

CLEFT FROM THE MAIN:

THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY FOR WOMEN WRITERS

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THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY FOR THE WOMEN WRITERS IN  
MARGARET LAURENCE'S THE DIVINERS AND  
AUDREY THOMAS' INTERTIDAL LIFE

By

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## Abstract

This thesis deals with the problem of identity for the protagonists, Morag and Alice, in Margaret Laurence's The Diviners and Audrey Thomas' Intertidal Life. Both women are writers searching for a self underneath the patriarchal fictions of womanhood. The notion of an essential self, Morag and Alice realize, is itself another fiction. What Morag and Alice discover in their self-reflective writings is only what they have been constituted as within the various discursive fields in which they participate. The self, these women come to recognize, is not an essence but rather a site at which various discourses converge and compete for sovereignty of the individual. In most cases, certain discourses, inconsistent though they may be, achieve dominance over other discourses and consequently over the subject, creating the illusion of a unified and coherent subjectivity. In the case of women writers, however, two contradictory discursive fields or ideologies are continually vying for mastery of the subject, each with considerable success. As women, Morag and Alice are inscribed within the field of traditional feminine discourses of submission and self-effacement, and as writers they are interpellated within liberal humanist discourses of gender equality. These two subject positions, woman and writer, are contradictory and thus conflict with one another. In attempting to unify their heterogeneous experiences of subjectivity, Morag and Alice recognize not only the impossibility of such a task, but also the arbitrary, conventional and ideologically-motivated nature of all discourse, which is to say of language and therefore of subjectivity itself. Having discovered this fact, Morag and Alice are then able to wrestle with language and unsettle the systems of symbols, analogies and metaphors constitutive of the dominant discourses and ideologies which have created a notion of woman which has validated her oppressed status.

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No man is an island entire of itself; every  
man is a piece of the continent, a part of  
the main.

-John Donne

Each [handmaid] was like a Druid rock; Or like  
a spire of land that stands apart Cleft from  
the main . . .

-Alfred Lord Tennyson

## Introduction

Alice and Morag, the protagonists in Thomas' Intertidal Life and Laurence's The Diviners are women writers. As writers, they must reject their culture's ideals of womanhood, notions such as passivity and self-effacement, and assume the authority traditionally reserved for men. Craig Owens confirms this view in his essay "The Anti-Aesthetic", where he states "in order to speak, to represent herself, a woman assumes a masculine position" (59). Unlike the male writer, however, the woman writer is necessarily subversive. Alice explains, "If she is to move forward at all [the woman writer] has to develop a layer of selfishness -- self-is-ness -- that has traditionally been reserved for men" (173). Because she speaks from her position as a woman in a patriarchal society, the woman writer assumes the antithesis of the position of masculine authority. Therefore, the woman writer properly occupies neither the feminine nor the masculine subject position.

Because the woman writer fails to conform to either of the two subject positions -- feminine and masculine-- defined by the dominant ideology, the position which she does occupy is not only subversive, but also unacknowledged and therefore unnamed. It has been remarked by Jacques Derrida that Western culture's discourse hinges on binary oppositions. In this tradition one term of the pair is inevitably privileged over the other. "These polar opposites do not, however, stand as independent and equal entities. The second term of the pair is considered the negative, corrupt and undesirable version of the first, a fall away from it" notes Barbara Johnson in her introduction to Derrida's Dissemination (viii). Paradigmatic of this dialectical thought pattern is the concept "masculine/feminine". This oppositional schema, however, fails to allow for the possibility of additional subject positions, an entire spectrum of which may exist, potentially or in fact.

This unwillingness of the dominant ideology to acknowledge other subject positions is a direct reflection of the patriarchal power structure of society which relies on the fundamental man/woman opposition for its justification. This political rationale is, however, covert. The ostensible reason for the inadmissability of other non-traditional subject positions is "scientific".

For in order for the political organization of society to be grounded on and informed by these anatomical differences, a general acceptance of the view of biological determinism is required. This theory holds that men and women are psychically as well as physically different and that these differences are innate as opposed to socially produced. That men and women are constitutively different seems self-evident. For example, women appear to be better caregivers than men and men better at intellectual activity than women. Moreover, one can always defer to history to substantiate essential gender differences. Literary history is a case in point. The canon is made up almost entirely of men. And yet, there have been countless examples of individuals who do not conform to the gender roles prescribed for them by society. In fact, the definitions of what constitutes masculinity and femininity have themselves changed throughout time and differ from culture to culture. In Thomas' novel, Alice records a conversation she has with her daughter Flora:

"Don't you think it's strange how the male birds and a lot of male creatures are the fancy ones? Have all the nice decorations and feathers?"

"Well, they do the courting. No doubt that's why."

"But men and women - -"

"Yes. In our culture anyway. I sometimes think that's what the sixties were all about -- men had a chance to let loose a little, dress up, wear beads and headbands or velvet coats. Wear an earring. Go without socks. Of course even in our

culture men have dressed pretty extravagantly at various times. If we ever go to England I'll take you to the National Portrait Gallery and you can have a look at some of the portraits there. It's a wonderful way to learn about the history of the costume" (257).

While the changeable nature of gendered subjectivity may seem obvious, the belief that there is an essential psychic difference between men and women persists. Why is it that we accept this contention with such ease despite the enormous evidence to suggest the contrary? What risk is involved in rejecting an essentialist view of what constitutes the subject? Throwing into question the naturalness of the gendered subject throws into question the naturalness of the power structure which has the naturalness of the gendered subject as its ground.

Thus, the subject position of the woman writer is unacknowledged because it throws into question the biological ground on which societal values appear to be based and, as a result, is one which is particularly threatening to the hegemony of patriarchal ideology. Because the subject position of the woman writer implies a usurpation of male authority, it is acknowledged only in the sense that it is seen as "monstrous". To fall into the cracks of the binary opposition man/woman so fundamental to our ideology is to be "monstrous", which is to say both threatening and unnatural.

In becoming aware of their experiences as women

writers in a patriarchal society which these ideologies have failed to acknowledge or obscured, Morag and Alice are made aware of the delusive nature of subjectivity. According to Louis Althusser, "the relationship between the individual and the subject position which she or he takes up in a specific ideology is imaginary" (Quoted in Weedon 31). Ideology works by creating subjects who believe they are acting in their own self-interest. In the case of women, ideology works by alienating them from the experiences appropriate to their condition. Moreover, ideology creates subjects who believe the origin of their subjectivity to be the manifestations of a static and innate nature which is paradoxically both unique and informed by their gender rather than the product of societal institutions and discourses. In so doing, ideology obscures the operations of power at the heart of gender relations. By attempting to discover their identities through writing, Morag and Alice expose the extent to which they are inscribed within ideology and language.

Antithetical to humanist contentions therefore, subjectivity is not a fixed and unified core at the centre of an individual's being, but, "precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we speak" (Weedon 33). The apparently self-evident categories of "masculine" and "feminine" are

revealed in these novels to be unstable social constructs which reflect the workings of power rather than of "truth" or "nature". Thus, it is through the insidious discursive constitution of gendered subjectivity, rather than any manifest control, that masculinist power is exercised over women. This notion is put forward by Michel Foucault who "rejects the idea that power functions only through "Thou shall nots" or forms of restrictive commandments and laws" (Diamond and Quinby xi). Rather, it is by being constituted within various patriarchal and capitalist discourses and institutions that individuals become unwittingly subjected to the ruling ideology.

-> Unwilling to conform to the "feminine" or "masculine" subject positions offered them by society, Morag and Alice, by examining their lives and themselves, attempt to discover what, if anything constitutes their essential self. What Morag and Alice discover in trying to find their core underneath all the social fictions is that the notion of an essential self is itself a fiction. What they discover is only what they have been constituted to be. In a recent interview Thomas states:

A search for the self is like looking for the northwest passage, where all those guys were sent out from England and Spain and so on. In their terms it didn't exist, it wasn't where they thought it was, so what did they get out of all that to-ing and fro-ing and travelling up Vancouver Island looking for some way to get across? What they got was doing it. But that's

it, what they got out of it was the search (49).

Thus, rather than a static entity, Thomas suggests the self is always in the process of constituting and reconstituting itself and thus can never be located and defined for all time. Quinby and Diamond write:

For Foucault "there is no subject," and much of his last work explicitly attempts to dethrone the sovereignty of the illusory subject that he argues is a product of a particular disciplinary practices and rationalizing discourses of the modern era (xii).

Morag and Alice recognize that the self is not a static entity but rather a dynamic site where discursive forces continually interact and compete for the subjectivity of the individual.

In this thesis, I will explore two discourses, the traditional feminine and the liberal humanist, which co-exist in our society and compete for the subjectivity of all women, especially that of the woman writer. Although the liberal humanist ideology claims to offer women equality, it fails to supplant the traditional feminine ideology which has deemed women subordinate and inferior. In fact, the liberal humanist ideology, it can be argued, serves only to reinforce the traditional feminine one it ostensibly seeks to subvert. What is responsible for the failure of liberal humanism as it relates to women's status, I suggest, is its refusal to address the larger metaphysical underpinnings of the constitution of gendered subjectivity. I will examine

the extent to which these writers, Thomas and Laurence, wrestle with and unwrench the logic, symbols and metaphors of Western thought which have inscribed and defined woman as secondary, derivative and inferior, and have thereby caused her oppression to appear natural.

## Chapter One

### The Search for a Unified Self

Both The Diviners and Intertidal Life are the autobiographical works of their fictional authors, Morag Gunn and Alice Hoyle. Morag and Alice are middle-aged divorced mothers and writers. Middle-aged and alone is a state neither woman had anticipated nor desired. Their situations cause them a great deal of anxiety, partly because they feel lonely and unloved, and partly because they blame themselves for what they deem to be their largely undesirable solitary status. Thus, Morag and Alice wish to better understand themselves and their lives in order that they may alleviate the chronic self-doubt and self-recrimination from which they suffer. Morag and Alice attempt, therefore, through their self-reflective writing, to explain themselves to themselves; to discover what, if anything, constitutes the essential core of their being. The discovery of this stable, unified and essential truth about themselves, Morag and Alice hope, will provide them with comfort and reassurance in their times of personal

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crisis.

What Morag and Alice discover in their self-reflection, however, is only what they have been constituted as in the various discursive fields in which they participate. As Catherine Belsey explains, "Subjectivity, then, is linguistically and discursively constructed and displaced across the range of discourses in which the concrete individual participates" (61). These discourses, however, are dynamic and may be inconsistent or in contradiction with one another. Thus, as Morag and Alice come to realize, not only are their identities non-essential, but they also lack stability and coherence. What Morag and Alice become aware of in their search for a stable self-identity are the profound contradictions at the heart of their being.

By becoming women writers, Morag in The Diviners and Alice in Intertidal Life have unwittingly transgressed the boundaries of the female subject position offered them by society. Thus, feminine subjectivity is no longer able to function as a ground on which Morag and Alice can rest, assured of an innate and stable identity. Rather, in writing about their lives, Morag and Alice come to see that two contradictory and conflicting ideologies have been most directly constitutive of their subjectivities: the traditional and the liberal humanist beliefs regarding the



nature of women and men. Alice and Morag's societies espouse liberal humanist notions of gender equality which claim to afford women the same rights and opportunities as men. According to liberal humanist discourses, "Rationality is shared by all individuals and is the basis of the liberal political demands for equality of opportunity and the right to self-determination" (Weedon, 80). At the same time as Morag and Alice's cultures exhibit a belief in the liberal humanist assertion of gender equality, however, they also give credence to traditional values which maintain that men and women possess what are seen to be opposite but complementary characteristics. As Belsey notes:

women as a group in our society are both produced and inhibited by contradictory discourses. Very broadly, they participate both in the liberal humanist discourse of freedom, self-determination and rationality and at the same time in the specifically feminine discourse offered by society of submission, relative inadequacy and irrational intuition. The attempt to locate a single coherent subject position within these contradictory discourses, and in consequence to find a non-contradictory pattern of behaviour, can create intolerable pressures (65).

What becomes apparent to Morag and Alice as they attempt to discover a coherent and stable subject position is the extent to which each has been constituted or, to use Foucault's word, "interpellated" as a subject within conflicting and contradictory ideologies.

