

*Shelf Life*  
&  
**Critical Commentary**

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own work and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Dario Franchini and Isabella Moretti.

## Abstract

This thesis consists of two parts: my novel, *Shelf Life*, and a critical commentary, ‘Sexual, Textual Politics & the Writing of *Shelf Life*’.

*Shelf Life* tells the story of Ruth Beadle, a thirty-year-old geriatric nurse who finds herself alone for the first time in ten years after her long-term partner abruptly leaves her. Ruth, whose adult life hinged on the relationship, suddenly has to find a way to rebuild herself from the ground up, renegotiating the boundaries of her identity and relationships.

Though the main strand of the narrative is told from Ruth’s perspective, it is punctuated by chapters narrated by the intersecting voices of the characters that she interacts with. These voices encompass a variety of different contemporary languages, such as e-mails, chat-log transcripts, diary entries and text messages. Through its refusal to settle on a clear causality, a unique subjectivity or a linear plot, *Shelf Life* offers a purposefully unstable reading experience, aimed at stimulating a meta-reflection into the narrative conventions that articulate female representation in postfeminist mainstream fiction and society.

My critical commentary details the process of writing *Shelf Life* in the context of its production, touching upon the political motivations that informed my creative choices. It identifies my critical background in feminist literary studies on women’s experimental writing, formulating an affiliation between my own creative practice and that of three authors – Virginia Woolf, Anna Kavan and Lydia Davis – whose work directly influenced mine. In Chapters One to Three, I investigate the intersection between textual and sexual politics in *Jacob’s Room*, *Who Are You?* and *The End of the Story*, as individual case studies, before turning to an analysis of my own novel and the creative process of its composition. In my final chapter, I examine *Shelf Life* as a feminist rewriting of the contemporary genre of chick lit, tracing continuities between the narrative strategies used in my novel and the work of the authors who inspired it.

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**Sexual, Textual Politics**  
**&**  
**The Writing of *Shelf Life***

Critical Commentary

## Abbreviations

- EOS        *The End of the Story*. New York: HarperCollins. 1995.
- JR         *Jacob's Room*. New York & London: Norton. 2007.
- LMA        *Let Me Alone*. London: Peter Owen Publishers. 1972.
- SL         *Shelf Life*.
- WAY        *Who Are You?* London: Peter Owen Publishers. 2002.

All other references are given parenthetically in accordance with MHRA author:date system.

## Introduction

Though it tells the story of one woman's search for identity, *Shelf Life* is a novel of many voices. It features Ruth Beadle's intimate account of her own struggle for self-determination alongside multiple narrative contributions from a large cast of characters, who observe her through this process from the outside. The first-person narrators who speak in each of the chapters only occasionally do so with the awareness that they are telling a story; more often they are caught unaware in the act of conversing with others through the contemporary channels of communication available to them, in the format of instant messaging, dating sites or e-mail. Ruth's narrative itself is frequently broken up by the intrusion of dreams that reveal to the reader the uncomfortable desires she represses while awake, and which later come to have very real consequences on the events of her life.

The tension between a single and multiple narrative perspectives has troubled the writing of this novel since the very beginning, occasionally frustratingly, ultimately, I hope, productively. In the beginning, the purpose of the novel was straightforwardly mimetic: I sought to represent truthfully the experience of piecing

together one's own identity as a young woman in late capitalist Britain, coming of age during the transition from an analogical to a digital society. Though I always envisioned Ruth Beadle as an entirely fictional creation, we did belong to the same generation, so initially I believed that I could (and indeed should, as young writers are often encouraged to do) 'write what I knew'. This seemingly uncomplicated assumption soon presented a first hurdle at a formal level. I was attempting to represent truthfully an experience close to my own, yet the conventional storytelling tools of realism seemed unfit to tackle my subject: narrative linearity, causal plot and consistency of characterisation bore very little resemblance to my own experience of coming of age during the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Seeking one's place in the world as a young woman, following the advent of the Internet and social media in particular, had not felt like a linear process of growth, but rather implied a continuous engagement with gendered power dynamics on multiple fronts. Despite the huge advances achieved by feminist movements over the last few decades, my generation still had to reckon with factual issues of gender inequality which negatively impacted women in their private lives, in education and in the workplace (World Economic Forum 2020). Nevertheless, the pressure for women to perform highly across all settings had increased in late capitalist Western societies, due to the inception of an 'aspirational model' of successful female independence contingent on neoliberal standards of productivity. This had been 'twisted [...] in the collective memory into a false promise of feminism' (Szalai 2015) not least by the circulation of 'empowering narratives' specifically targeted to

