the madlanes of memory and without the indigestion, but I'll feel a foolish flutter at fraternizing with the very force that will make my training my experience my lifelong passions more and more redundant, you mustn't worry he'll say and titillate my thigh.<sup>55</sup>

There never is an affair between the National Education Computer man and the character Cassandra; this is merely one plot amongst many that take place "as if" they are real events. This plot of a love affair is simply one of the multiplicity of discourses which structure the lives of women and men.

The textual play with the different discourses in the novel constitutes a critique in which a large part of daily life is mediated through the effects of television, radio, film, advertising, newspapers and so on. The love affair plot along with the terrorist plot, the kidnapping plot, the prison-camp plot and the earthy farmer plot are all textual strategies which point to two fundamental issues. Firstly, Brook-Rose highlights the literary problematic of assuming that there is a reality which precedes narration, and secondly, she points to the cultural problematic of living today in a kind of pseudo-future, in which the vast proportion of news coverage has become an account of what might happen and where the possibility of nuclear war puts a question mark over the future altogether.

The fictional texts of Christine Brooke-Rose display to different degrees the postmodernist aesthetic of intertextuality, but the text of *Amalgamemnon* is more thoroughly imbued with this technique. Intertextual play is a key instance of the way in which theory and practice are combined in setting out the parameters of language, in that there is often a refusal to maintain a distinction between intertextuality as a theory of the production of discourse and as a mode of composition.

All texts must play through variations of movements drawn from numerous aspects of culture. For example, in Roland Barthes' well known essay 'The Death of the Author' it is argued that:

We now know that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning . . . but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.<sup>56</sup>

In every aspect of textuality there is an indefinite number of other texts that create a multiplicity of meanings. As a theoretical paradigm, intertextuality is a necessary part of the proposition of the autonomy of language. But more generally, it is also a culmination of a variety of views about the ludic nature of language.

Christine Brooke-Rose's interest in the nature of language might be considered to have affinities with the recent work of feminist scholars such as Catharine Stimpson, Elizabeth Meese, Alice Parker, Michèle Barratt, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Hester Eisenstein, and Alice Jardine all of whom have written on the problematic of the concept of 'difference' in terms of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexual preference. Brooke-Rose's fictions could thus be read in terms of Catherine Stimpson's comments in her essay '*Nancy Reagan wears a hat: Feminism and its cultural consensus*,' in which she argues that the work of some women postmodernists does have potential political feminist significance; a view with which I would agree.

Stimpson writes:

Even if they prove to be theoretically inadequate or incomplete, their writing helps everyone cultivate open, subversive spaces within cultures, including feminist cultures.

Those acts of cultivation help weed out conformity; repetitions of outworn ideas; jejeune, if seemingly satisfactory, assumptions about the reflectiveness of our representations of the world; and presumptions about the value of monolithic generalizations about the female.<sup>57</sup>

### Angela Carter

Carter's fictions epitomise that aspect of the postmodern condition which carries out the ludic enterprise of playing with notions of identity, desire and simulacra. Yet this is not to suggest that her work is merely a set of literary tricks, on the contrary, Angela Carter's postmodernist work has a considerable degree of affinity with different strands of feminism, especially socialist feminism and the more recent feminist work that seeks to explore the differences between women as well as the similarities. Paulina Palmer, for example, suggests that Carter's early fictions are concerned with "gender and its construction, the cultural production of femininity, male power under patriarchy, and the myths and institutions which serve to maintain it".<sup>58</sup> Angela Carter later works, Palmer maintains, deal with:

. . . themes relating to liberation and change, in the organisation of personal life and the social formation. Acts of resistance against patriarchy are represented. The deconstruction of femininity and masculinity is explored and, in keeping with the shifts in contemporary feminist thought, the perspective becomes increasingly woman-centred. A re-evaluation of female experience takes place and the emergence of a female counter-culture is celebrated.<sup>59</sup>



Paulina Palmer's contention that there is a fruitful relationship between Carter's fictions and the reading positions epitomised by different feminist political strategies, would seem to confirm the notion that there are significant points of intersection between postmodernism and feminism.

In one of her earliest novels *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), Carter instills a world of detailed and sharply focused objective reality which meshes with images of the extraordinary and the inexplicable. This text blends and blurs myth and history, fiction and reality but retains the formal power of a strong narrative. *The Magic Toyshop* constructs a postmodernist textual world in which the nature of desire and the question of identity are presented as problematic through the juxtaposing of borrowed images and motifs from other literary sources ranging from modernist novels and poetry, Freudian psychoanalytical theory, to the biblical and the fantastic.

The opening of the novel finds the central character Melanie tentatively exploring her own female sexuality in the Lawrentian moonlight of episodes pastiched from *Women in Love* and *The Rainbow*. Carter undercuts Lawrence's use of moon symbolism to denote the nature of women's sexual libido, by creating a beautiful scene in which "the red swollen moon winked in the apple tree"<sup>60</sup> and the character Melanie is at her most sensual, but then inscribes her own ironic subversion of this Lawrentian image. The girl Melanie accidentally tears and soils the borrowed

white wedding dress; after her sojourn in the moonlit garden, she finds herself locked out of the house, the overwhelming experience with nature only alienates her, leaving her lonely, panicky and defenceless, "Too much, too soon . . . the garden turned against Melanie when she became afraid of it".<sup>61</sup> The Lawrentian idea of female sexuality is revealed through this pastiche to be just another cultural myth about the nature of woman as 'Other'.