Both writers convey this sense of themselves as

Both writers show a sense of themselves as 12 sites for these competing ideologies through water-related imagery. Although this imagery suggests many things in the novels, there is an indication in both that the protagonists identify closely with water. The title of The Diviners suggests a resemblance between the search for water and the search for the self. The affinity between the self and water is similarly made in Thomas' novel, which is punctuated with water-imagery. At one point Alice writes, "Water imagery again -- I can't escape it" (165). Morag metaphorically resembles the river that flows both ways described at the beginning and end of The Diviners. The two natural forces, gravity and wind, which combine to create this seemingly impossible occurrence are analogous to the contradictory ideological forces which are combined in the personality of Morag. The simultaneously backward and forward-flowing river images the fact that the traditional values and beliefs of her culture continue to influence Morag at the same time as they are resisted by the apparently more progressive ideology of gender equality. Thomas' novel conveys this notion in a similar way. The intertidal creatures who live neither wholly on land nor in the sea fascinate Alice because they reflect her own subjectivity which she experiences as being caught between the ebb of the old ideology and the flow of the new. Both Thomas' and Laurence's water imagery suggests that

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subjectivity can be described more accurately as constituted by forces rather than an essence and that these forces are ideologically produced rather than innate.

Because they are women, both Morag and Alice's subjectivities have been constituted to a large extent by the "specifically feminine discourses" (Belsey 65) characteristic of the traditional ideology which views men and women as occupying distinct realms of activities and possessing opposing but complementary characteristics. This conventional belief about the nature of men and women is viewed as not only natural but beneficial to both women and men. Furthermore, the effects of such commonly-held assumptions are ubiquitous; most institutions and discourses contribute to some degree to the constitution of gendered subjectivity. Nevertheless, the discourses which are likely to have the greatest influence on the constitution of female subjectivity are those which have the thoughts, actions and emotions of women as their subject. Therefore, male-centered discourses, which is to say most discourses, while they overtly or covertly reinforce the same ideology, do not have the same power to subjugate women within masculinist thought patterns as do those which address women directly.

Among the most influential of these women-centered discourses are fairy tales and romance fantasies. Both

Morag and Alice's expectations for their lives have been conditioned by fairy tales -- models of female development (or lack of it). Morag describes Brooke in the early stages of their relationship as, "a prince among men" (206) and Alice's friend, Trudl, comments, "We're all looking for Prince Charming" (171). Similarly, Alice and her daughter, Flora, read a great deal of Harlequin Romances throughout the summer during which the framing section of Intertidal Life takes place.<sup>1</sup> Alison Light in "'Returning to Manderley' - Romance Fiction, Female Sexuality and Class" explains the appeal of romance fantasies for women as follows:

Romance offers us relations impossibly harmonized; it uses unequal heterosexuality as a dream of equality and gives women uncomplicated access to subjectivity which is unified and coherent and still within a field of pleasure. (142)

The extent to which Morag and Alice participate in this ideology is suggested by the fact that the priority of each woman in her youth was marriage. Alice records a conversation with her friends, Stella and Trudl. Alice says,

"I have no idea what's happened to the girls I

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<sup>1</sup> Alice's reading of romance novels is more complicated than I suggest here, and I will return to this idea latter in this chapter. Here, I simply wish to point out the cultural climate of traditional feminine discourses in which women live, which can best be emblemized by the romance novel.

knew in high school. I guess I was never very close to any of them. I'm sure they all married young and had lots of kids. I can't remember any of them ever saying they wanted to be anything. Anything other than that."

"Did you?"

"No. Yes. I wanted to be a painter, funnily enough. But I wasn't as good at it as I was at writing. I was a writer by default. But I wanted to be married first. Didn't want the one without the other. Can you imagine a man thinking, well, once I get married I can think about being a composer or a painter or whatever! Once I find the right woman" (179).

When Brooke proposed marriage to Morag, she agreed to his request that she give up university. Morag's action is typical of a heroine of romance. Alice, for example, comments to her daughter Flora, "Still, interesting girls, those Harlequin girls. They often had careers at the beginning of the book but never at the end" (16). Whatever interests or activities women participate in are only valuable in so far as they increase their value in the sexual economy.

Yet, after the successful completion of the one great adventure in women's lives, attracting and winning a man, the romance novel or fairy tale is over. The lives of the women who have been influenced by these discourses, however, continue. After they are married, a phase in women's lives not dealt with in fairy tales or romance fantasies, Morag and Alice discover that the traditional role of wife, and in Alice's case of wife and mother, does not satisfy them. Initially Morag believes that if only

Brooke would let her have a child she would be content. Later, however, she begins to see that the source of her discontentment is something quite different. Morag wonders "whether, if Brooke now suggested that she should try to have his child, she would any longer agree (279).

When the heroine of a woman-centered discourse obtains her goal, that is, the marriage proposal from the hero, she is perceived as being heroic and triumphant, the antithesis of an oppressed individual. Morag, however, recognizes the extent to which the ideology reflected by fairy tales deluded her about herself and her desires. After Prin's funeral, Morag returns to the modern apartment where she and Brooke are living. Morag writes, "Maybe tower would be a better word for the apartment. Crestwood Towers is in fact the name it bears on the flossy brass plate outside the thick plateglass doors . . . A tower it certainly is" (275). The shape of this building suggests the phallogentrism in which she, along with the rest of her society, have been inscribed. This tower recalls fairy tale towers from which princesses are rescued by princes. Morag, however, has already been rescued according to fairy tale conventions and the ideology they embody. It is this ideology and the underlying reality it obscures from which Morag needs to escape. In the fairy tale Rapunzel, the prince rescues the princess from the tower by climbing up



her long hair. Morag sardonically draws attention to the tendency of such myths to obscure the actual position of women while at the same time exposing what these myths obscure -- that women are imprisoned emotionally, mentally and physically, when she states, "Who the hell could let their hair down here?" (275). The happiness and fulfilment that these discourses taught women to expect from life is revealed to have been a delusion.

Both Morag and Alice reject to varying degrees the world view depicted by romance fantasies and fairy tales. During their marriages, both Morag and Alice begin to view their writing as a profession rather than a hobby. Any ambitions women may have besides those related to caregiving fall under what has traditionally been considered the male domain. Thus, in aspiring to become authors, Morag and Alice are participating in the non-traditional ideology of liberal humanism which claims to afford women the same rights and opportunities as men. Yet, while espousing this new notion of femininity, Morag and Alice continue to display certain traditionally feminine attributes which they deem to be in their best interest. Thus, rather than totally rejecting their former roles, both women believe it possible to occupy a unified subject position able to encompass the various roles of writer, wife and mother. They are unaware, however, that this new subject position is

constituted from two distinct notions of femininity which are inherently incompatible and contradictory.

That Morag and Alice attempt to unite the traditional and liberal humanist feminine subject positions is suggested by the fact that they limit their career choice to one which they can do while still fulfilling their primary roles of wife and mother. Neither Morag nor Alice are qualified for a profession. As a result, any occupation they might obtain would probably augment rather than diminish their need for personal fulfilment. Writing, however, does not require specialized training and Morag and Alice had both wanted to be writers before their marriages. Most importantly, Alice and Morag realize, writing is something that can be done at home and therefore is likely to create the least interference with their primary domestic and care-giving responsibilities, or so they believed. Alice and Morag both write at the kitchen table, signifying their attempt to yoke together the heterogeneous roles of writer and homemaker into a unified subject position. Neither woman suspected, however, the conflicts that would arise in their lives and in themselves as a result of this attempt.

During her marriage, Morag began writing during the day while Brooke was at work. On a few occasions, she became so absorbed by her writing that she lost track of

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time. On one of these occasions Brooke complains, "Don't you think I've held back, many times, coming home and finding you sitting there at the typewriter as though hypnotized, and no dinner in sight?" (278). Years after leaving her husband, Morag forms a new relationship with a man named Dan McRaith and has a four year old child to care for. Morag describes her schedule:

She goes [to Dan's] in the afternoons, most days, which is by no means a perfect arrangement. She works mornings in the bookshop. Dan works mornings at his work. Pique does not go to bed until after nine, so evenings are not much good for Morag's work. The choice for her seems to be not too simple.

How to change our hours to suit? What to do, Lord? How to cope with it all? Maybe I should be able to write evenings, late, so as not to inconvenience anyone? I couldn't write then, anyway. I am too bloody tired by then (39).

Morag ambivalently feels that her writing is secondary to the needs of others while at the same time resenting the sacrifices she voluntarily makes.

Yet, the expectations placed on women do not stop at tending to the needs of those to whom they are closest. As women, Morag and Alice are expected to dole out help and support wherever it is needed. It is no coincidence that the Harlequin romance novel Alice's daughter is reading at the beginning of Intertidal Life is entitled, Nurse Prue. The nursing occupation, held almost entirely by women, reflects many of the sexist values of society -- it is the quintessential helping role. That Morag is expected to be

there for others is suggested as she writes:

This had been the pattern of her life for how long? Morag at this table, working, and people arriving and saying, in effect, Please don't let me interrupt you. But they did interrupt her, damn it (372).

Alice experiences similar frustration. She recalls a conversation with her husband, Peter, about her former best friend, Anne-Marie, with whom Peter is having an affair:

"Listen, I know Anne-Marie as well as you, don't forget. I know how sorry she feels for herself. I know that all last spring when I was trying to write, she'd phone up and interrupt me and start crying, say how low' she was feeling, how she hadn't meant to phone but was feeling so low."

"And you told her, didn't you, to stop calling unless it was after twelve-thirty or she was about to commit suicide. Your bloody book was more important than your friend!"

. . . "Listen, Peter, . . . When I said that to her -- about not calling unless she was about to commit suicide -- I said it with a laugh, you know, but also to let her know that she could call, if she were really desperate. I couldn't take the phone off the hook because the kids might have an accident or something - it has happened in the past -- but I was, yes, desperately trying to have a few hours to myself while Flora was at daycare. What's wrong with that? Why should I feel guilty for wanting that? (21-22).

Alice and Morag are considered and consider themselves to be monsters if they refuse or begrudge placing other's needs before their own. As women they are expected to be angels of self-sacrifice or they are damned as selfish monsters. Morag and Alice are perceived and perceive themselves as being monstrous in the sense of greedy -- they want it all. Alice tells her friends,

"I want the whole works! I want to be with a man, not just any man but the miracle man, and be writing my novel. I want to be free to work six or eight hours a day and then play with my kids and then have supper miraculously appear and the children instantly fall asleep and the nannie look up from her knitting and say, 'Don't worry dears, stay out as long as you like,' and then my man and I go off down the road in the moonlight to make love in the woods" (179).

The incompatibility of the two roles, writer and homemaker, and the subject positions they reflect is further suggested by Morag and Alice's relationships with their husbands. Both Brooke and Peter appear to espouse the liberal humanist ideology of gender equality since they encourage their wives in their writing. Yet the amount of encouragement each husband doles out is inversely proportionate to the seriousness with which each woman takes her writing. Alice comments:

"He encourages me and encourages me and encourages me then, when I'm really committed to my writing, really flying around out of the nest a bit, he says, 'you're cold, you're calling all the shots, you're neglecting me'. . . The stronger I got the more he turned away from me" (174).

Both husbands are professors and are threatened by their wives' potential success. When Morag learns that her novel has been accepted for publication, she begins to regard herself as Brooke's equal. Brooke reacts to Morag's new found confidence and success with hostility and contempt. She recalls the following exchange:

"I know you know a lot about novels. But I

know something, as well. Different from reading or teaching."

"With that insight, perhaps you'd like to take over my English 450 course in the Contemporary Novel? I'm sure it could be arranged" (281).

Furthermore, their wives' writing causes Brooke and Peter anxiety because they were accustomed to being the centre of their wives' worlds. Peter, however, was vying with more than Alice's work for this central position in her life. She comments to her friend Stella, "The children, my work. Artists are never always there' and mothers generally put children before husbands" (161). That his wife's decision to become a writer is interpreted by Peter as a kind of personal rejection of himself is understood by Alice as she says, "It had not occurred to her that Peter might be jealous of her writing" (21). Although they initially tried to be supportive of their wives, Peter and Brooke ultimately find this impossible. What appeared an innocuous creative outlet for their housewives begins to disrupt, in ways incomprehensible to Brooke and Peter, the foundation of their beliefs regarding the nature of relationships between men and women and, ultimately, their conception of themselves.