women: from Cosmopolitan's editor-in-chief Helen Gurley Brown's memoir *Having It All* (1985), to Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's self-proclaimed feminist manifesto *Lean In* (2013), all through other countless, pervasive examples in mainstream culture, from high-circulation women's magazines to bestselling texts of popular psychology. Over the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the growing presence of new media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram further complicated matters, promoting an accretion of fictional self-projections via the provision of a new range of digital languages and narrative tools, through which women were encouraged to 'share' their accomplishments with online audiences and engage in social comparison with peers (Vogel and others 2014: 206-22).

Devising a formal framework capable of accommodating the intrinsic narrative complexity I had encountered in navigating female identity under the pressures of contemporary patriarchy thus became a priority for the project from the outset. The passive character of Ruth Beadle, who conceives of herself only in relational terms, was partly invented so that I could use her as a blank canvas onto which to project different contemporary power narratives, in order to observe their effects on the identity-formation process of a woman my age.

Such practical considerations were underlaid by a broader political interest in the fictional representations of women's experiences in contemporary society. I envisioned my creative practice in relation to the contemporary feminist debate on intersectionality, so I was aware of the partiality of the experience I was seeking to represent. I wanted the novel to acknowledge its belonging to a society in which, as

bell hooks ([1984] 2014: 5) puts it, '[s]exism as a system of domination is institutionalized, but [...] has never determined in an absolute way the fate of all women.' Thus, as a young, able-bodied, white cis-woman writer living in a metropolitan area, I recognised the necessity to interrogate my own privileged authorial perspective, and correspondingly, that of my protagonist.

Certainly, in undertaking my creative project, I was not filling a gap in the literature: representations of young, single white women on a quest for self-determination abounded in contemporary literature by the time I came to writing. Privileged heterosexual white women in particular benefitted from a mainstream positioning within the literary industry, often at the expense of other voices (Saha and Van Lente 2020; So and Wezerek 2020). This disproportionate visibility had led, among other things, to the establishment of new conventional genres of popular fiction about a *particular type* of narrative journey towards female independence, whose narrative universe was essentially aligned with the above-mentioned 'aspirational models' of successful womanhood. As Rachel Carroll (2015: 24) has observed:

Entry into the mainstream is one of the great achievements of cultural feminism [...]. [T]his endeavour [...] now contends with the explicit appropriation of feminist ideas concealing reactionary political subtexts. Although mainstream publishers have been quick to capitalize on the popularity of women's writing and exploit the market for postfeminist genres such as "chick lit", inequalities persist.

Among the contemporary genres specifically targeted at millennial women, chick lit stood out in particular, as it had played a role in my own upbringing as a

widely available form of escapist literature that narrativised the experience of coming of age as a young woman in the early 2000s, while comfortably occluding the threats of contemporary patriarchy. Arising in the late 1990s, as a commodified by-product of a contemporary Western literary context characterised ‘by the influence of feminism in broader culture’ (Carroll 2015: 23), early chick lit pushed a conventional representation of young women’s search for identity, whose accomplishment was dependent on compliance to the values of late capitalist Western societies. Couched in a humorous narrative style and with sympathetic female protagonists constructed to prompt easy identification in women readers, it popularised a conception of female agency contingent on privileges of race, class, sexuality and status, often entrusting narrative closure to the appearance of a male romantic saviour. The existence of such an established genre in itself raised the question of how a similar story with a similar protagonist might be approached – if at all – when operating with a feminist intent.

In my view, the most problematic aspect of chick lit lay precisely in its biggest area of potential: its popularity as a genre capable of attracting a wide readership of young women. As Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley observe in *Feminism in Popular Culture* (2006: 2), ‘most people become conscious of feminism through the way it is represented in popular culture [...] for many women of our generation, formative understandings of, and identifications with, feminist ideas have been almost exclusively within popular culture.’ This had been true of my own experience and that of other women my age upon encountering chick lit in our teenage years:

many of us had reached for readily available novels about women seeking comfort and reassurance in their sympathetic female protagonists, whose experiences, we hoped, might help us better understand our own. What the genre's conventional homogeneity offered, instead, was the promise of a happy ending pending our willingness to subscribe to a prescriptive vision of successful female independence and an acceptance of the light-hearted, humorous nature of the pursuit.