In a similar ironic subversion, Carter sets up a pastiche of W B Yeats' poem 'Leda and the Swan', the sonnet depicting the metamorphosis of Zeus into a swan and his sexual encounter with Leda. Carter reworks Yeats' poetic use of the Greek myth, to undercut the modernist use of myth and reveal the sexual politics inscribed within it. Thus, in *The Magic Toyshop*, Uncle Philip's life-size swan puppet is not the glorious and majestic creature of Yeats' poem which has created the "wild, phallic bird of Melanie's imaginings", but on the contrary, it is "dumpy, homely and eccentric".<sup>62</sup> Carter's fictional technique in this novel operates in such a way as to allow us to distinguish postmodernism from modernism, through the recycling of modernism itself, and to view her work as part of the politics of feminism epitomised by Kate Millett on the one hand and Elaine Showalter on the other, who seek to challenge male representations of female sexuality. Paulina Palmer suggests that *The Magic Toyshop* "is a text

of particular interest to the feminist reader. It illustrates Carter's skilful use of the device of intertextuality to analyse femininity and female subordination as cultural constructs".<sup>63</sup>

In her collections of short stories such as *Fireworks* (1974) and *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), Carter's decoding and rewriting of classic fairy tales and folk lore undermine and subvert almost every orthodox literary convention. So that whilst there may be an omniscient author, the narrative is utterly unbelievable; the most extraordinary events may be narrated as common, every-day occurrences; the juxtaposition of characters some of whom are credibly 'real' and others who are distinctly bizarre prevent their recuperation in any accepted sense; but above all, this combination results in some of the most compellingly readable postmodernist fiction.

Carolyn Brown suggests in her essay 'Feminist Literary Strategies in the Postmodern Condition,' that "the postmodern world is a world of plurality of languages, discourse, practices, without nostalgia for unity, for universality, for origin, for a world with guarantees".<sup>64</sup> This description provides a useful framework for Carter's *oeuvre*, for her texts utilise and rewrite the fictional languages and techniques of the gothic novel, the fantasy novel, the nineteenth century realist novel, and the fairy tale, they pastiche and parody elements of poetry and drama, literary criticism, history and sociology, and do not pretend to offer textual originality but steal from

other sources and guarantee nothing.

There is a strong tendency in Carter's works to write fiction which has strong linear narrative but does not have the 'apparatus of credibility' and the 'predictable check list of details' of classic realism. The tales in the volume *The Bloody Chamber* for example, are revisions of some of the best known stories of Western culture. The oral history of Europe which has been transformed over the centuries into fairy tales and folk lore, provides the material for Carter's fictional constructions, especially as it reveals "the way in which fairy tales and folk lore are methods of making sense of events and certain occurrences in a particular imaginative way".<sup>65</sup> Carter's incorporation of the motifs of the gothic tale and the fairy story in *The Bloody Chamber* demonstrates how this kind of postmodernist theft and purloignment "can both lay bare the mechanics of writing and give the fairy tale back its ancient emotional power".<sup>66</sup>

Many of Angela Carter's postmodernist texts situate their fictional worlds in locations which are neither recognisably real nor demonstrably fantasy or science fiction. These texts operate at a level which cuts across traditional boundary conventions in literary form, so that the character/setting balance is contradictory. Brian McHale suggests that the term *zone* is useful to denote the space and setting that occurs in much postmodernist fiction, and thus is helpful in discussing the locations in Carter's work. McHale



draws upon L Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* (1900) which exists on the margins of the literary system rather than at its centre, to demonstrate his concept of *zone*. The land of Oz is a fantasy *zone*, containing several dissimilar realms but is nevertheless located somehow in the state of Kansas and its heroine Dorothy, her dog Toto, her Uncle Henry and Aunt Em are sufficiently realistically drawn to typify conventional characters.

Similarly, Angela Carter's picaresque, science-fiction novel *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), the gothic parody of *Heroes and Villains* (1969), and the fantastic, carnivalesque *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman* (1972) are set in *zones* which exist in the margins between conventional genre borderlands. These texts displace temporal and spatial norms and offer a paradoxical combination of 'realistic' and fabulatory characters, so that the various formal levels of these texts resist assimilation into the closed categories of either the modernist or the realist canons, or the genres of fantasy or science fiction.

For example, in *The Passion of New Eve* and *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman*, Carter has constructed *zone* settings which may have affinities with America and Africa respectively but they are not these countries as they are commonly understood. In the former novel, American cities represent different "possible orders", which "operate within a self-perpetuating reality".<sup>67</sup> In the latter text, Carter represents Africa as a *zone*

constructed from imperialistic and colonistic European fantasy. As Brian McHale argues, Carter makes a sharp critique of the Western imaginative expropriation of Africa. She subverts dominant cultural images of Africa by choosing to:

. . . populate its coast with cannibal tribesmen straight out of party jokes, comic-strips, and slapstick; while in the interior she places centaurs, in effect suppressing indigenous mythology in favor of an imported European myth.<sup>68</sup>

In *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman*, Carter exposes the way in which white, male dominated Western culture has imposed its particular form of power and control through 'reason' and 'rationality', projecting its unconscious fears and desires onto 'Others'. This postmodernist fiction substitutes a mirror world for the world in which the text's 'hero', the character Desiderio lives. This figure claims that he is the confidential secretary to the Minister of Determination, a newly created post that has replaced that of the Minister of Trade. Desiderio's name is playfully substituted with Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Andrew Marvell; the Minister was Milton or Lenin, Beethoven or Michelangelo, "not a man but a theorem".<sup>69</sup>