Because Peter is a product of a later generation than Brooke, he appears to espouse the liberal humanist values much more so than Morag's husband. Thus, unlike Morag

who recognizes the impossibility of complete equality in her relationships with men, Alice believes not only that equality is possible but that it in fact exists in her relationship with Peter. Moreover, she assumes that the arrangement is mutually satisfactory. She is mistaken, however, not only about her husband but about herself. Although Alice usurps certain conventionally male privileges by becoming a writer, she does not wish to give up certain advantages that accompany her former position as a woman. Alice had always relied on Peter to be there, like a rock, tied to her needs. Even when she conformed less and less to the traditional female role, Alice, nevertheless, expected Peter to conform to her view of the traditional male role. Alice records a conversation with her friend, Stella:

"last October he said to me, You don't want a husband, you want a seeing-eye dog." A very strange remark and I've been puzzling over it ever since."

"He probably meant you want a protector, something as simple as that."

"I don't know. With a blind person and a seeing-eye dog who's the master and who's the slave? The dog may be the 'protector' but it is also totally bound to the master's wishes . . . I think that's more what Peter meant. That I relied on him absolutely - that he would always be there, totally bound to me and my wishes" (161).

Thus, Alice saw that there were advantages to both the traditional and liberal humanist ideologies and tried to combine them in such a way as would most suit her various needs. Because Alice believed it possible to unite the two

ideologies and thereby achieve a unified and harmonious subjectivity, it dismays her that her husband is unwilling to accept this new version of herself.

Unlike Peter, Brooke is from an earlier generation and does not openly espouse the liberal humanist ideology. Morag, however, still believes, that the promise of equality held out by this new ideology is possible in relationships with some men, if not her former husband. Unlike Alice, Morag does not want a seeing eye-dog. She is both frightened and amazed at times by her own strength. As a result, she embraces the new liberal humanist ideology more completely than does Alice. Years after leaving her husband, Morag forms a relationship with an artist named McRaith. Unlike her ex-husband, Brooke, McRaith seems to treat Morag as an equal. He respects her desire to be a writer as well as the fact that she has her own mind and is not afraid to stand up to him. On one such occasion McRaith tells Morag,

"My God, you should realize how glad I am that you'll stand up to me. That you'll yell at me if necessary. That's what's so bloody difficult with Bridie -- oh Morag, love, I'm sorry, I must not talk about her to you. It is not fair to either of you. But sometimes I want to say to her-- sometimes I do say -- for christ's sake, woman, don't sit there looking injured -- if you disagree with me, say so. Can't you see that's the one thing I value most about you?" (400).

Despite McRaith's declarations which suggest his desire for an egalitarian relationship, what Morag comes to realize in

time is that her relationship with McRaith is just as unequal as was her relationship with Brooke, albeit in different ways. As the previous quotation reveals, McRaith is married and it is only as his mistress, that is by overlooking the fundamental inequality in their relationship, that Morag is allowed some measure of equality.

Unlike Morag, McRaith's wife Bridie is very traditional. She is content to be a wife and mother and does not seek out additional stimulation. That Bridie believes motherhood to be her exclusive role as a woman is underlined by the fact that she has eight children. McRaith does not leave his wife for Morag but continues to divide his time, unbeknown to his wife, between the "liberated" Morag and the traditional Bridie. By allowing herself to become McRaith's mistress, Morag is unwittingly participating in the masculinist power structure which accords men these sexual privileges. Morag realizes that McRaith needs his wife to fulfill a traditional feminine role in order to reassure him of his masculinity and all that entails. At the same time, however, Morag's strength of character and willingness to stand up to him act as an aphrodisiac for McRaith. They are not, however, the qualities he desires in a wife. In fact, if Morag were his wife, she imagines, "she would be expected to make the meals

and do the laundry for him as well as for herself and Pique" (404). When, after three years, Morag finally meets Bridie, she realizes, much to her surprise, that this woman, whom she had for three years seen as her antithesis, resembles her in a profound way. The equality she enjoyed with McRaith was a delusion and she and Bridie, different as they might appear, are fellow victims of patriarchal ideology. Morag's affinity with Bridie is made evident during her brief first and only visit to McRaith's home in Crombruach village, Scotland. Morag is able to understand Bridie based on her few words and gestures better than McRaith is able to, even though McRaith and Bridie have been married for many years. Morag writes:

Bridie's hands reach down for a second, in an automatic gesture, as though she were about to wipe them on an apron which she now remembers she is not wearing. Morag's heart lurches and she finds herself wanting to say I didn't mean to hurt you, if I did hurt you; I didn't know you were here (410).

#### Liberal Humanism -- Cure or Poison?

Although Morag and Alice are capable of donning the qualities traditionally reserved for men and thus proving that the attributes associated with the terms masculine and feminine are free-floating signifiers, they are unable to escape the power hierarchy at the foundation of gendered

subjectivity. Despite the new "male" privileges she has been told she is allowed, Morag still continues to experience the powerlessness characteristic of women's traditional position in society. Morag, for example, though unwilling to accept the conventional feminine role in the manner of Bridie is nevertheless unable to adopt the traditional masculine role as embodied by McRaith. The liberal humanist ideology of gender equality, although it sounds reasonable, fails because it does not take into consideration the crucial place which the notion of "femininity/masculinity" has in supporting the entire structure of Western metaphysics. Thus, the liberal humanist ideology which both women embrace to varying degrees obscures their real relationship to power but does little to effect change. As Jonathan Culler observes, "Affirmation of equality will not disrupt the hierarchy" (166).

Morag and Alice come to realize that this subject position which they take up, this amalgamation of traditional and liberal humanist notions of femininity, is one which is inherently contradictory. Experience has taught them that a unified subjectivity is not a possibility if they attempt to live according to the liberal humanist ideology. The internal divisiveness and frustration Morag and Alice experience as a result of their adherence to the

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new liberal humanist ideology causes them to experience a nostalgia for a "unified and coherent subjectivity within a field of pleasure" (Light, 42) which may never have existed in reality but which, in times of inner conflict, becomes their ideal. Both women believe that their emotional suffering is a result of their inability to accept the traditional female role and blame themselves, in part, for the failure of their relationships with men. Although the world view represented in fairy tales and romance fantasies never truly existed for these or any other women, Morag and Alice at times believe that happiness may have been possible had they been able to live up to the feminine ideal.

In her despair after the departure of her husband, Alice is haunted by a desire for the world view represented by romance fantasies and conventional views of gender relations. The frame section of Intertidal Life occurs seven years after Alice's husband leaves her. At the beginning of the summer, she and her daughter, Flora, draw up a long list of things they would like to do. Most of the summer, however, they spend lying on the beach reading Harlequin Romances. As a writer, Alice is aware of the lack of literary merit in romance novels and the objectionable values they represent. She comments, "On the inside cover of some of them there was a garland in which you could write your name: This Harlequin Romance is the property of



\_\_\_\_\_.' Who would want to admit reading that stuff?" (16). At the same time, Alice and her pubescent daughter are drawn to them. Both women are at a sexually insecure time of life and these novels allow them to participate vicariously in the sexual confidence of the heroine. In other respects, however, Alice's reasons for reading these novels differ from Flora's. Unlike Flora, Alice has already lived through the premarital phase continually rehearsed in these books and the promises for love and happiness held out by the ideology they inscribe proved for her to be false. She comments to her daughter, "I don't know why I let you read such nonsense. Oh well, Madame Bovary is a good antidote'" (14). By referring to Madame Bovary as an antidote, Alice is implying that Romances are a kind of poison. And indeed, Flaubert's heroine literally takes poison when she discovers that the world view represented in romance novels is unavailable to her. Alice's recommendation suggests that she, unlike Flora, knows that these books are only fantasies. Yet, rather than the potentially toxic effect these books are likely to have on Flora, they act as a kind of elixir for Alice, nourishing her fantasies and allowing her a temporary escape from reality. After analyzing comments made by Harlequin Romance readers about why they enjoy these books, Janice Radway drew the following conclusions:

These few comments all hint at a certain sadness that many of the . . . women seem to share because life has not given them all that it once promised. A deep-seated sense of betrayal also lurks behind their deceptively simple expressions of a need to believe in a fairy tale. . . many of the women explained in the interviews that despite their disappointments, they feel refreshed and strengthened by their vicarious participation in a fantasy relationship where the heroine is frequently treated as they themselves would most like to be loved (130).

Thus, unlike other forms of discourse, Harlequin romances speak to Alice's desire to be loved and allow her to temporarily escape from a world in which she believes the kind of love she desires and was taught to expect is no longer, nor was ever, possible.

Despite their inadequacy and the new options open to them, discourses which depict traditional modes of femininity and gender relations continue to exert the greatest influence on the female psyche. Furthermore, the powerless position of women inscribed by traditional discourses is not significantly disturbed by liberal humanism. How can we account for the failure of this ideology to establish equality between the sexes? The new feminine subject position under the liberal humanist ideology is not new at all, but rather a transposition of the former masculine subject position. For a woman to occupy a strictly masculine subject position, as I noted earlier, is impossible since by definition such a woman is subversive. Moreover, for a woman to occupy a combination

of the masculine and feminine subject positions, as Morag and Alice attempt to do, is equally impossible because it denies the relationship between the two terms. Rather than positive terms existing in and of themselves, the notions of femininity and masculinity are defined in opposition to each other. The two terms are inextricably bound one to the other, totally dependent on one another for their meaning. Culler confirms this notion as he states, "Various discourses -- psychoanalytic, philosophical, literary, historical -- have constituted a notion of man by characterizing the feminine in terms that permit it to be set aside" (166). To be both selfless and self-centered, dominant and submissive, willing to sacrifice yourself for others and demand sacrifices from others, is to occupy the antithesis of a unified subject position. It is to be mad. Indeed, as Belsey points out,

One way of responding to this situation is to retreat from the contradictions and from discourse itself, to become "sick" - more women than men are treated for mental illness. Another is to seek a resolution of the contradictions in the discourses of feminism (66).

It is the latter which both Alice and Morag choose. The clash which occurs when Morag and Alice attempt to negotiate between the masculine and feminine subject positions exposes the previously imperceptible gaps and contradictions in both the traditional and liberal humanist ideologies. Both ideologies are exposed as social constructs whose main

function is to legitimize and/or obscure the power of one gender over another. The traditional ideology does so by pretending that the gender relations are not only natural but advantageous to both men and women, the liberal humanist by professing the equivalent of a belief that both men and women can occupy the masculine subject position.

Rather than opposing ideologies, the liberal humanist and traditional ideologies are part of a larger belief system which they both serve to obscure. What these ideologies have in common is not what they ostensibly profess about the nature of gender relations, but what they ignore -- the powerless position of women in society. The liberal humanist ideology not only fails to alter the nature of power relations between the sexes glorified by the traditional ideology, but, by ostensibly regarding women as equal, it obscures the fundamentally different conditions of existence which women experience. In both ideologies, women are included under the rubric "man", either because they are seen as unimportant or as essentially the same. It is by examining the gaps and contradictions in these ideologies that Morag and Alice begin to discover the real workings of power at the heart of the seemingly innocuous discursive realities which inscribe them. As Chris Weedon points out,

Although the subject . . . is socially constructed in discursive practices, she none the less acts as a thinking, feeling subject and social agent capable of resistance and innovations produced out

of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices (125).

Once the ideological fog which has enshrouded their subjectivities has lifted, Morag and Alice begin to see that whether they were participating in the traditional or the liberal humanist ideology, their actual position was politically essentially the same: plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose. As I have indicated, the liberal humanist ideology points out the extent to which attributes conventionally seen as essentially masculine or feminine are in fact free-floating signifiers which may be adopted by either gender. Regardless of how these human attributes are arranged, however, the balance of power is always accorded the masculine side of the tally. Beyond allowing women equal access to what have been conventionally considered male qualities and privileges, a fundamental reassessment of the forces at work in the constitution of gendered subjectivity and of the notion of subjectivity itself is required if women (and men) are to become truly liberated.

## Chapter Two

### The Absence of an Essential Self

As I have indicated, both the liberal humanist and the traditional ideologies are revealed to be aspects of a larger all-encompassing ideology. Derrida is useful in attempting to unravel some of the threads which make up its apparently seamless web. As he has shown, binary oppositions are the keystone of Western metaphysics. Furthermore, these binary oppositions are inevitably hierarchical. Two terms or entities are conceived of as opposed in order that one term can be privileged at the expense of the other. The terms feminine and masculine are a case in point. Although women and men are anatomically different, it does not follow logically that they must possess opposing characteristics. The values these biological differences receive are cultural and arbitrary. While male/female is perhaps only one instance of this metaphysical tendency, Culler notes,

Some writers have claimed that [male/female] is the primordial opposition on which all others are

based and that, as Helene Cixous puts it, the aim of logocentrism, though it could not admit it, has always been to found phallogocentrism, to assure a rationale for a masculine order (165).