Chick lit's generic conventions are engineered to soothe anxieties about gender and identity by encouraging young female readers not to take themselves too seriously, diverting their attention from a serious examination of the power relations acting upon them in society; its narrative structure and subjects partake of the working apparatuses of contemporary late capitalist ideology, functioning, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis (1985: 6) puts it, as a 'system of representation by which we imagine the world as it is.' This not only contributes to marginalising the perspectives of women who do not adhere to chick lit's identity paradigm, but silences individual women's subjective experiences of self, funnelling enormously complex processes of identity-formation into a narrow set of narrative expectations. As Imelda Whelehan (2005: 155) has noted in *The Feminist Bestseller*, chick lit 'allows women to think that they can change their own lives even if they don't have the mettle to change the world.'

This understanding further prompted me to consider the role that narrative form might play, on a political level, to avoid complicitly contributing to the same order of representation promoted by such women's mass-marketed genres, despite

writing about female identity from a similarly situated perspective. A significant shift occurred in the project once I began to think about formal innovation not only as a way to mimetically reproduce my own contemporary female experience, but also as a potential way to counter reactionary appropriations of feminist ideas in mainstream popular culture. I progressed onwards by creatively engaging the notion put forward by Joanna Frye in her study of contemporary women's fiction *Living Stories, Telling Lives* (1986: 32-33), that '[a]s cognitive strategies, both culturally and individually shaped, literary conventions [...] not only constrain but also enable both readers and writers in the process of changing cultural paradigms.' It was at this point that my initial interest in form became 'decidedly political,' as Frye suggests, and my 'concern with cultural change' led me to engage in formal experimentation with a more focused creative agenda.

One of the central narrative challenges of *Shelf Life* subsequently became that of deconstructing the literary conventions of chick lit, while exploiting the genre's outreach to expose the arbitrariness of its narrative conventions to the same broad readership, with the aim of disempowering its reactionary political subtext. Creatively, this undertaking entailed a series of experiments with narrative form which took the chick lit model as a starting point and began a process of formal defamiliarisation aimed at reopening a range of possible interpretations of the specific female experience it conventionally represented. The final manuscript of *Shelf Life* included in this thesis is the result of a long process of negotiation with form, which has involved both discontinuities and compromises. Throughout the

book, I have tried to experiment with form in targeted ways, carefully altering some of the conventional elements of chick lit while keeping other recognisable features, to promote an understanding of gender identity as an ambiguous, open-ended process of reckoning with societal standards that demands personal and political accountability on the part of individual women. My aim was to turn the chick lit model, to borrow Roland Barthes' terminology (1974: 5), from entertainment literature into a 'writerly' text: a novel offering a 'plurality of entrances, [an] opening of networks, [and an] infinity of languages.' As an author, this meant explicitly renouncing the centrality of my own perspective and, correspondingly, signposting the partiality of my protagonist's, in an attempt to reconcile the 'pitiless divorce' with the reader (1974: 4) promoted by the marketing of women's literature as light entertainment. Through formal experiment I have tried to build space in my novel for the reader to *consciously* inhabit a chick lit narrative, interrogating the genre's conventions from within the text. By creating an open-ended narrative that explicitly demands the reader's contribution in its meaning-making process, I invite them to no longer be 'a consumer, but a producer of the text' (1974: 4), with freedom to exercise their own critical judgement on the outcome of the story and its underlying value-system.

For the experiment to have any ambition to effect meaningful feminist change, however, it seemed essential that my novel retained the same accessibility and potential readership of the chick lit genre. In the early stages of planning the novel, I had envisioned the project as more formally adventurous than it eventually

resulted, at one point conceiving of *Shelf Life*, as an art object: a box from which the different perspectives making up Ruth's identity could be extracted at random and pieced together by the reader, to allow them further narrative agency. Soon, I realised what little political purchase there was in taking formal disruption so far as to disengage with the original model: the production of such an experimental art object would have no doubt restricted the novel's availability and risked alienating chick lit's popular audience. Likewise, I had concerns, in the context of this particular project, about creating a formally audacious work that may nevertheless result obscure or impenetrable on the level of language, as I still wanted my novel to respond to the genuine impulse that, as a young woman, had made me reach for accessible stories about other young women in an attempt to illuminate my own experience of gender. To do this, it was necessary to strike a balance between formal innovation and readability, to square the matter of textual and sexual politics so that the popularity of a certain kind of entertainment literature for women could be used, through variations in narrative practice, in the service of women's actual processes of self-understanding.