The figure of Dr Hoffman is more a proposition than a recognisable character, and his 'guerilla war' against 'rationality' and 'human reason' is carried out by making "great cracks in the hitherto immutable surface of the

time and space equation we had informally formulated in order to realise our city".<sup>70</sup> The campaign of Dr Hoffman operates at the level of reflecting all the imagined and unimagined desires into concrete realities:

Since mirrors offer alternatives, the mirrors had all turned into fissures or crannies in the hitherto hard-edge world of here and now and through these fissures came slithering sideways all manner of amorphous spooks. And these spooks were Dr Hoffman's guerillas, his soldiers in disguise who, though absolutely unreal, nevertheless were.<sup>71</sup>

In this text, Carter's characters are stripped of realist conventions and do not have the interiority provided by the modernist 'stream of consciousness' technique. These figures are frequently unsympathetic, two-dimensional caricatures. Yet Carter stresses the strong element of fictionality in such characters as Madame la Barbe, the Alligator Man, Mohammed and the team of Moroccan acrobats who dismember themselves, and Mamie Buckskin who claims to own rifles, pistols and revolvers that once belonged to Billy the Kid and Doc Holiday.

Any desire on the part of the reader to recuperate these figures on the recognizable level of realism is undermined, since even the narrator does not 'believe' in them:

I felt as if I was watching a film in which the Minister was the hero and the unseen Doctor certainly the villain; but it was an endless film and I found it boring for none of the characters engaged my sympathy, even if I admired them, and all the situations appeared the false engineering of an inefficient phantasiist.<sup>72</sup>

The actual and the imagined are juxtaposed relentlessly in this text, where characters, objects, events, and locations exist in a *trompe l'oeil* condition. Thus, Dr Hoffman's Wagnerian castle, is "not really a castle, only a country house" and unlike every other setting in the text "here, everything was safe. Everything was ordered. Everything was secure".<sup>73</sup> Yet even in this apparently well ordered environment, the incongruous exists in the nature of the oil paintings on the walls, which depict Leon Trotsky composing the Eroica Symphony, Van Gogh writing *Wuthering Heights* in the parlour of Haworth Parsonage, and a gigantic canvas of Milton "blindly executing divine frescos upon the walls of the Sistine Chapel".<sup>74</sup>

In drawing upon the motifs and techniques of the fantastic and juxtaposing them against the narrative conventions of the realist novel, Carter constructs a postmodernist intervention between literary norms and conventions. Despite the narrator's insistence on verisimilitude in his account of life during Dr Hoffman's war, ("I shall describe the war exactly as it happened. I will begin at the beginning and go on until the end"<sup>75</sup>), *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman* resists assimilation through conventional readerly habits.

In her more recent novel, *Nights at the Circus* (1984) Carter draws on medieval sources for the central character Fevvers, the winged Cockney Venus. This character juxtaposes the earthiness and vulgarity of Chaucer's



figure, the Wife of Bath, with the thoroughly implausible archetypal Angel of the House that haunted so much Victorian fiction. Carter thoroughly utilises the postmodernist technique of intertextuality for the characterisation of Fevvers. Drawing on her own work in *The Sadeian Woman* (1978) Carter analyses sexual relations between men and women as a form of power relations. Thus she argues that the Marquis de Sade's Justine and Juliette can be seen as epitomising the two 'fates' which can befall women, if they either refuse to confront their own sexuality, or engage in it without any sense of limitations.

If Justine is the thesis and Juliette the antithesis of feminine sexuality, then Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus* is the synthesis of these two extreme states. Carter also steals from Hollywood movies so that there are elements of Mae West in the characterisation of Fevvers. Indeed, Fevvers actually quotes Mae West's lines when she is dressed up to perform her act at St Petersburg. Fevvers looks in her dressing-room mirror and says 'Suckers'! which is what Mae West says when she comes out on the cat walk in the movie where she impersonates the lion-tamer.

The postmodernist techniques Carter uses to effect such displacements in the *The Passion of New Eve*, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman* and *Nights at the Circus*, are also of interest to feminist critics. Ricarda Schmidt, writing in 1989, finds these novels of significance to

feminist deconstructionist work in the area of female subjectivity. Schmidt suggests that:

The adventures these characters encounter on their journeys in the fantastic realm of the imaginary and the symbolic mediate a discussion of the making of the subject in the light of philosophical, psychoanalytical, and feminist ideas. All three novels are complex and multi-faceted, yet each of them deconstructs essentialist, humanist notions of the subject and . . . explores the constitution of the subject in relation to one dominant aspect, which is at the same time representative of cultural ideas about the subject in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, respectively: desire in *Hoffman*, gender in *Eve*, and free womanhood in *Circus*.<sup>76</sup>

I would agree with Schmidt's contention that Carter's work could be read constructively by such an approach. Indeed, Schmidt provides an exemplary reading of these three novels in the light of Carter's serious and socially engaged postmodernist literary project, which would seem to indicate that prevailing notions of postmodernism as merely arid, nihilistic word-play are misleading.

In the collection of short prose pieces in *Black Venus* (1985), Carter demonstrates the range of strategies and techniques which have been identified as postmodernist earlier in this study. The volume as a whole consists of a diversity of strands of writing which mix actual people with fictional characters. Its pages are populated with Charles Baudelaire and his mistress Jeanne Duval; Edgar Allan Poe and his family; Josephine Baker (the Blue Bell Dancer); the 'Daddy' from Sylvia Plath's poem; characters

from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Oberon, Titania, and Puck); Lizzie Borden (the American woman who murdered her parents - and recently the subject of a feminist film); the allegorical figure of Peter (the boy who cried 'wolf' in the folk-lore story) and Conan Doyle (writer of detective stories and expert on fairies). An analysis of four texts, 'Overture and Incidental Music for "A Midsummer Nights Dream"', 'Peter and the Wolf', 'The Fall River Axe Murders' and 'The Black Venus Tale', will demonstrate how this volume is a textual bricolage of history, fiction, literary criticism, folk lore, tragedy, drama and comedy.