Whether or not masculine/feminine is the originary opposition, the ubiquitous tendency in Western thought to divide concepts and experience into a series of hierarchical binary oppositions has facilitated, if not created, women's subordinate status.

Furthermore, following Ferdinand de Saussure, Derrida reminds us that language is based on difference and that nowhere is the meaning of a signifier self-identical and fully self-present as had previously been believed. Meaning exists not in the signifiers themselves, but rather is generated by the differences between signifiers. As Saussure remarks, "Signs function, then, not through their intrinsic value but through their relative position" (Quoted in Belsey, 40). Because of this fact about language, it is virtually impossible not to describe or conceive of individual concepts except in terms of their degree of difference or similarity to other concepts. In a radical sense, then, all thinking, whether we recognize it or not, can be described as analogical or metaphoric. As George Eliot deftly points out in her novel, The Mill on the Floss, "we can so seldom declare what a thing is, except by saying it is something else" (209). Similarly, there are several dictionary definitions of words in Thomas' novel which

underline the fact that the concepts which words evoke can only be understood in relation to other, different words. Thus, analogies, symbols, metaphors -- indeed, all figures of speech, can no longer be unproblematically viewed as vehicles for literal referents. All language is figural. As J. Hillis Miller writes, "No metaphor or myth is a mere 'symbolic convenience', separable from the thought it embodies. It is the body of the thought, the secret generator of the concepts it incarnates" (10). Moreover, Eliot remarks in the same passage from which the previous quotation was taken,

It is astonishing what a different result one gets by changing the metaphor! Once call the brain an intellectual stomach and one's ingenious conception of the classics and geometry as ploughs and harrows seems to settle nothing. But then it is open to some one else to follow great authorities and call the mind a sheet of white paper or a mirror, in which case one's knowledge of the digestive process becomes quite irrelevant. It was doubtless an ingenious idea to call the camel the ship of the desert, but it would hardly lead one far in training the beast. O Aristotle! if you had had the advantage of being the freshest modern instead of the greatest ancient, would you not have mingled your praise of metaphorical speech as a sign of high intelligence, with a lamentation that intelligence so rarely shows itself in speech without metaphor, -- that we can so seldom declare what a thing is, except by saying it is something else? (209).

Thinking analogically, which is to say thinking itself, is an effect of language and all language, including analogies, symbols and metaphors is rooted in culture and does not represent universal truths, fixed for all time. Such

attempts at mastery, Nietzsche and Derrida have argued, are fundamentally illusory. As Nietzsche says, "Ultimately man finds in things nothing but what he himself has imported into them. All knowledge is an expression of the will to power" (Quoted in Selden, 98, emphasis added). Language, therefore, not only reflects our values and beliefs, but, because its contingent and arbitrary nature is suppressed, serves as a powerful means of reinforcing the dominant patriarchal ideology.

Women's subordinate status, thus, has not been entrenched exclusively by the fact that she is considered the secondary term in the binary opposition man/woman, but also by her analogous alignment with other secondary concepts. Toril Moi points out that sexual analogy is commonly used to classify experience and women are analogously aligned with the negative powerless instance of the endless series of hierarchical binary oppositions characteristic of Western philosophy (104). In these novels, both Morag and Alice examine the extent to which the analogic and binary thought patterns of patriarchal ideology have defined and limited them. Furthermore, they demonstrate the instability of the ground on which this thinking is based and in so doing unwrench the monological patriarchal discourses whose systems of metaphors, symbols and logic have constituted a notion of woman which has

validated her oppressed status.

In order to throw into relief the latent tendency in our culture to confuse culturally-determined analogies with universal truths, Morag and Alice focus on the seventeenth century, during which time this ideology was manifest. It was exemplified by a belief in correspondences between different ontological planes. This belief led to a conception of a social order which is grounded in the natural world. According to this system, the human world is contiguous with the natural world. Both were believed to exhibit elements which could be hierarchically arranged in what is known as the Great Chain of Being. This totalizing tendency has resulted in making oppression seem natural. While this view is repudiated by most scholars and laypersons alike, associating it with other less enlightened ages, both Intertidal Life and The Diviners expose the extent to which a belief in an ordered universe has lost neither its appeal nor its influence.

Both authors suggest that we have not progressed much beyond the seventeenth century despite what we may think. Laurence, for example, focuses on John Donne (a poet both women feel exemplifies this seventeenth-century metaphysic) in order to convey the notion that thought has changed little in the last three centuries. Morag identifies with the apostrophized lover in Donne's poem,

"The Canonization". The writer records an exchange between herself and her professor during her seventeenth-century English class. Morag writes,

"For God's sake hold your tongue and let me love." That's a very cruel line. Supposing the lady had been able to write poetry -- I mean, you wonder what she might have said to him."

"You would not take kindly, Miss Gunn, to be asked to hold your tongue?"

. . . "No. No, I would not."

"Well, quite right, too . . . But Donne, surely, must be seen as a man of his historical time" (208).

Unknown to Morag, this professor will later become her oppressive husband, reinforcing how little the times have actually changed. Both novels suggest that we are still in the wake of the Copernican revolution begun in the seventeenth-century. By suggesting that the earth can no longer be considered the centre of our conceptual universe, Copernicus began a process of conceptual decentering which is still going on today. Alice confirms this notion when she writes,

"what's happening to men and women today is just as exciting and terrifying as the discovery that the earth was round, not flat or even that the earth was not the centre of the universe but just part of a solar system" (171).

The residual effects of this seventeenth-century metaphysic are particularly evident in the tenacity of received attitudes toward women and men. In order to emphasize the fact that women and men are thought of in

terms of other entities to which they are thought to correspond, Thomas examines Western civilization's attitudes toward the sun and moon. Women have always been believed to have a natural connection with the moon and men, the sun. J.E. Cirlot confirms this mystical hypothesis in his book A Dictionary of Symbols in which he states:

It is a well known fact that. . . "solar passion", so to speak, with its heroic and fierce character, clearly had to be assimilated to the masculine principle, and the pale, delicate nature of lunar light, with its connexion with the waters of the ocean (and the rhythm of women), obviously had to be classified as feminine. These equations are certainly not constant; but the exceptions do not invalidate the essential truth of this symbolism (318).

While there may in fact be a similarity between women's menstrual cycles and the moon's phases, the significance given to this coincidence is by no means self-evident. Furthermore, the values and qualities ascribed to the moon and analogously to women, or vice-versa, are cultural constructs designed to validate male superiority and dominance. Joan Coldwell in her essay "Natural Herstory and Intertidal Life", confirms this notion that women's association with the moon is purely cultural. She states that "The ritualistic refrain . . . (And the moon up there, female, shining always by reflected light, dependant on the sun) -- emphasizes woman's relative powerlessness in a man's world" (142). The use of the word "emphasizes", however, ignores the possibility that this symbolic association

between women and the moon may in fact contribute to if not create women's oppressed status by causing it to seem natural. All attempts to align the conceptual or physical universe along the lines of gender serve to further entrench received ideas about gender and therefore the phallogocentrism of Western ideology. Coldwell more explicitly falls back on analogical thinking when she speaks of Alice's eventual "physiological link" with "the moon's cycles and the tides" (141). She conflates Alice's desire for the ontological stability of the natural order with its possibility. Women's linkage with the moon and the qualities they are perceived to share reflects a belief in a transcendental truth beyond the political and social realities of women's lives. In other words, the moon is seen as a motivated symbol in which the gap between the signifier "moon" and the signified meanings such as dependency, inferiority, and powerlessness, has been closed and meaning has been fixed for all time.

Alice unsettles this totalizing scheme by examining the extent to which signifiers like 'sun' and 'moon' could be said to connote completely opposite and unconventional signifieds. As Coldwell points out, the moon can not only be said to symbolize women's powerlessness, it can also suggest the opposite -- men's power. She states, "It was as if Peter had a dark magnetic pull whereby he even

appropriated the powers of the 'female' moon, drawing the women to him 'as surely as though he controlled the tide'" (143). Alice further unsettles the traditional hierarchical thought patterns by establishing a link between women and the sun. She records a conversation between herself and her two friends, Trudi and Stella:

"But it's a bitch, isn't it? All this bleeding and Tampax and pregnancy stuff."

"Our sister moon doesn't have to go through any of that!"

"No. It's the sun that bleeds, isn't it, across the sky. Bursts and bleeds" (195).

This passage reflects Alice's desire to participate in the "solar" power traditionally reserved for men while at the same time shows her exercising that power -- participating in the creation of meaning. Despite Cirlot's manifest and Coldwell's latent assertions to the contrary, the inessentiality of the traditional equation woman-moon/man-sun might in fact be proven by the exceptions. Thus, the sun and moon can no longer be unproblematically used as a ground for the oppositional nature of men and women. The implication that women resemble the moon and men the sun more closely than they resemble each other is an example of the great lengths to which patriarchal logic must go in order to suppress the genders' much more obvious similarities.

There are various ways in which patriarchal logic validates the woman-moon/man-sun correspondence. The fact

that the moon shines by reflecting the sun's light has led to the belief in the moon's passive and the sun's active nature. Thus, women and men are analogously seen as passive and active respectively. By exposing the essential instability of the woman-moon/man-sun equation, Alice is simultaneously throwing into question the naturalness of the belief in women's passive and men's active natures.

Thomas deftly employs the patriarchal logic used to ascribe women a passive and men an active nature in order to show the arbitrariness of such connections. The fact that the moon shines only by reflected light has traditionally been interpreted as a testimony to its passive nature. Alice, however, recognizes the arbitrary association between the signifier "moon" and the signified "passive". If the meaning of the moon is to be truly grounded in its specificity, than it should logically signify a reflective rather than a passive nature. In this way, Alice exposes the extent to which the moon is a ideologically rather than a naturally motivated symbol and in so doing is able to co-opt it for her own polemical purposes. Thus, she gives the moon, and by analogy women, a new positive currency based on her belief in their reflective rather than passive natures.

The notion of reflection, like that of the woman writer, is disruptive because it is able to comprehend both sides of the passive/active opposition. Alice and Morag,

for example, are reflective in both the active and passive senses of the word. Characteristic of their "in between" position as women writers, Alice and Morag can both passively reflect the phallogentric version of reality offered them and actively participate in its recreation.

Like the concept of "reflectiveness", that of "writing" is also a rhetorically reversible signifier capable of straddling the active/passive opposition. The signifier "writing" takes on either passive or active connotations depending on the gender of the person who performs it. Thus, women writers are seen as passive, men, active. Writing takes on these two opposite associations because the writer and the writing are believed to be inextricably linked. Women have traditionally been relegated to a domestic sphere of experience which has been devalued by the dominant ideology. Thus, women's writing is also regarded as "domestic" in the sense of being limited in its scope and ability to convey universal "truths". Alice's own metaphors to describe the writing process reinforce the perceived connection between women's domestic lives and their writing. She writes,

Alice and Stella were talking about writing.

"Oh, I don't know," Alice said to Stella, "it's a funny feeling -- like knowing just when the bread has risen enough -- or maybe even baked enough. A kind of knowing' anyway, that you're doing it right." Then she laughed.

"But sometimes that's an illusion. You burn it or it's underdone or soggy -- a mess."

"And then?"

"And then I crumple it all up and use it to start the fire" (164).

Furthermore, women's writing, like women in general, is oxymoronically thought to be a "passive activity". When Morag is living in Vancouver, her first novel is published. Her landlady, Maggie Telfer, is curious as to the source of Morag's new found income. Morag writes,

Maggie Telfer is suspicious, obviously thinking that such a pregnant lady cannot have suddenly become a hustler, but if not that, what?

"You have come into some money, dear?" she enquires. Morag explains, but guardedly.

"Think of that," Mrs. Telfer says. "That guy said you were an author, but naturally I never believed him."

"Oh, naturally."

"Well," Maggie says, sighing heftily, "it must be nice to be able to earn a living just sitting there (321).

Similarly, Alice's husband, Peter, shares this view that when women are writing they are being passive. Alice comments, "Peter said that when she picked up a pen she was 'naturally stoned' and she found the remark insulting" (135).

While both Morag and Alice may refuse to accept that when they are writing they are "just sitting there" or "naturally stoned", these phrases do seem to represent to them the gestalt of their lives. As mothers and writers, these women often see themselves to be suffering from a kind of inertia. As Alice notes, "Women aren't encouraged to

take risks" (161). Women are often enmeshed in familial responsibilities which inhibit their freedom and make them feel passive. Alice writes,

But one went on a true quest alone and, except for magical and divine intervention, one fought the terror of the dark wood alone. One didn't bring three kids a lame dog and a spiteful cat (141).