The formal framework of *Shelf Life* was devised as a possible answer to these creative conundrums and sustained by a personal creative belief in fiction's ability to represent as well as contribute towards redefining the premises of society (Frye, 1986: 16). This commentary documents how the political desire to enact positive feminist change guided my research-in-practice, detailing the models and critical debates that informed my narrative choices. During the writing of *Shelf Life*, the

creative and critical strands of my doctoral research have been tightly intertwined, often feeding off each other. I refined the political foundations of the novel in response to the critical framework I was building around it, and in turn, once the novel was finished, I extrapolated backwards from it, to narrow the focus of my critical argument. As such, the following pages do not simply contextualise the creative portion of this thesis but capture the inception of a personal writing ethos and political stance, as they arose from the mutually productive relationship between my creative and critical explorations.

In chapters One to Three, I discuss three novels that directly inspired the experimental processes by which I arrived at the final manuscript of my novel: *Jacob's Room*, by Virginia Woolf, *Who Are You?*, by Anna Kavan and *The End of the Story*, by Lydia Davis. These books were chosen on the basis of both their subject matter and formal strategies, as supporting examples of experimental novels that actively involve the reader in rethinking the premises of female representation through situated formal innovation. Although their authors' allegiance to the feminist movements of their time is not always directly verifiable (or, in some cases, unlikely), the readings I offer were shaped by the simultaneous process of writing *Shelf Life*, so in them I have naturally been inclined to investigate strategies that felt meaningful to my own feminist exploration of form in *Shelf Life*.

In Chapter One, I discuss *Jacob's Room* as a modernist deconstruction of the conventional *Bildungsroman* for young men, with particular attention to Virginia Woolf's use of multiple female points of view. I then turn to an analysis of Anna

Kavan's use of circular time and flat character in *Who Are You?* as a strategy intended to implicate the reader in the protagonist's experience of sexual violence. In Chapter Three I move on to discussing the distancing and control techniques deployed by Lydia Davis in *The End of Story*, to foreground and legitimise female creative agency. Finally, in Chapter Four, I turn my focus back to *Shelf Life*, to evaluate the impact these influential texts have had on my own novel and explain how I reconfigured some of the narrative strategies I learnt from them in pursuit of my own contemporary feminist agenda.

Before turning to the texts themselves, however, it is important to acknowledge the role that feminist literary criticism has played in the creative articulation of my novel. In the next section of this commentary, I introduce the critical texts that enabled me to positively conceive of my own project in affiliation with those of my chosen authors, tracing continuities between our practices to discover new strategies by which literary experiment might be used to trigger a political reflection on sexual politics.

## Feminism and Formal Experimentation

The following overview of debates draws on research conducted alongside the process of drafting *Shelf Life*; as a practitioner-led enquiry, it has been shaped by the needs of my own creative process and is thus necessarily partial. I identified *Jacob's Room*, *Who Are You?* and *The End of the Story* as three texts that were meaningful to my own formally experimental practice relatively early on, selecting them from different moments in the history of women's writing in a bid to establish at least a partial genealogy for my own practice. Though belonging to different times and cultural contexts, each novel individually offered examples of formal innovation, which helped me solve issues with my own contemporary project. Nevertheless, once I had chosen these novels as my individual case studies, I found the task of formulating a creatively productive feminist affiliation to an overarching tradition of 'women's experimental writing' a much more slippery endeavour, not least because I could only rely on a narrow field of scholarship, since formally innovative works by women have suffered from critical neglect in literary studies until relatively recent years.

Early attempts to identify ‘Women’s Experimental Writing’ as a critical field coincide with the mature phase of the postmodernist debate, unsurprisingly, given that the postmodern critique of representation and the feminist critique of the patriarchal representation of women in literature appear to dovetail in their overarching projects. Feminist arguments in favour of postmodernism suggest that humanist disciplines have relied on a deceptive notion of unique subjectivity that is by no means universal but used as a shorthand for a specific type of subject – white, Western, bourgeois, male – whose value judgements are trusted and deemed legitimate precisely *because* they already emanate from a position of power (Owens 1985: 59). My initial interest in formal experimentation moved from a similar intuitive assumption, and so many of the works I discuss in this chapter belong to this earlier moment in the feminist debate. More importantly, the critical arguments I consider in the following pages played a direct role in refining the political foundations of my own contemporary novel, by bringing to consciousness the creative choices I was often instinctively drawn to; in that respect, this brief survey also provides a broader critical context for the experimental features of the novel, to which I shall return in terms of practical aspects of composition in Chapter Four of this commentary.

Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs’ *Breaking the Sequence*, the first critical anthology to indicate women’s experimental writing as an area deserving of rigorous critical study, was published in 1989, and it is in those years that a specific focus on women’s experimental fiction begins to arise in anglophone feminist literary

criticism. In *Breaking the Sequence*, Friedman and Fuchs (1989: 6) identify the paradox that has historically led to a critical oversight of the works of women experimentalists: “Theorists are interested in “woman” as an object of inquiry, but not necessarily in “women”; feminists, on the other hand, are interested in “women,” but suspicious of the theorists’ use of woman.’ Despite this, the authors conclude, ‘the natural convergence of “woman” and “women” would seem to take place in women’s experimental narratives.’

The polarisation between ‘woman’ and ‘women’ that Friedman and Fuchs refer to has its roots in the second wave feminist debates of the 1970s, which pitched the efforts of Anglo-American feminists against those of the group of continental feminist scholars associated with the rise of poststructuralist theory in France, during the same years. Now classic anglophone texts whose project of retrieving the forgotten history of *women’s* writing pragmatically adopts content-based and biographical criteria can be ascribed to the first group, such as Ellen Moers’ *Literary Women* (1976), Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of their Own* (1979) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), to name but a few among the most prominent titles belonging to the tradition. At the other end of the spectrum and interested primarily in *woman* – or gender as essence – was the group of scholars whose work was informed by poststructuralist theory, during the same years. Influenced by Lacanian psychology and Derrida’s deconstructionist theory, the latter considered the literary text as a primary site of resistance to patriarchal ideology, a stance most famously exemplified by the notion of *écriture féminine* (‘womanspeak’)

coined by Hélène Cixous in her 1976 essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa,' which advocates for an inscription of femininity in the literary text through the radical alteration of poetic and fictional conventions. As Alice Jardine puts it in her study of French feminist poststructuralism *Gynesis* (1986: 35), the key objective of this continental movement was that of 'putting woman into discourse,' by means of enacting textual operations at the level of language.

The state of the debate at its height was perhaps best captured by Toril Moi in her admirably succinct interrogation of feminist literary criticism *Sexual/Textual Politics*, from which this commentary borrows its title. Published in 1985, Moi's critical overview offers a sceptical take on the 'archaeological and compensatory' efforts of Anglo-American feminists (Friedman 2012: 154), who fail to recognise appropriately the efforts of feminist writers who experiment with language and form, such as Virginia Woolf. Prefiguring Friedman and Fuchs's argument about women experimentalists, Moi (1985: 7) advances the suggestion that feminist fiction should not merely be concerned with seeking to represent the 'right content [...] in the correct realist form.' Yet, while she welcomes the French theorists' interest in linguistic exploration as a tool for resistance to patriarchal power, Moi remains suspicious of many aspects of the post-structuralist approach. Her particularly harsh profile of Luce Irigaray is indicative of a general scepticism towards the possible practical repercussions of a theory of 'feminine essence' in language: 'If the dominant discourses have barely changed, why aren't we still living in the gynaeceum?' Moi (1985: 147) muses, adding: 'Irigaray's failure to consider the historical and economic

specificity of patriarchal power, along with its ideological and material contradictions, forces her into providing exactly the kind of metaphysical definition of woman she declaredly wants to avoid.'

In *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (1989), Rita Felski expands on Moi's suspicions concerning the existence of a 'feminine essence' in textual practice, setting off on the more ambitious task of debunking the association between experimental formal aesthetics and feminist writing. Convincingly arguing against the claim that the conventions of symbolic and social discourse are inherently patriarchal, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* marks a historical leap forward from essentialist conceptions of *écriture féminine*, towards including and legitimising a wider range of feminist approaches to writing. Felski (1989: 19) believes that 'the most appropriate strategy for a feminist writing practice cannot be determined a priori', building her argument upon consideration of the key elements of temporal and spatial location in women's identity-formation processes, as well as the influence of the evolving women's movement upon women's literary production and reception. Felski (1989: 5) observes:

The attempt to argue a necessary connection between feminism and experimental form, when not grounded in a biologicistic thinking which affirms a spontaneous link between a 'feminine' textuality and the female body, relies on a theoretical sleight-of-hand that associates or equates the avant-garde and the 'feminine' as forms of marginalised dissidence vis-à-vis a monolithic and vaguely defined 'patriarchal bourgeois humanism' which is said to permeate the structures of symbolic discourse.