In the short story 'Overture and Incidental Music for "A Midsummer Night's Dream"' the text is narrated by a character who demands "Call me the Golden Herm"<sup>77</sup>, thus parodying the opening line of Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), which begins "Call me Ishmael".<sup>78</sup> Carter mixes up the fictional nature of the character Herm, with the real world, and insists that he/she was shipped from the Coast of Coramandel in a trunk bought from the famous Army and Navy Stores by his aunt. This 'aunt' is actually Shakespeare's character Titania, and the narrator continues to describe this extraordinary conjuncture of the 'real' and the fictive, in completely normal, conversational tones when he/she also points out that he/she calls Aunt Titania, the Memsahib, cutting a dash of British imperialism into the text.

The temporal and spatial shifts in the text undermine any sense of a

credible location, so that although the narrative is *about* Titania, Oberon and Puck in Shakespeare's Elizabethan England, the setting obliquely contradicts this notion, as the Golden Herm states:

And here I stand, under the dripping trees . . . In the underpinnings of the trees, all soggy and floral as William Morris newspaper [sic] in an abandoned house. I, in order to retain my equilibrium and psychic balance, meditate in the yogic posture known as The Tree, that is, on one leg.<sup>79</sup>

The setting for the wood is not Athens, but is "really located somewhere in the English midlands, possibly near Bletchley . . . where the great decoding machine was sited".<sup>80</sup> It is not even as if the text could be read as reflections of or commentaries on the lives of the actors and actresses playing *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; if it were, it would be easier to accommodate the descriptions of bored fairies suffering from influenza. The narrative voice shifts from that of the Golden Herm to a discourse on the distinctions between woods and forests, recounted by an omniscient narrator who directs the information to the Herm.

The artifice of the text is of course heightened by the fact that its intertextuality is drawn from Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which also contains a play-within-a-play 'Pyramus and Thisbe' and the additional 'play' between Titania, Oberon and Puck. The postmodernist device of Chinese-box worlds is utilized to its furthest extreme in this text.

The *Black Venus* collection also contains in 'Peter and the Wolf', a



rewrite of the well known allegory but one which functions in the mode of a postmodernist fictional artifice. This text disrupts the linear narrative with self-reflexive techniques and formal strategies. In its play with the form of endings it reminds the reader of the fictionality of the text:

He looked over his shoulder and saw, how, with distance, the mountain began to acquire a flat, two-dimensional look. It was already turning into a picture of itself, into the postcard hastily bought as a souvenir of childhood at a railway station or a border post, the newspaper cutting, the snapshot he would show in strange towns, strange cities, other countries he could not, at this moment, imagine, whose names he did not yet know, places where he would say in strange languages, 'That was where I spent my childhood. Imagine!'<sup>81</sup>

Then as the Peter of the allegorical story turns his back on the countryside of his childhood "he saw it turn into so much scenery, into the wonderful backcloth for an old country tale, tale of a child suckled by wolves, perhaps, or of wolves nursed by a woman . . . Then he determinedly set his face towards the town and tramped onwards, into a different story".<sup>82</sup> The flaunting of formal artifice draws attention to the role of allegory, fairytale and myth as devices which are used to construct narratives in order to define and understand the multiplicity of fictions which are the only 'reality'.

Carter's story 'The Fall River Axe Murders', is an imaginative recasting of the Lizzie Borden axe murders. The setting is the fourth of August, 1892, in Fall River, Massachusetts. The apparent realism and traditional methods of narration, are interrupted in the description of

inhabitants of the Borden household:

Five living creatures are asleep in a house of Second Street, Fall River. . . . The other old man is some kind of kin of Borden's. He doesn't belong here; he is visiting, passing through, he is a chance bystander, he is irrelevant. 'Write him out of the script.'<sup>83</sup>

The text continues, almost as if to persuade the narrator to retain this other man, "Even though his presence in the doomed house is historically unimpeachable".<sup>84</sup> Nevertheless, this 'other man' is written out of the text, out of the story, by the unknown narrator's instructions, "Write John Vinnicum Morse out of the script"<sup>85</sup> but of course, in writing him out, he has at the same time been written in.

This text sets up a tension between the historical accuracy and the fictionalising of the past, reminding us that history is just as much a matter of interpretation as current events and that both are always accounts which arbitrarily select some events and omit others. Discussing the relation of history and fiction, Linda Hutcheon comments:

Postmodern fiction suggests that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological.<sup>86</sup>

Angela Carter often demonstrates an interest in the problematizing of history and in 'The Black Venus Tale' Carter turns literary history inside out and subverts it by taking a series of Baudelaire's poems *Les Fleurs du Mal*, and

focussing attention on the woman Jeanne Duval, who as Baudelaire's Muse, inspired the poems.

Carter devises a prose text from Baudelaire's sequence of poems known as 'The Black Venus Cycle'. In this fiction, Carter provides scenes which are beautiful and evocative in their own right, and sections and fragments which cross-refer to the poems, and in a sense are written over Baudelaire's words. But this technique is not the same as the modernist palimpsest; it is the postmodernist's act of *bricolage*, using whatever means are at hand in a rough and ready way and not striving to create the polished autonomous literary artefact.