While writing for women is diagnosed as passive, writing for men is seen as the ultimate activity. Men's lives, unlike women's, are considered active. Great works of fiction are believed to originate largely from the adventures men experience in their lives, adventures which are denied to women. The one socially sanctioned adventure in a woman's life is attracting and winning a man. As the literary canon reminds us, this is not considered a subject for great literature. Furthermore, writers have conventionally been seen as men who are imbued with special powers which enable them to actively create worlds through their words. As creators, male writers are analogously aligned with God. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out this fact in The Madwoman in the Attic. They write, "God the Father both engenders the cosmos and . . . writes the Book of Nature: both tropes describe a single act of creation" (6, emphasis added). The connection between authorship and godliness is made explicit in the title of Laurence's novel, The Diviners. In so doing, Laurence has

made evident her desire for the authorial power and prestige which her male counterparts have always enjoyed. Alice further unsettles this woman-passive/man-active opposition by once again rigorously employing patriarchal logic in order to reveal its arbitrary nature. Recalling the Churching of Women ceremony in England, Alice writes:

And the Minister who delivereth the  
Cup shall say,

The Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ which was shed for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life. Drink this in remembrance that Christ's Blood was shed for thee, and  
be thankful.

(said to the partakers of his most blessed body and blood.)  
Why did we not put our hands between our legs, show him our blood.

"Drink this in remembrance."

For the word is not made flesh, it's the other way around. The flesh made word, or rather, in the beginning, made cry, made howl (53).

Although women play the largest role in (pro)creation, their analogous relationship with divinity is repressed in patriarchal religions and cultures. Furthermore, it is not only the sun but also Christ who bleeds and therefore shares a commonality with women rather than men.

While activity is traditionally believed to be an attribute of men and passivity of women, Alice observes that the reverse could equally be said to be true. Passivity, for Alice, is exemplified not by herself and her female friends but by Peter and the other (mostly male) dope-smoking hippies who inhabit the island. The adherents to

this "microculture" appear to espouse very different values from the rest of society. Their oppositional nature, however, may be more apparent than real. As Alice comments, "Although there were posters everywhere, Alice did not see signs of anyone marching to the beat of a different drummer" (201). In many respects, this group is a microcosm of Western civilization and as such throws into relief one of its central, though latent, attributes -- its search for and belief in a systematic and ordered universe. Alice comments of the hippies, "Everybody Brother Sun or Sister Moon. (But the moon only shining by reflection)" (274). The hippies confuse the ontological status of these celestial objects with their own. This fact represents an inauthentic desire in the Sartrean sense to avoid the human condition. Moreover, it is this object-like passivity which makes Alice afraid for the world. Alice states, "It would be hard to take a stand on anything if you were always sitting with your back against a log, your eyes closed, just being'" (135).

Despite their mystical desires to form part of an integrated universe, what is also apparent to Alice are the attributes of the sun and moon which the hippies make no effort to analogously resemble. Alice comments, "there's something so passive about what's going on now . . . There's no real spirit of adventure; there's no reflection either

(201). Thus, the hippies' mysticism is purely opportunistic. They ignore the behavioral analogies which could be derived from observing the sun and moon, such as spiritedness and reflectiveness, and instead focus on the already existing cultural values which these entities seem to validate. Their selective attention further engenders male dominance. Thus, Alice suggests, passivity, not as it is traditionally conceived of as an innate attribute of women but rather as an unreflective acceptance of the power structures in society can lead to a political quietude which jeopardizes all our rights and freedoms.

As the hippies make evident, the desire for integration into an analogous and ordered universe is ultimately a desire to preserve the existing social structures and therefore a masculinist desire for power and authority. In order for the universe to be ordered, it must be anchored. There must be a centre, otherwise, everything would be relative. The centre is of course God, and by analogy, man who is created in his image. Although men who are writers perhaps come closest to divinity, all men partake to some extent of this privileged central position. Alice's estranged husband Peter, who is an art teacher, decides to teach Alice's two best friends on the island how to paint. He suggests that they all three paint a mandala. According to Cirlot, "the mandala always alludes to the

concept of Centre . . . it takes its inspiration from the mystic longing for some supreme integration" (201). The "man"dala is aptly named. Peter becomes the centre of the little group flanked by his admirers, Alice's friends, Trudl and Stella. Alice's writes, "Stella showed Alice a drawing she had made in her journal: Peter in the middle with his arms around Stella and Trudl" (191). Thus, this belief in an analogous and integrated universe with man as its centre allows women to be characterized as marginal and therefore set aside as unimportant.

This notion of women as marginal is imaged in Thomas' novel by the heroine's affinity for and association with islands, non-essential pieces of land dependent on the main. Alice lives on an island off the coast of British Columbia. Although Manawaka, the town where Morag was raised, is located in the most landlocked part of the continent, it is island-like in that it is isolated from all major centres. After living in the major centres of Toronto, Vancouver and London, England, Morag eventually settles on a farm at McConnell's Landing, Ontario which, like Manawaka, is remote from urban centres. Morag and Alice's sense of themselves as marginalized according to an ideological map is concretized by their obvious marginalization in geography.

Morag and Alice's peripheral position is further evident in that, like most women, they are largely isolated

from the economic power structures of society. During their marriages, both women's primary role is that of housewife and as such, Morag and Alice are financially dependant on their husbands. Although they are writing during their marriages, neither woman makes enough money to support herself. As a result of its low to non-existent monetary value, writing is not considered a "real" occupation, especially if it is done by women. Alice comments regarding her separation agreement,

Alice noticed that the document said "Peter Hoyle, teacher" and underneath, "Alice Hoyle, housewife." She borrowed one of Hannah's pens and crossed that out, that housewife business. "Writer". Then she wrote a letter to the lawyer and enclosed the agreement saying that she had no intention of signing until the document had been officially changed (157).

After the break-up of their marriages, Morag and Alice are both in financial difficulty. Morag and the divorce law at the time both agree that she is not entitled to any of "Brooke's" money because she is carrying another man's child. Furthermore, Morag's pregnancy inhibits her ability to make a living. She is forced to quit her job as a typist and accept a much lower paying one as a cook and cleaner in a boarding house which she refers to as "bleak house". Morag comments,

Why had she imagined that she could look after and support a kid on her own? It had seemed a perfectly natural notion at the time. Now it seems merely lunacy. She will have to go on

welfare. Never. But of course she will, if necessary. What will happen to her and to the child? (317).

Alice also experiences financial difficulty after her marriage break-up. She refuses to take what she refers to as "the old alimony-and-accusation route" preferring instead to at least try to be independent. Alice comments, "I couldn't take money from a man who didn't love me. I was so emotionally dependent on him that I was afraid to be financially dependent on him too" (177). Moreover, Alice's low self-esteem after her husband leaves her allows her to be persuaded not to demand money from her husband. She writes:

We don't want to bicker about money. After all, as he says, that's not the kind of marriage we had. I murmur no, no of course not, grateful, grateful! that he can say something positive about our marriage. Now I sit here in bed, radio turned low, candle flickering, wondering why I didn't get a good lawyer and hit him for everything he's got. "We didn't have that kind of marriage . . ." What kind did we have, then, tell me you asshole. Here I am on this island with three kids and a drafty house with no inside doors, no privacy for any of us in our shock and grief" (40).

Because they are relegated to the margins, women are analogously equated with other politically marginalized groups. Both Alice and Morag, for example, identify with dispossessed and imperialized peoples such as Canada's native population. The marginalization of the Metis is

suggested in The Diviners by the fact that they live on the outskirts of town and in that way share the status of the town's garbage. The similarities between women's treatment under patriarchy and colonized peoples under imperialism is made explicit by Alice. She tells her friends,

"Women have let men define them, taken their names even, with marriage, just like a conquered or newly settled region, British Columbia, British Guiana, New Orleans, New Jersey, New France, New England, etcetera. I really understand all those African nations taking new names with their independence, names that relate to their racial history. Also the Afro-Americans and the Indians" (171).

Conquered peoples have been denied the right to name and thus define themselves in order that they may be constituted as civilization's Other. According to Steven Connor in Postmodernist Culture these places are often represented

in ways that simultaneously bring these regions into being for Europe, fulfill its need for psychological and political centering, and silence any attempts at self-definition by these people and their post-colonial descendants (232).

Women, Alice suggests, fulfill a similar role for men.

### Chapter Three

#### Women (as) Frame

By positioning women on the periphery, men are perceived as stable and unified, possessing full self-identity. Rather than men's fully present and self-identical opposite as they are traditionally conceived, however, this conceptual map with women on the margins and men in the centre suggests that women function as a kind of frame for men. Derrida has remarked on the indeterminacy of the frame. "There is framing," asserts Derrida, "but the frame does not exist" (Quoted in Culler, 197). In other words, frames become part of the background and part of what is inside the frame. In this way, women unsettle the inside/outside opposition necessary to the patriarchal schema by comprehending both sides of the equation.

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One of the ways in which women, as frames, become

part of men's background is that they are aligned with nature. Nature has traditionally been conceived of in typical male narratives as something to be conquered and dominated. Craig Owens describes these tales as, "narratives of mastery; of man seeking his telos in the conquest of nature" (65). Alice's desire for adventure in the traditional masculine sense is suggested by the epigraphs in Intertidal life which are taken from A Spanish Voyage to Vancouver, the book Alice is reading during the summer which constitutes the frame section of the novel. By marginalizing in the novel that which has traditionally been perceived as central -- narratives of male mastery -- and centralizing that which has been constituted as peripheral -- the emotional and physical reality of women's lives -- Thomas has demonstrated the fundamental instability of this traditional opposition.

Although, on one level Alice desires adventure, on another she feels ambiguous about this type of activity since women are analogously equated with the land which is being conquered. Alice comments:

The turn of women, now, to go exploring? Do we want to remain like John Donne's mistress, passive -- "She is all States/and all Princes, I" -- or like the woman in the dress made up of a map, the one we sang about at summer camp and thought we were being so naughty:

Her back was BRAZIL  
Her breast was BUNKER HILL  
And just a little bit  
Below

Was BORNEO (70).

Alice's response to the televised first moon landing reflects her identification with the violated moon. "Alice felt frightened -- it was as though the earth were doing something it had no right to do" (16). Because women occupy the subject position of the conquered rather than the conqueror, Alice has difficulty imagining women, least of all herself, on any real adventures. Furthermore, women's very different circumstances raise practical as well as existential concerns. She comments,

Would we take our children with us, on these voyages of discovery?

#### FIRST MOM ON THE MOON

Would our lovers wait faithfully for us until we returned? (Would we really want to go?) (70).

This parenthetical question is central to the problem of women's subject position. They can neither totally reject nor accept either of the two subject positions offered them and as a result feel divided from themselves.

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Women are also conceived of as the border which separates men from animals and as such women and animals are often analogously equated. Like animals, women are seen as subservient to men and are trained to perform in ways which

men deem desirable. Morag recognizes this fact when, after observing the other women at a local dance, she asks, "Does she really want to join the circus, be a performing filly going through her prancing paces?" (164). Furthermore, like nature, animals are seen as something to be possessed and conquered. Morag describes these men as "contemptuous of the girls they are trying to make. Not as though it might be something they both want to do, but only as though the girl were a mare to be mounted by a studhorse" (164).

This equation between women and animals is also carried out in more subtle ways. In fact, often the obverse of the denigration implied by this equation seems to be the case, as for example, in celebrations of the Virgin Mary. This ideal of womanhood, however, causes actual women to suffer by comparison. Alice records her thoughts during the Churching of Women ceremony in England. She writes, "After the Immaculate Conception, the maculate delivery, pushing and grunting and lowing like the beasts in the manger" (52). The fact that Christianity ignores and represses certain physical realities of women's lives and bodies, such as that which Alice describes, reinforces a disgust for actual women and a tendency to see them as subhuman.

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Along with nature and animals, women also form part of men's background in that they are conflated with children. Since the moon is dependent on men for its light, women, by analogy, are believed to be naturally dependent on men. This postulate allows women to be equated with truly dependent individuals, children. Patriarchal logic encourages this view of women for many reasons. Men are uncomfortable with women's adult status partly because of its perceived synonymy with motherhood. Women, because of their larger role in procreation, are seen in terms of children; either as children themselves or as having children. The childless adult woman is considered an anomaly. Thus, by acknowledging their wives as adults, men run the risk of confusing them with their own mothers. This unconscious confusion between their wives and their mothers has the potential to cause in men a resurfacing of their repressed Oedipal desires. In an attempt to avoid such a resurfacing, Morag's husband, Brooke, takes great pains to convince himself of his wife's childlike status. For example, he affectionately refers to Morag as "child". What Brooke likes most about his wife is what he considers to be her "mysterious non-existent past". He comments to Morag, "It's as though you are starting life now, newly" (212). In so doing, Brooke forces Morag to deny her past and her lack of innocence and literally become his child. Furthermore,

in order to ensure Morag remains a child, Brooke denies her one.

Despite these efforts to disavow his wife's adult status and thereby repress his Oedipal desires, Brooke's fantasies return to him on occasion in the form of nightmares. He is repeatedly haunted by the quasi-sexual relationship he had with his nanny when he was a child. Brooke was punished by his father and made to feel guilty for this relationship. Thus, the trauma of this event has inhibited his ability to progress beyond this Oedipal stage of development. Paradoxically, the fact that Brooke denies Morag a child actually serves to rehearse his childhood fantasies. Because Morag remains childless, Brooke is able to remain her little boy without having to compete with a father or other siblings for her attention.

Alice's husband Peter experiences similar internal conflicts. Although Peter does not forbid Alice from having children, Alice notices that his feelings towards her changed after she became a mother. She writes:

"I think," Alice said, that the minute I became a mother he was unable to love me anymore. Romantically, I mean."

"You mean because you lost your figure?" Of course Stella would ask that.

"Oh I didn't, not for years. No, nothing like that. I mean because he hated his own -- she was so uptight about sex. Mothers and fathers shouldn't be genitally oriented. Got to get on with it. Life, don't you know. First acts over, now we're into the heavy stuff" (154).

Alice unwittingly encourages this confusion in Peter between herself and his mother. Her tendency to mother her husband becomes exaggerated after their marriage break-up. Alice records a conversation between herself and Stella. She writes,

"If you had left him completely then you might have got him back."

"Why?"

"You made it all very easy for him. Actually you behaved like a mother."

"A Mother!"

"Sure. Well an ideal wife, anyway. You allowed him to do as he pleased, go where he would and come back anytime, all is forgiven. So civilized. So understanding. You wouldn't even take his money" (177).

Yet, in other ways, Alice refuses to act the part of the ideal mother. Peter is jealous of her writing and her children, both of which compete with him for her attention. The women with whom Peter becomes seriously involved during and after his marriage, Anne-Marie and Stella in particular, are childless, ambitionless and tend to display a greater child-like dependency on others. Thus, refusing to mother him, they nonetheless in some ways act the part of the perfect mother by devoting all their attention to Peter. This combination of childlike traits encouraged in women allows men to paradoxically remain children themselves.

In order that women can be unproblematically viewed as childlike, they are encouraged to be dependent, helpless and to avoid responsibility. These qualities are often

exhibited by women because they experience a nostalgia for childhood, a time of security. "When she was a young child", Morag writes, "she used to believe that everything would be alright once she was grown up and nobody could tell her what to do. Now she wishes somebody could tell her what to do" (168). Similarly Alice writes:

She felt alien and afraid and pulled her wool cape closer to her. Walking the quiet streets, the yellow lights of the houses as innocent as butter pats. Dragging her steps a little wishing some Great Parent would swoop down and gather her up with a cry of "Oh there you are" and tuck her into bed and kiss her cheek and tell her the world would soon be alright again (123).

Women are encouraged to remain in this child-like state by the dominant ideology which obscures the cost to women of remaining in this emotionally immature, dependent and powerless position. The consequences of trying to live up to the feminine ideal by remaining in a childlike state are brought home to Morag when she attends her step-mother, Prin's, funeral. Prin's full name, Princess, points to the fairy-tale expectations which those who named her, and consequently perhaps Prin herself, had for her life. The amputation of the last syllable of Prin's name is appropriate since it suggests Prin's stunted personal and emotional growth as well as her unfulfilled expectations of life. Prin did not live happily ever after, but instead was destined for a life of poverty and degradation as the uneducated wife of the town's garbage collector. Called

simple all her life, Prin tried to insulate herself from the world in rolls of fat and ultimately experienced an untimely death from premature senility. Morag wonders how long Prin had been senile. The implication is that in some respects Prin has been senile all her life. In other words, the abdication of responsibility encouraged by society is not only reminiscent of childhood, it also looks forward to senility. Unlike childhood, senility has no positive associations. Thus, by comparing the position women are encouraged to assume with that of the elderly rather than with children, the nostalgic enticement is removed and the political and personal implications of women's status can be examined objectively.

This childlike status, rather than natural in women, is shown to be in direct conflict with their roles as mothers. The reality of most women's lives suggests that the benefits of childhood are only ever a memory since they have children of their own who are dependent on them, forcing them to become adults. Laurence uses pregnancy and birth as a trope in The Diviners to focus on the inextricable connection between adulthood and motherhood. After leaving Brooke, Morag continues to be doubtful about her ability to survive financially and emotionally on her own. She is unable to return to Brooke even if she wanted to, however, since she has become pregnant by another man.

After years of being treated like a child, Morag finally has a child of her own, and in so doing gives birth to herself as an adult. The absence of a man to depend on does not create Morag's new sense of herself as an adult, but rather throws it into relief. Motherhood, on the other hand, which has traditionally been a mark of women's inferiority, acts as a catalyst in Morag's development towards independence and adulthood.

Alice further throws into question the naturalness of the woman/child equation. While it is only women who are diagnosed as childlike by the dominant ideology, Alice observes that men too desire freedom from responsibility and the comfort of being told what to do characteristic of childhood. Like women, men also experience a nostalgia for the carefree days of their youth. Unlike women, however, men are not encouraged to act in accordance with these desires. This latent urge in men to become children again is manifest in the hippie culture Alice observes on the island. Their goal, or so it seems to Alice, is to return to a way of life resembling that of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. That this desire is a disguised wish to return to childhood is suggested by the fact that the hippies are always looking for parent figures, someone to tell them what to do. Alice writes of her two hippie friends:

(They) yearned for gurus -- always male, preferable from someplace older, more ancient in its wisdom than raw North America. They, too, wanted to be told what to do. Or maybe what they wanted was both: to "do their own thing" and be told what their "own thing" was? (96).

That the hippies are not unique in this way is suggested by the fact that Alice's husband, Peter, a respected university professor, also exhibits many of the same characteristics and desires. Although a lack of responsibility is conventionally a feminine privilege and attribute, Peter, after being exposed to this new culture, has no misgivings about adopting this trait for himself. When Alice becomes a writer, the tacit agreement between the sexes is upset. Her participation in the liberal humanist ideology means a rejection of the feminine ideal. Thus, this transformation on her part served as a catalyst which triggered an unforeseen reaction in her husband. Peter is no longer accorded the traditional privileges which go along with the male role. Since Alice is no longer willing to live up to her end of the unspoken agreement, Peter feels under no obligation to live up to his. Although he did not initially desire the break from tradition, Peter too sees advantages in becoming liberated from the conventional expectations placed on his gender. Like Alice, when she was dissatisfied with her exclusive role as wife and mother and decided to participate in a new ideology, Peter becomes

aware of a philosophy of life more in line with his self-interest.

Unlike the liberal humanist ideology which creates considerable conflict in women as they try to unite contradictory attitudes and notions of themselves, the "extracultural" hippie philosophy offers men a subjectivity which is harmonious and unified. While this lack of responsibility and carefree nature is conventionally part of the feminine subject position, it is nonetheless compatible with certain qualities traditionally associated with the men. Thus, the male adherents of this ideology acquire additional privileges while at the same time refusing to give up any of the those traditionally awarded their gender. In fact, male liberation as it is envisioned by the hippies, consists not only of freedom from responsibility but also freedom to further exploit those privileges the dictates of convention regard as their due. Foremost among these prerogatives is an increased sexual license. In other words, liberation for men equals "more and better sex" (Martin, 11). Ironically, women's desire for liberation causes them to feel like monsters with voracious appetites while men's desire for increased freedom is perceived as natural.

While there are women who participate in this extracultural movement, they find an increase in the

negative, rather than the positive aspects of their former role and that nothing has really changed for the better. Alice records a conversation between herself and her friends Stella and Trudi:

"Women and men make terrible bargains with one another," Alice said. "I'll be mummy if you'll be daddy."

"That's changing."

"Yes and no. What are the hippies doing over at Coon Bay? The women cook and have babies, follow the men around, do the washing, all that."

"But the men don't earn money."

"That's true. Often the baby is the key to the welfare check, right? The key to this month's grub and dope."

"And the men can always split if they find a new old lady" (173).

This passage makes explicit the extent to which the cultural values exhibited by the hippies are nothing new. According to Biddy Martin in her essay, "Feminism, Criticism and Foucault":

Sexual expression far from having liberated women, has historically often led to increased male access to women's bodies, allowing exploitation not just sexually but politically and economically as well (11).

Thus, sexual privilege is at the heart of all forms of male domination of women. Sexuality plays a key role in the constitution of gendered subjectivity. Indeed, one could say that one's subjectivity is one's sexuality. Because patriarchal discourse chooses to differentiate between men and women based on the presence or absence of the phallus, the belief in men's superiority is grounded in

their sexuality. Therefore, the privileged status of the phallus and male sexual license are intimately bound up one with the other. Alice writes:

When she confronted Peter about the mandala he sighed.

"You always wanted to have a finger in every pie."

"That's an interesting image," Alice said, "coming from you" (221).

Furthermore, the traditionally male domain of sexual license is revealed to be an example of men's privilege which is reminiscent of childlike irresponsibility. This fact is suggested by Alice's new conception of her husband after their separation. The former, Peter the Rock, becomes Peter Pan, the juvenile, carefree fairy-tale figure sought by female admirers.

Because it is no more and perhaps less natural for women to behave like children than it is for men, women must be encouraged to act childishly in order for men to maintain their artificially inflated status. Relations between men and women, rather than being based on the innate natures of the genders, is shown in both novels to be a social construct, an elaborate game in which women are the players and men the prizes. Women are encouraged to compete with one another for attention from men the way children compete for attention from a parent or for a prize in a game. An example of this tendency can be seen in Intertidal Life. As I mentioned, Alice's ex-husband offers to teach Alice's two

best friends on the island how to paint, suggesting they all three paint a mandala. Alice comments to one of these friends, Stella:

"There is a little game going on here and I don't like it. In fact, it makes me very angry and very sad. There aren't many interesting people on the island, you know -- certainly not here at the north end. You and Trudi, but especially you, have been a great comfort to me-- now I feel you both withdrawing. And why? So you can play silly little games with my ex-husband, whom I still happen to love, as you well know. You have both become giggly little students and have exalted him to the position of guru. He is a good teacher, I know that, maybe a brilliant one. But you and Trudi aren't really doing this mandala thing just to learn about painting, are you? It's a secret society you've formed, with all the attendant whispers and rituals of such a society. We used to have clubs like that in grade school and they always involved leaving somebody out. Sometimes I think that was their major purpose. You should think about badges and jackets" (220).

As this passage suggests, the competitiveness which is encouraged among women cuts them off from each other so that they become totally dependent on men and thus resemble children.

Both Morag and Alice resent having to play games. When they do comply with the rules of the sexist games, it is because the need for love overcomes their objections. Morag in Laurence's The Diviners demonstrates this inner conflict. During the first few years after Morag's separation from her husband, her situation is such that, as she says, "opportunities for sex are minimal" (339). One

evening however, Morag plans to attend a party for a visiting poet. The writer describes herself preparing for the party as follows:

She goes back upstairs and applies more lipstick. She dislikes and feels alienated from herself with a lot of make-up on. She has, however, minimal faith in her own judgement. After all the women who are successful with men always plaster all this gloop on their faces. Fan's paint job takes her about forty-five minutes. Is it the make-up or Fan's inner assurance that does the trick? Or just the fact that Fan really doesn't give a damn about men, and certainly doesn't need one sexually and is hence in a very good bargaining position? Bargaining Position One of the sexual postures not mentioned in the Kama Sutra. Postures. The ways in which one lies. Oh, shut up.

"I'm not that fond of games," Morag tells the mirror.

"Well, then, why not stay at home with your knitting?" the mirror replies, meanly.

Angrily, Morag slaps on more lipstick. Then, angrily takes most of it off again (341).