Carter takes 'La parfum Exotique', 'Les Bijoux', 'La Chevalure', 'Danse de la Serpent' amongst others from the 'Black Venus Cycle' and weaves them into prose narrative, in which narratorial wry comments move from fictional prose into sociology, history, and literary criticism. Carter constantly undercuts the romanticism, colonialism and reification of the image of the *exotic* black woman in Baudelaire's modernist poetry, by interrupting the text with direct quotes from his poems, in which the "Weird goddess, dusky as night" is projected as utterly 'Other', and juxtaposing a love making session between the poet and the muse with an excerpt on the courtship habits of the Albatross.

The narrator interrupts the description of a room which may or may

not have been in the real Baudelaire's Parisian apartment, to comment:

. . . this handsome apartment with its Persian rugs, its walnut table off which the Borgias served poisons, its carved armchairs from whose bulbous legs grin and grimace cinquecento faces, the crust of fake Tintoretos on the walls (he's an indefatigable connoisseur, if, as yet, too young to have that sixth sense that tells you when you're being conned).  
..<sup>87</sup>

These semantic shifts from the language of a tourist guide to colloquialism thus undercuts any hint that these fixtures and fittings are really from the Baudelairean apartment, and reminds readers of their gullibility for thinking for one moment that they might be.

Carter employs temporal shifts from the present of the text to future Parisian cultural life in describing Jeanne Duval:

She was a woman of immense height, the type of those beautiful giantesses who, a hundred years later, would grace the stages of the Crazy Horse or the Casino de Paris in sequin cache-sexe and tinsel pasties, divinely tall, the colour and texture of suede. Josephine Baker!<sup>88</sup>

and incorporates the real personage of Josephine Baker, founder and dancer of the Blue Bell dance troupe fame, with the fictional dancing of Baudelaire's Muse.

In this postmodernist textual *bricolage* we also find Carter utilising mythology in the shape of the Aztec goddess Nanahuatzin. However, this technique is not used as with the modernist writers to install a sense of order over contemporary chaos, but to make a sexual/political point:



For herself, she came clean, arrived in Paris with nothing worse than scabies, malnutrition and ringworm about her person. It was a bad joke, therefore, that, some centuries before Jeanne's birth, the Aztec goddess, Nanahuatzin, had poured a conucopia of wheelchairs, dark glasses, crutches and mercury pills on the ships of the conquistadores as they took their spoiled booty from the New World to the Old; the raped continent's revenge, perpetrating itself in the beds of Europe<sup>89</sup>

Carter's aphoristic style cuts into the voluptuous scenes between the Muse and the Poet to insert sociological documentary on Jeanne Duval's origins, the iniquities of slavery and her meeting with Charles Baudelaire in 1842:

The splendid continent to which her skin allied her had been excised from her memory. She had been deprived of history, she was the pure child of the colony. The colony - white, imperious - had fathered her. Her mother went off with the sailors and her granny looked after her in one room with a rag-covered bed.<sup>90</sup>

The textual narration of the circumstances of the character Jeanne's grandmother is delivered in a tone of voice which utilises almost complete banality to narrate the overwhelming nature of her birth and early life:

'I was born in the ship where my mother died and was thrown into the sea. Sharks ate her. Another woman of some other nation who had just still-born suckled me. I don't know anything about my father nor where I was conceived nor on what coast nor in what circumstances. My foster-mother soon died of fever in the plantation. I was weaned. I grew up.'<sup>91</sup>

The postmodernist textual strategy of avoidance of authorial commitment or engagement at crucial points within the narrative is used by Carter to sharp

effect here.

Carter's 'Black Venus' epitomises postmodernist historiographic fiction in that it draws attention to the institution of slavery in the French colonies which was still in place whilst Baudelaire was enjoying having his black mistress. Carter reveals the blind spots in mainstream Baudelairean criticism which has rarely analyzed the ideological nature of this aspect of their relationship, almost as though the political and social aspects of slavery would mar the exoticism with which Baudelaire has depicted their relationship.

Carter takes the concept of the female muse, personified in this instance by Jeanne Duval, and then deconstructs this concept by the suggestion of the immense ennui of posing around all day, in the hope of inspiring something. The muse refuses to be impressed with the notion of woman as 'exotic'. As Linda Hutcheon has suggested, "Postmodern art - like feminist theory and practice - is always aware of difference . . . difference defined by contextualization or positioning in relation to others."<sup>2</sup> The strategy used by Carter to call into question the patriarchal myths of male creativity, together with issues of racism, would seem to indicate that postmodernist literature may have strong affinities with some aspects of feminism, which might enhance rather than restrict the scope for political critique.

In this short prose fiction, Carter utilises postmodern techniques and strategies to their full advantage by rewriting the myths and fictions which structure sexual and racial relations. Carter's fiction, in both her short stories and her full length novels, is frequently subversive of both sexual and textual conventions, and like the texts of the other women writers examined in this chapter, demonstrates that postmodernist fiction can, and indeed does, have a significant contribution to make to understanding the nature of contemporary culture.

Throughout the foregoing study of a number of novels and short stories by Brigid Brophy, Christine Brook-Rose, Muriel Spark and Angela Carter I have attempted to demonstrate how postmodernist strategies and techniques are used by these writers in relation to a number of related issues. Brigid Brophy's *In Transit*, for example, contexts the construction of subjectivity as automatically and necessarily heterosexual, whilst simultaneously setting up a degree of intertextuality with the conventions of modernist writers such as James Joyce and the modes of subgenres, in particular the pornographical novel. Brophy's postmodernist novel arguably intersects with some of the political interests of feminism in so far as her pornographic subtext both parodies and critiques such a mode, and her challenging of heterosexuality reinforces the work of feminists such as Adrienne Rich.