For Morag, make-up symbolizes the artificial and socially constructed position women must assume if they wish to successfully compete with members of their own sex for members of the other.

Like Morag, Alice is also aware of the necessity for game-playing in relations with members of the other sex. She blames the break-up of her marriage on an instance, perhaps the only instance, during her marriage to Peter when she momentarily forgot they were playing a game. She writes,

"Alice, what is it you really want?" she didn't understand the question. She was so full

of contentment that she said, almost half asleep,  
 "Nothing." . . .

Even after all these years she is not sure what the right answer would have been. But even then she knew better than to give the answer she did. The sun, the lichen-covered rocks, the pale green flesh of the arbutus trees, the hum of the bees, everything conspired to put her off her guard (37-38).

Alice feels she resembles Cordelia, the heroine of Shakespeare's King Lear who refuses to succumb to the hollow flattery of her father exhibited by her sisters and as a result is disinherited and exiled. Unlike the wilful Cordelia, however, Alice sees flattery as a small price to pay for her husband's love and her failure to buoy up Peter's ego on request was completely unintentional.

Women are further enticed to see themselves as children because the men with whom they are romantically involved often act in ways reminiscent of their fathers. As women are encouraged to see themselves as children, they are also enticed to see their husbands as fathers. The ideal man is often characterized by "power, dominance and social recognition" (Coward 191) terms which are reminiscent of the father. According to Rosalind Coward:

In the adoration of the powerful male, we have the adoration of the father by the small child. This adoration is based on the father as all-powerful, before disillusionment and struggle for autonomy has set in . . . Power which might previously have been adored -- after all, it ensured the welfare of a dependent child -- becomes suffocating for a child struggling to become independent. Especially for women, the relationship to patriarchal authority is bound to be hazardous.

Men have power and authority only if women's power is denied (192).

Thus, when women exhibit assertive or non-childlike behaviour, they are often met with humiliation or violence. Fathers have traditionally felt justified in maintaining authority over their children by humiliating them in the name of discipline. Brooke, for example, recalls his father punishing him in ways which Brooke refers to as subtle. He states,

Once he made me sit on top of a large steamer truck, tied to it actually, just outside the front gate of the compound, where everyone was passing by, Europeans, and Hindus from Brahmans to outcasts, could see me. On my chest was a placard which read I Am Bad . . . I was supposed to stay there until I begged for his forgiveness (236).

Women who threaten male authority often meet with similar abuse. Morag's friend Julie describes her treatment by her husband:

It's not the beating up kind of cruelty -- he's never blacked an eye for me or like that. Better if he had. [The courts] could understand that. It's what he says -- That I'm out to get his power, things like that (324).

Children also suffer physical abuse at the hands of their fathers. Morag recalls the regular beatings that her next door neighbour, Winkler, inflicted on his children. Women who threaten male authority are often subject to similar abuse. When Morag asks an acquaintance who wishes to spend the night with her to leave, he responds by belting

her across the chest. Yet, it is not only strangers who abuse women. In a conversation with her ex-husband about his lover and Alice's former bestfriend, Anne-Marie, Alice screams "fucking bitch" several times very loudly. Peter responds by punching Alice in the face. Just as parents often rationalize their abuse of their children as necessary discipline done in the best interests of the children, Peter interprets his violent treatment of his wife as signifying his deep feeling for her rather than an attempt on his part to preserve his position of power and authority. Alice writes, "Peter said that when he hit me he realized how much he did love me (how nice)" (87).

While men's aggressive and women's passive natures may seem natural, both novels unsettle this opposition. Like men when their power is threatened, women are angered by their powerless social position. Unlike men, however, women are taught to repress this "unfeminine" emotion. Alice's friend Trudi comments, "I feel terribly guilty about my mean thoughts. I was brought up to be 'nice'" (210). Since displays of hostility by women are deemed unacceptable, women are forced to direct their anger inwards at themselves rather than outwards at their oppressors. Alice writes:

Selene is really Peter's ideal . . . [She] is a natural-born martyr. Her relationship with Raven is an awfully strange one. He calls all the shots. And look at her terrible asthma attacks.

She never raises her voice, never gets angry, and yet she suffers from severe asthma. I think there's a lot of anger in Selene that she's afraid to let out. She is trying to live up to some impossible ideal she's set for herself (210).

When women's anger is channeled outwards, the dominant ideology suppresses the extent to which it resembles male violence and aggression, and instead regards it as an expression of typically female behaviour. An example of this tendency occurs in The Diviners. Morag's refusal to display humility in front of her husband, Brooke, when discussing her novel causes Brooke to respond in a patronizing and condescending fashion. Morag responds by heaving an Italian glass bowl across the room into the fire place. Morag describes Brooke's parental response:

"You'd better clear that away," he says finally, in a perfectly controlled voice. "I wouldn't advise you do that again, Morag. The burden of your complaint, these past months, seems to be that I treat you like a child. Might I suggest you stop acting like one?" (281).

Thus, women's acts of rage are co-opted and interpreted as childlike behaviour even though they resemble the violence to which women are subjected under patriarchy.

Thomas similarly suggests that women are equally capable of desiring power and dominance and experiencing violent and aggressive urges. Moreover, she points out that men are occasionally relegated to the powerless position believed to be reserved for women, children or other

marginalized groups. To demonstrate this fact Alice examines the all-male and culturally homogeneous power hierarchy depicted in Captain Vancouver's journal entitled A Spanish Voyage to Vancouver. Alice writes:

Oh for some of that eighteenth-century discipline. How I should love to see some flogging done . . . Sometimes he refers to flogging as "a slight manual correction." Oh to give Peter a slight manual correction, or even a severe one. Bringing the lash down on his shoulders again and again until he begged for mercy. And the beautiful Anne-Marie. Would I have flogged her as well? (40).

Both authors disturb and exceed the patriarchal logic which views the unequal distribution of power between the genders to be natural by demonstrating the rhetorical reversibility of such claims.

## Chapter Four

### Women (as) Supplement

As frames which surround men, women blend in not only with what is outside the frame, not men, but also with what is inside, men themselves. Rather than persons in their own right, women become part of the men to whom they are connected. Their function according to the dominant ideology is merely to supplement the personalities of their husbands. One of Western metaphysics' key concepts, according to Derrida, is the logic of supplementarity. Culler explains this notion as follows:

The supplement is an inessential extra, added to something complete in itself, but the supplement is added in order to complete, to compensate for a lack in what was supposed to be complete in itself. These two different meanings of supplement are linked in a powerful logic, and in both meanings the supplement is presented as exterior, foreign to the essential nature of that to which it is added or in which it is substituted (103).

Rather than possessing the same autonomy and completeness as their husbands, Morag and Alice merely function as inessential additions to their husbands who, nevertheless,

in some way complete them. Morag recognizes her essential supplementarity in her relationship with her husband. Brooke refuses to acknowledge Morag as an individual in her own right. This ideological oneirism allows Brooke the delusion that Morag exists only through and for him, as an extension of himself. Furthermore, Morag is expected to complete or balance Brooke's personality. His fundamental though unacknowledged incompleteness is suggested by his surname, "Skel(e)ton". When he married Morag, Brooke believed she would always be happy and positive and therefore able to balance his all too prominent "dark side". He tells Morag, "keep on being happy and cheerful -- it's a kind of leaven. It's what I need from you" (246). In order to fill this supplementary role women must deny parts of themselves. Morag writes, "I will never let him see the Black Celt in me. Morag shortly before marriage. It seemed an easy thing to undertake, then" (246). The parts of themselves women must disavow, however, often involve incredible sacrifices. Alice observes this selfless quality in her friend Selene. She comments to her friend, Trudi:

"Although Peter always maintains that Selene is so centered, she seems to be an incredibly lonely person. She denies whole continents of herself in order to keep loving Raven. She is always the calm one, the peacemaker, the 'parent' in the relationship" (167).

As supplements, women believe they cannot exist

independently of men. Alice recalls a childhood song which she teaches her children. She states:

Is it right to teach them such rubbish? To sing  
 about a man without a woman (is like a kite  
 without a tail; is like a boat without a rudder;  
 is like a ship without a sail --) and conclude  
 that if there's one thing worse in this universe  
 it's a woman

I said a woman

I mean a woman without a ma-an (108).

Alice's appendage-like relationship to her husband becomes apparent to her after her husband's desertion. There are various references in Intertidal Life to severed fingers. Alice feels Peter has just chopped her off and that she is incomplete in a profound way as a result. Alice perceives her relationship with Peter to resemble that between a starfish and its lost limb. As the starfish can grow back another limb, so Peter seems able to easily replace a lost, or in this case amputated, wife. Alice, on the other hand, can only float around aimlessly, desperately incomplete yet unable or unwilling to attach herself to another man.

Although patriarchal discourse regards women as inessential supplements to men, these novels unsettle this logic. Rather than supplemental, these novels reveal the extent to which women are essential to men's notions of themselves. As the name "Skel(e)ton" which Morag adopts upon marriage to Brooke suggests, women are not frames in the sense of inessential supplements, but frames which are inside and integral to the structure itself; they prop up

the notion of masculinity and give it its shape. Both Morag and Alice, despite their conviction that they are totally dependent on men, manage to survive on their own while their ex-husbands are almost never without women in their lives. Shortly after Morag and he separate, Brooke marries a woman younger than Morag, suggesting he still believes it possible to have an innocent, childlike wife. While Peter claims to want freedom from the institution of marriage, after a number of affairs he soon finds himself in a marriage-like relationship with Alice's former close friend, Stella. When Stella leaves Peter after living with him for five years, he is devastated.

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Women are essential to men's notions of themselves because they aggrandize the male self-image by comparison. Virginia Woolf observes in A Room of One's Own, "Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (35). Moreover, Luce Irigaray argues that femininity has been produced in relation to the logic of the "Same". She bases this conclusion on Freudian theory in which, "female difference is perceived as an absence or negation of the male norm"

(Moi 132). Therefore, patriarchal discourse sees women as deficient or lesser men in order to bolster the male ego. When they were married, Morag and Alice were considered part of their husbands and therefore could partake of their husbands' enlarged status. Alice comments,

"I loved being 'Mrs. Hoyle'. Then everybody knew I was married, you see. I had status. I had an official lover and protector. You'd go to a party: I'd like you to meet 'Peter and Alice Hoyle'. A couple, a unit. I loved all that stuff" (172).

Without men, however, women feel disfigured. Both novels use the trope of women as maimed or handicapped individuals to suggest women's sense of themselves as incomplete (without) men. Morag feels deficient immediately after leaving her husband. She writes:

Jules puts one arm around her, as though assisting along the street someone who is maimed or crippled . . . "You hate to ask anyone to prop you up sometimes, eh?" Yes, yes, I do. And yet that's what I suppose I was asking of him, at the start (291).

This notion is also suggested in Intertidal Life. Seven years after her husband leaves her, Alice still feels incomplete. She writes:

she remembered . . . a sign she had seen in Victoria, "War Amps." (Anne said, "Even their name has been amputated.") Were there love amps too, people who wandered around with parts of themselves, let's take the heart for example, permanently missing? "Not with a Club, the Heart is broken/ Nor with a Stone." Going from door to door selling calendars, key chains, candles. Wearing a badge which echoed the words on the cenotaph. "Is it nothing to you?" (242).

Alice's identification with detached fingers also evokes the notion of women as deficient men. A finger is phallic in shape yet smaller than a penis suggesting that women are lesser men, having only an inferior, truncated penis or clitoris. The fact that these fingers have been severed suggests castration and therefore reinforces the notion of women as disfigured or incomplete men.

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This same sense of disfigurement characteristic of the solitary woman is also evoked by communities of women. Feeling betrayed by her husband and best friend, Anne-Marie, Alice turns to the other women on the island for support and reassurance. She begins to see the island as a kind of utopian Adamless Eden. She writes:

Sometimes Alice saw, growing between her and the other three women, a great twisted vine, or rope. So that, if she had had to step out into the dark, she could, as she had once done on a small ship caught in the tail end of a hurricane, pull herself forward safely, even in the most severe of storms. Could move from her cabin, to Trudl's, to Stella's, even over to Selene's in the most awful storm of blind despair or self-hatred and know that as long as she held on tightly to their friendship she would be all right (164).