Muriel Spark's work disrupts the conventions of the realist novel and blurs the boundaries between high art and mass culture by drawing upon popular fiction genres such as the gothic, the murder mystery, and the ghost story. Whilst her very early work retains considerable features of modernism, her novels *The Driver's Seat*, *Not to Disturb*, and *The Hothouse by the East River* would seem to fit within the aesthetic model of postmodernism. These postmodernist dimensions are not displayed in any whimsical sense, but are used to serious purpose in her novels to probe such issues as fate and free will, the concepts of sanity and insanity, and relations between women and men. Spark's fictions foreground the role of the author and the act of writing, and her work might be fruitfully juxtaposed with the work of feminist critics such as Elaine Showalter and Patricia Stubbs, who seek to establish a tradition of women writers.

The novels of Christine Brooke-Rose discussed earlier demonstrate a distinct relation to post-structuralism which differentiates her fiction from modernism, although there is a similar concern for innovatory form. Yet Brooke-Rose's fiction also has clear connections with certain aspects of feminism, such as the work of Alice Jardine, Catharine Stimpson, and Elizabeth Meese, which explores the literary text as primarily a discursive practice. In *Between* and *Amalgamemnon* particularly, Brooke-Rose reveals how language is grounded in social and cultural contexts, and may be used



to subversive purpose to challenge and resist the oppressive nature of dominant conventions.

In the short stories and novels of Angela Carter it is often difficult to distinguish where aspects of feminism end and dimensions of postmodernism begin. Carter's commitment to socialist feminism suffuses her work, and her concern to respect difference on the basis of gender, race and class between and amongst women is related both to the politics of feminist critics such as Hester Eisenstein, Barbara Christian, and Toril Moi, and to postmodernist notions of multiplicity and heterogeneity. Her works are perhaps the most distinctly postmodernist of all the writers considered in this chapter, and at the furthest remove from modernist writers. There is little of the modernist interest in depth psychology, Greek classics, esoteric palimpsests, and conservative political commitments to be found in Carter's work. Yet there is undoubtedly a shared interest in how fictional language may be renewed and invigorated through juxtaposition with other modes of writing.

The contradictory elements of the novels and short stories under discussion in this chapter suggest, finally, that there is much to be gained by bringing feminism and postmodernism into conjunction with one another. The diverse nature of these innovative texts indicates the need to consider the category of 'women's writing' as one which must take into account the differences between women. At the same time, the extent to which the

fiction of Brigid Brophy, Muriel Spark, Christine Brooke-Rose and Angela Carter are imbued with postmodernist strategies and techniques suggests that prevailing accounts of postmodernism are limited by the neglect of these writers. These novels and short stories, together with those of Joyce Carol Oates discussed in the last chapter, and those of Toni Morrison, Marilynne Robinson, Maggie Gee, Joanna Russ, and Christa Wolf amongst others considered in Chapter Three, may be regarded as representative of a much wider range of women's postmodernist writing, which may be considered as an alternative cartography of postmodernism.

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3. Brigid Brophy, *In Transit: an Heroi-cyclic Novel* (London: Macdonald and Co Ltd, 1969), p23.
4. Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: the Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction* (London: Methuen and Co Ltd, 1984), p146.
5. Brophy, *In Transit*, p12.
6. Ibid, p36.
7. David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy and the Topology of Modern Literature* (London: Edward Arnold Ltd, 1977), p229.
8. Brophy, "An Interview," p166.
9. Brophy, *In Transit*, p41.
10. Waugh, *Metafiction*, p146.
11. Brophy, *In Transit*, p102.
12. Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen and Co Ltd, 1987), p175.
13. Brophy, *In Transit*, p191.
14. Ibid, p22.
15. Waugh, *Metafiction*, p146.
16. Brophy, *In Transit*, p214.
17. Ibid, p70.
18. Brophy, 'An Interview,' p166.
19. Umberto Eco, 'Lector in Fabula; pragmatic strategy in a metanarrative text,' in *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the*

*Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), p234.

20. Waugh, *Metafiction*, p120.
21. Muriel Spark, *The Comforters* (London: Macmillan and Co Ltd, 1957), p156.
22. Ibid, p42.
23. Ibid, p63.
24. Spark, *The Comforters*, p105.
25. Waugh, *Metafiction*, p120.
26. Spark, *The Comforters*, p180.
27. McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, p121.
28. Muriel Spark, *The Hothouse by the East River* (London: Methuen and Co Ltd, 1973), p108.
29. Ron Sukenick, 'Nine digressions on narrative authority,' in *Form: Digressions of the Act of Fiction* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), p99.
30. Spark, *The Hothouse*, p7.
31. Ibid, p17.
32. Spark, *The Hothouse*, p150.
33. Ibid, p150.
34. Ibid, p113.
35. Ibid, p118.
36. Ibid, p120.
37. Ibid, p120.
38. Patricia Stubbs, *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel 1880-1920* (Brighton: The Harvester Press Ltd, 1979), pp234-235.



39. Ibid, p235.
40. Waugh, *Metafiction*, p146.
41. Christine Brook-Rose, *Between* (London: Michael Joseph, 1968), p19.
42. Christine Brook-Rose, *Thru* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1975), p40.
43. McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, p181.
44. Ibid, p187.
45. Brook-Rose, *Thru*, p32.
46. Ibid, p54.
47. Ibid, p59.
48. The question "who speaks?" is asked on pages 1, 22, 35, 42, 59, 89, 107 and indeed recurs throughout the text.
49. Brook-Rose, *Thru*, p66.
50. Ibid, p114.
51. Waugh, *Metafiction*, p147.
52. Allen Thither, *Words in Reflection: Modern Language Theory and Postmodern Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p112.
53. Christine Brooke-Rose, Television Interview, *The Book Programme*, BBC 2, June 1987.
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64. Carolyn Brown, 'Feminist Literary Strategies in the Postmodern Condition,' in *From My Guy to Sci-Fi: Genre and Women's Writing in the Postmodern World*, ed. Helen Carr (London: Pandora Press Ltd, 1989), p113.
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83. Ibid, p104.
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86. Linda Hutcheon, 'The Pastime of Past Time: Fiction, History, Historiographic Metafiction,' *Genre*, 20 (Fall/Winter 1987): 290.
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91. Ibid, p17.
92. Linda Hutcheon, 'Feminism and Postmodernism,' in *Donna: Women in Italian Culture*, ed. Ada Testaferri (Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions Inc, 1989), p33.

# Conclusion

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In the fraying of identities and in the reflexive strategies for constructing them, the possibility opens up for weaving something other than a shroud for the day after the apocalypse . . .

Donna Haraway, '*A Manifesto for Cyborgs*'<sup>1</sup>

If modernism and postmodernism may be taken as representing early and late twentieth century literary innovation, then perhaps the diverse strands of feminism apparent in the works of women writers of both movements, introduce a more positive and socially engaged political dimension to modernist and postmodernist aesthetics. In viewing prevailing notions of postmodernism in relation to contemporary innovative literature by women writers such as Brigid Brophy, Muriel Spark, Marilynne Robinson, Toni Morrison, Angela Carter, Christine Brooke-Rose, Joyce Carol Oates, Maggie Gee, Kathy Acker, Christa Wolf and Joanna Russ, amongst many others, it would appear that some of their fictional practice may be interpreted as both postmodernist and feminist. Yet the absence of these writers from most accounts of the cultural history of postmodernism seems to point to a number of problems which arguably arise from certain assumptions made in these accounts about the relation of modernism and postmodernism.



The definition of modernism as a historical phenomena is replete with difficulties and not easily reducible to one single statement which might contain its complexity. However, certain commentators on the phenomenon of postmodernism, in their endeavours to create a postmodernist conception of literature, have constructed an aesthetic model of postmodernism based upon a supposed reaction against a peculiarly flattened out version of modernism. Equally, the efforts of those critics who wished to argue that postmodernism is merely the logical continuation of modernist innovation, has led to a misleadingly impoverished account of the sheer variety of postmodernist literature.

In both instances, the diverse nature of modernism and postmodernism has been obscured through the widespread neglect of the role played by women writers in developing innovatory forms of modernist and postmodernist literature. Linda Hutcheon has noted that modernism and postmodernism appear, on the basis of mainstream critical histories, to have been constructed in terms of male models of thought and has suggested that certain feminist critics regard such literature as problematical since in terms of subject matter they would seem to have little connection with the politics of feminism. It is perhaps for this reason perhaps that some feminist literary

critics, rather than seeking to enter this male province, have attempted to construct an alternative literary tradition comprised exclusively of women writers.

Yet such a project is not without its problematic aspects, one of which has been a constriction of the critical frame of reference within which innovatory writing such as that of Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, Djuna Barnes, Emily Holmes-Colman, and Ivy Compton-Burnett could be placed. Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own*, for example, placed Woolf within a tradition of largely realist writers, the conventions of which Woolf contested both in her fiction, especially her later works, and non-fiction writing.

Showalter's project is avowedly realist because her implied concern is to create a new history of women writers in relation to the dominant literary tradition. Yet as a number of other feminist critics have pointed out, the conventions of realism are not without problematic aspects for women writers. Catherine Belsey has argued that "realism is a predominantly conservative form",<sup>2</sup> and Rosalind Coward contends that it cannot be argued "that the structures of the realist novel are neutral and that they can just be filled with a feminist content".<sup>3</sup>

Until the mid 1980s, innovative fiction by women writers has been

relatively neglected by both feminist and mainstream critics, perhaps because of the tendency of earlier feminist reading strategies to concentrate on nineteenth century literature and the woman writer's relation to realism. This neglect has been addressed recently by the work of feminist literary critics such as Shari Benstock, Gillian Hanscombe, Molly Hite, and Elizabeth Meese. In their work they have sought not only to challenge the ways in which dominant cultural groups marginalise some women, but also to highlight how mainstream accounts misrepresent the social and cultural contexts in which writers produce their work.

The first aim of my thesis has been to explore some of the critical limitations of the exclusive nature of these male/female models. My second aim has been to examine other more neglected novels by women writers who may be perceived as sharing an interest in innovative form with postmodernist writers and who would also seem to demonstrate an awareness of certain political strategies which could be seen as falling within the ambits of feminism.

Robert Rawdon Wilson has suggested that "As a concept, postmodernism . . . unpacks in more than one manner. In effect, there are two distinct archives, two sets of relevant primary and secondary texts, behind the usage of 'postmodern.'<sup>4</sup> Wilson's comments could apply to the

way in which twentieth century innovative literature has appeared to consist of two archives set apart from one another on the basis of gender. Yet the actual fictional practice of such modernist writers as Woolf, Proust, Richardson, and Joyce, and postmodernists such as Carter, Brooke-Rose, Katz, and Federman would seem to defy the imposition of a clear boundary between them and thus defeat any attempt to file away their works into discrete boxes.