Unfortunately, this Adamless Eden turns into a kind of pandemonium for Alice. Alice's profound sense of loss and desolation at her husband's desertion seems to bring out her

friends' own insecurities about living without men. The community of women Alice imagines herself a part of fails because women's own individual sense of being maimed or lacking causes them to devalue each other. According to Elizabeth Janeway:

Locked out of a larger community of a man's world, women and homosexuals develop profoundly ambiguous feelings about any sort of community they might set up for themselves. Both groups are notorious for tight but short-lived cliques and bitter personal rivalries. Cattiness and disloyalty are expected, and cattiness and disloyalty are found among all those who regard part of themselves as unacceptable (111).

Furthermore, the man who has the power to reduce Alice to such despair and for whom she continues to pine, becomes the conscious or unconscious desire of Alice's friends on the island, who also see their own lives as desperately missing something essential. Thus, the relationship among women is governed by rivalry for the "male organ". Alice comments,

I tend to exaggerate everything -- look at how I have mythologized my husband. Some day I must ask myself a very painful question. Did my "love" for Peter, my obsession with him after he left, have anything to do with the attitude of other women toward him? If he was so special that in losing him I felt I had lost my world wouldn't he become exalted in the eyes of others? (243).

In addition to communities of women, both novels suggest the possibility of lesbianism as an alternative for women disenchanted by the politics of heterosexual relationships. Yet, as with communities of women,

homosexual relationships do not enable women to overcome the profound sense of loss caused by life without a man. Lesbianism, rather than a positive alternative to heterosexuality, becomes a way of registering discontent. Morag's landlady, Fan Brady, has given up on any hope of achieving a lasting and meaningful heterosexual relationship. Morag writes:

"Know what I wish?" Fan says suddenly, as though this is costing her something to say.

"No, what?"

"I have sometimes," Fan says carefully, "wished I was a lez. Queer. Bent as a forked twig."

"Maybe you are. Would it bother you?"

"It would make life easier," Fan says. "But yeh, it would bother me."

"That's -- too bad. That it would bother you, I mean."

"I know," Fan says, and her voice has a sadness in it that Morag has never heard there before. "Yeh, I know" (340-41).

Patriarchal ideology maintains its hegemony, in part, by cutting women off from each other in ways such as the social taboos against homosexuality.

Homosexuality is also contemplated by some of the women in Thomas' novel. Trudl, for example, asks Alice if she has ever been erotically attracted to a woman and if she has ever made love to one, suggesting that she herself has had or would like to have these experiences. One homosexual encounter does occur in Intertidal life between Alice and her friend, Selene. Rather than mutual passion or desire, however, this encounter was the result of shared pain.

Alice writes,

"It wasn't erotic. I don't know what it was. Some kind of strange communion."

"Did you come?"

"Yes. We both did. But not passionately. I can not explain. We knew it would never happen again but we were both glad it had happened. What's the book by Radclyffe Hall? Well of Loneliness? I guess that's where we both were . . . We met on this deep plane of utter despair (168).

Thus, homosexual relationships, rather than an imitation of heterosexual ones, tend to evolve out of shared pain. This view throws into question Freud's contention that female homosexuality evolves out of women's identification with men, "her longings to have equal powers with the male sex" (Irigaray, 70). Freud's assessment is inadequate because it leaves no positive space for female sexuality. As Irigaray notes,

Woman herself is never at issue in [Freud's] statements: the feminine is defined as the necessary complement to the operation of male sexuality, and, more often, as a negative image that provides male sexuality with an unfailingly phallic self-representation (70).

It is precisely Alice's inability to identify with men, to see herself as possessing the phallus, which prevents her from regarding homosexuality as a positive alternative. Her lesbian experience reinforces the dominant patriarchal discourse in which sexuality without a phallus is seen as derivative and inferior.

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Thus, women's dependency on men, her sense of her own incompleteness without a man, stems from her notion that she is deficient in a specifically sexual sense, lacking the "superior equipment" she observes in men. "Woman's penis envy reassures man of his sexuality and makes woman desirable both as the repository of this reassurance and as a sexual object", according to Freudian theory (Culler, 170). Therefore, woman is positioned by patriarchal discourse as a passive object of sexual attention rather than an active participant. Both Brooke and Peter view women as sexual objects. Alice writes:

He wanted me to be more sexy, bought me lovely nightgowns and negligees which I hardly ever wore for fear of setting myself on fire. I liked the coziness of flannel, especially in the middle of the night, getting up to soothe or feed a child. When miniskirts were in he bought me miniskirts and go-go boots. I thought that was kind of fun but felt awkward sitting down or bending over. Once or twice I found porn novels under his pillow (165).

Pornography is a mode of (re)presentation which perhaps more than all others defines men's notions of women and sexuality, not because of any specific image or pose in which women appear but because it throws into relief the extent to which women are positioned as objects of male gaze. Because the woman's lack is a visual lack, "rien a voir", it is the visual which patriarchal culture privileges

over other senses since it justifies men's notion of having superior equipment. As Moi notes, "Freud's own texts, particularly 'The Uncanny', theorize the gaze as a phallic activity linked to the anal desire for sadistic mastery of the object" (134). Both Morag's lover, Dan McRaith and Alice's husband, Peter are visual artists. Peter is renowned for his nudes. Alice comments:

Peter painted nudes with loins of irresistible attraction, breasts like bloated wineskins, bursting to be touched and tasted, smelled and sucked. Waiting, voluptuous, lying on their backs and sides, with heads or faces hidden. Flesh so real it smoked. But passive, faces turned away waiting to be penetrated (31).

The (re)presentation of women is the ground for which actual women are figures. The ideal woman, rather than flesh and blood, is a two-dimensional (re)presentation of male desire.

Women's sense of themselves as objects is reinforced by the tendency of the dominant ideology to regard women as possessions. As George Eliot writes in The Mill on the Floss, "We don't ask what a woman does -- we ask whom she belongs to" (542-3). Thus, Morag's status in the eyes of her husband is not only that of a sexual object, but, specifically his sexual object. This notion is suggested by the fact that Brooke attaches a great deal of importance to Morag's virginity prior to their marriage even though he admits, or perhaps boasts, that he himself is not a virgin. Morag does not confess her previous liaison with Jules

Tonnerre, even though it was unconsummated, since she fears it will lower her in Brooke's esteem and jeopardize their relationship. Morag's suspicions are not ungrounded as she recalls a conversation she overheard between two boys in a coffee shop: "I was all set to throw her the ice and it wasn't one of your two-bit rings neither and then she gave in and whaddy know I wasn't the first on that road so I thought the hell with that jazz" (217). When Morag finally decides to leave Brooke, it is after she has spent a night with Jules. The pain Brooke experiences on discovering her whereabouts on the previous evening, Morag realizes, is not a result of her decision to end the relationship but rather of the fact that his wife has spent the night with another man. Morag writes:

She is shocked and awed by his pain. At the same time, she sees for the first time that he has believed he owns her.

"Brooke, I'm sorry. Not for what happened last night. I'm sorry that neither one of us were different. But Brooke -- you've put yourself inside women other than me."

"Not since we married," Brooke says, "unless you want to drag up that one time when we were in Nova Scotia, that girl on old Kenton's trawler, his niece or something. But once she'd hauled me into her bunk, I couldn't."

". . . You mean to say it doesn't count cause you didn't come?" (300).

Morag perceives the same double standard in her lover's relationship with his wife, Bridie. Unbeknownst to Bridie, McRaith has been having an affair with Morag for three years. Yet he does not entertain the possibility that

Bridie may wish to exercise the same privilege. Morag writes:

"If [Bridie] went down to London with you, sometime," Morag says, "and went to bed with Andrew, how would you feel about it?"

McRaith considers.

"Andrew wouldn't attract her," he says finally. "He's not her type of person."

Morag laughs, and he looks at her for a moment, bewildered, and then laughs, too. But does he really see what she is laughing at? And is she laughing, or what? (413).

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To be thought of as an object is to be thought of as a thing rather than a human. "Subjectivity is denied to women," Irigaray claims,

and this exclusion guarantees the constitution of relatively stable objects for the (specularizing) subject. If one imagines that woman imagines anything at all, the object (of speculation) would lose its stability and thus unsettle the subject itself. If woman cannot represent the ground, the earth, the inert or opaque matter to be appropriated or repressed, how can the subject be secure in its status as a subject? (Moi 136).

Moreover, Simone de Beauvoir has shown that, women themselves internalize this objectified vision thus living in a constant state of what Sartre called "inauthenticity" or "bad faith" (Moi 92). According to Cixous:

For one of the terms in a hierarchical binary opposition to acquire meaning, it must destroy the other. The "couple" cannot be left intact: it becomes a general battlefield where the struggle for signifying supremacy is forever re-enacted.

In the end, victory is equated with activity and defeat passivity; under patriarchy the male is always the victor." Femininity is equated with passivity and death (Moi 105).

Thus the ideal woman is, in a very crucial sense, dead, and the desire to be such a woman is a disguised death wish. Not surprisingly therefore, death is a motif common to both novels. Both Morag and Alice are unduly preoccupied with their mortality and it is this preoccupation which is arguably the impetus behind both their writings. Prin had given birth to a child who, she tells Morag, was born dead. Morag asks, "How could you be born and dead at the same time?" (53). Patriarchal logic suggests that these heterogeneous ontological states, life and death, are yoked together in the feminine subject position, once again revealing "woman" to be a signifier capable of comprehending opposites. While listening to Prin's favorite hymn at her funeral, Morag's previously unconscious expectations of her life are revealed to her. She states, "Those halls of Sion. The Prince is ever in them. What had Morag expected, those years ago, marrying Brooke? Those selfsame halls?" (273). The halls of Sion suggest the death-like existence women are encouraged to assume under patriarchy. Like childhood which loses its nostalgic appeal when conflated with senility, the secure womb in which Morag once wished to be enveloped is rejected when it is revealed to resemble a stifling tomb. Thus, as the halls of Sion suggest, the objectified vision

of herself Morag had internalized is only possible after death.

Like Morag, Alice has also internalized an objectified vision of herself. I have argued that the childlike status women are encouraged to assume, rather than natural, is in direct conflict with their roles as mothers. Similarly, the objectified vision of themselves women are offered is equally difficult for them to internalize. Unlike men, women have menstrual cycles which are a constant reminder to them of the fact that they lack stability, physical and often emotional. Although the opposite may seem to be the case since women's menstrual cycles are thought to correspond to the moon's and therefore connect women to the natural world, Thomas' novel unsettles this notion. Alice records a conversation between herself and her friends, Trudi and Stella:

Trudi shook her head. "The trouble is, a woman's cycle might correspond [to the moon's] at one time and not at another. If she's had an abortion, or a miscarriage, or a child, the whole thing can change drastically."

"It is weird, isn't it?" Stella said, "the twenty-eight-day thing."

"Well, only the moon is that regular!" (194).

Contrary to commonly held assumptions, women's cycles lack the regularity of cycles in the natural world. This, along with the emotional instability often caused by these cycles, remind women of their ontological difference from the natural world. Intertidal Life explores the great lengths

to which women must go if they are to imagine that they partake of the ontological stability of that world. Alice, for example, wonders if women have a "slack tide". She writes:

"You know, the tides have a moment where there's no perceptible rise or fall, a kind of still moment, maybe an hour or a day, when ovulation is just about to begin, but hasn't. That might be our most stable moment if we could locate it precisely" (194).

Alice's wish to locate the "slack tide" in herself is a desire for the stability of nature and, as such, a disguised death wish. Alice's "slack tide" becomes the "calm plateau" in The Diviners. In a letter to McRaith, Morag writes:

The calm plateau still seems pretty far off to me. I'm still fighting the bloody same battles as always, inside the skull. Maybe all there is on that calm plateau is a tombstone (312).

## Conclusion

In writing about themselves and their lives, Morag and Alice come to recognize that the self is not a static entity but rather a dynamic site where discursive forces continually interact and compete for the subjectivity of the individual. By regarding the nature of the self as a "becoming" rather than a "being" or "essence" and thereby dismantling the fictions of masculinity and femininity, Morag and Alice are free to actively participate in the continual process of creation and recreation of their own discursive realities. Like Frankenstein's monster, Morag and Alice, along with all human beings, are shown to be patchwork creations -- the sites at which various discursive strands are brought together. Thus, it is the feminine and masculine subject positions which, in so far as they attempt to fix and stabilize the subject, are "unnatural", and therefore, "monstrous". Recognizing this fact, Morag and Alice refuse to accept the artificial limits on the self imposed by these polemical attempts to constitute their

subjectivities. As a result, these women writers are shown to be neither feminine nor masculine and because of this, they are profoundly aware of what it means to be human.

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