By drawing upon Fredric Jameson's model of restructuration, it has been possible to view the uneven nature of literary change between modernism and postmodernism within a more flexible framework that allows for the consideration of women writers. When the strategies and techniques of postmodernist fiction by Oates and Barth, Carter and Barthelme, Brooke-Rose and Pynchon writers are viewed in relation to the devices of modernist writing by Stein and Joyce, Barnes and Gide, Proust and Richardson, then a more complex and richer picture emerges which avoids the oversimplifications suggested by the rhetoric of 'break or continuity.'

The similarities between modernism and postmodernism may be found in their shared concern to create innovatory modes of writing in contrast to the perceived limitations of the conventions of realism. Rather than suggest that the literary techniques of modernism have been totally



rejected by postmodernist writers, I have attempted to demonstrate that certain features which may be considered dominant in modernist writing have shifted into becoming marginal in the fiction of postmodernist writers. Conversely, secondary or peripheral features in modernism have shifted into becoming dominant aspects of postmodernism.

So, for example, the modernist's use of the 'stream of consciousness' technique has not disappeared altogether in postmodernism, but is no longer of primary interest. Similarly, the modernist's interest in developing characterization based upon the insights of depth psychology, may be considered as less central to postmodernist writers. The fiction of postmodernist writers will often assimilate the techniques of modernism, and combine them with modes of writing despised by the modernists, such as the formulaic subgenres of the gothic, romance, thriller, sci-fi and ghost story.

Some commentators have suggested that postmodernism's apparent flirtation with mass culture inevitably compromises the traditions upon which literature has been built. Yet from the standpoint of such feminist critics as Kate Millett and Elaine Showalter, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Cheryl Wall, Adrienne Rich and Susan Griffin, Linda Hutcheon and Helen Carr, such literary traditions are political constructions which have excluded the work of those writers who are not considered to be part of the dominant

culture.

In my view the postmodernist attempt to collapse the hierarchical distinction between high art and certain forms of mass culture is one of the most creative and political aspects of postmodernism. I hope to have demonstrated in my earlier discussion of the works of Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, Muriel Spark and Maggie Gee, how these writers develop new configurations of the possibilities of literature, by calling dominant and marginal modes of writing into question.

It has been one of the aims of this thesis to show that the literary texts under discussion, especially those of Brigid Brophy, Muriel Spark, Christine Brooke-Rose, Joyce Carol Oates and Angela Carter, tend to be self-reflexive, they foreground the role of the author and the act of writing, explore the limits of fictionalising, and disrupt the conventions of the realist novel. In terms of their cultural position they situate themselves within the concept of intertextuality, perceive themselves as engaged in discursive practices, and recognise that the limits of language affect their relation to social and cultural contexts.

Their novels and short stories investigate the nature of power and politics, call into question traditional notions of identity, explore the construction of subjectivity in its multiple determinants, and frequently blur

the distinctions between literary genres, and between literature and theory.

These texts, which are representative of a much wider range of women's postmodernist writing, delineate a new cartography of postmodernism. At the same time they politicize that cartography because inherent in their innovations is a challenge to dominant sexual and textual conventions. Teresa de Lauretis has suggested that:

What is emerging in feminist writings is . . . the concept of a multiple, shifting, and often self-contradictory identity, a subject that is not divided in, but rather at odds with, language; an identity made up of heterogeneous and heteronomous representations of gender, race, and class, and often indeed across languages and cultures; an identity that one decides to reclaim from a history of multiple assimilations, and that one insists upon as a strategy . . .<sup>5</sup>

It is Teresa de Lauretis' view that such a conception of subjectivity denotes the difference between feminism and postmodernism. But I would suggest that some of the postmodernist fiction by the women writers under discussion in my study indicates that this is one of the key points at which postmodernism and feminism intersect.

The definition of the political has expanded considerably under the influence of the different standpoints of feminism, so that it is now understood to articulate the effects of gender difference within and between the individual, language and power. To the extent that the writers studied here demonstrate the wide range of postmodernist aesthetics, in many of

their fictions it becomes no longer possible to differentiate the point at which postmodernism aspects overlap with the political dimensions of such standpoints of feminism.

Despite the differences between the writers under discussion, there is one significant feature that their texts have in common. These texts share a desire to interrogate, challenge and deconstruct the notion of a closed system of meaning. It is a recognition that the world we live in consists of multiple realities, and that to privilege one reality, to argue one closed perspective, is to operate in terms that are insensitive to difference.

Throughout this study I have discussed the limitations of prevailing notions of postmodernism. Postmodernism may be fruitfully inscribed within a feminist framework drawn from the work of critics such as Linda Hutcheon, Meaghan Morris, Carolyn Allen, Helen Carr, Leslie Dick, and Carolyn Brown amongst others, (the political standpoint from which my position is based for the purposes of this thesis). When the criteria that creates literary canons includes the work of women writers, then the significance of postmodernism as a cultural movement in which gender together with race, class, ethnicity and sexual preference are no longer



ignored, becomes apparent. If the nature of postmodernism is to be understood in its full significance, then the complex interplay of history, power, politics and culture must also be recognised.

1. Donna Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s,' *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (London: Routledge 1990), p199.
2. Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Methuen, 1980), p51.
3. Rosalind Coward, 'Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels?' *Feminist Review* 5 (1980): 60.
4. Robert Rawdon Wilson, 'SLIP PAGE: Angela Carter, In/Out/In the Postmodern Nexus,' *Ariel* 20 (October 1989), p99.
5. Teresa de Lauretis, 'Feminist Studies/Critical Studies: Issues, Terms, and Contexts,' in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p9.

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