Touching upon some of the questions raised by my own creative process, Felski (1989: 63) argues that the search for a unique feminist aesthetic that retains an ‘oppositional purity’ is nothing short of utopian. ‘By favouring linguistic subversion and deconstructive readings as the most authentically oppositional practice,’ she continues, ‘we make it impossible to account for the differing ways and contexts in which women may legitimately choose to use language for feminist aims in the present cultural context: to negate but also to construct, establish and affirm’ (1989: 46). These pragmatic considerations helped me to untangle some of my creative doubts concerning textual accessibility and readership, enabling me to pursue a hybrid approach that maintained some of the conventional features of the popular chick lit model, alongside the introduction of negative narrative strategies like fragmentation, temporal disruption and intertextuality.

Indeed, as a feminist novel, *Shelf Life* simultaneously responds both to a political wish to negate the conventional boundaries of gendered representations in contemporary mass-marketed women’s literature and an affirmative urge to represent contemporary female experience. In her study of postmodernist literature and sexual politics, *Feminine Fictions*, Patricia Waugh ([1989] 2012: 14) comes close to articulating my initial intuitive perception of the ‘naturalizing conventions of fictional tradition’ as unfit to represent contemporary female experience. ‘For those marginalised by the dominant culture,’ Waugh writes, ‘a sense of identity constructed through impersonal and social relations of power (rather than a sense of identity as the reflection of an “inner essence”’) has been a major aspect of their self-concept

long before post-structuralists and postmodernists began to assemble their cultural manifestos.’ According to Waugh ([1989] 2012: 22), the women’s movement’s aim to establish a sense of subjectivity, agency and collective history on the basis of gender, is fundamentally in conflict with the deconstructionist practices of postmodernism: unlike male avant-gardists, ‘for many women there can be no prior subject or self whose fragmentation becomes a political necessity, source of nostalgic regret or hedonistic *jouissance*.’

Waugh’s suggestion ([1989] 2012: 23) that women writers who challenge subjectivity and narrative linearity do so out of a gendered awareness of subjectivity as relationally constructed, often in an attempt to discover a ‘collective concept of subjectivity’ for women, resonated with my own creative project, by supporting the creative urge to bring together multiple narrative perspective and different textual surfaces to promote a constructive reflection on contemporary sexual politics and gendered identities, rather than as an expression of aesthetic alignment with deconstructionist practices primarily aimed at challenging subjective agency. This understanding also allowed me to experiment with more freedom in *Shelf Life*, borrowing a range of formal tools from different experimental traditions, as I discuss in my final chapter, in relation to my three chosen texts.

In her essay ‘A Double Margin: Women Writers and the Avant-Garde in France,’ Susan Suleiman further probes the complex entanglement of sexual and textual politics in women’s experimental writing, with a stronger emphasis on individual creative agency. Suleiman’s reformulation of the same issue identified by

Waugh provided a further conceptual bridge in my own practice, enabling me to move forward with increasing confidence. Refusing, like Felski, to pin down an essentialist view of ‘feminist aesthetics’, Suleiman remarks on the importance of analysing experimental works written by women on an individual basis, suggesting that each work should be located, respectively, within the history of the avant-garde and of feminist literary genealogy. As a scholar of the avant-garde, however, Suleiman enticingly highlights the productive aspects of operating from the negative intersection identified by Friedman and Fuchs. The double marginalisation of experimental women’s works, Suleiman (1988: 153-54) contends, may actually offer sustenance to women writers who *choose* to identify with a marginal positioning, psychologically relieving them from the pressure to match preconceived narrative expectations:

I want to emphasise a more positive and empowering aspect of the ‘woman’/avant-garde/marginality trope for female subjects [...] there is a way in which the sense of being “doubly marginal” and therefore “totally avant-garde” provides the female subject with a kind of centrality *in her own eyes*. In a system in which the marginal, the avant-garde, the subversive, all that disturbs and “undoes the whole” is endowed with positive value, a woman artist who can identify those concepts with her own practice and metaphorically with her own femininity can find in them a source of strength and self-legitimation.

Subsequently, in the introduction to her essay collection *Subversive Intent: Gender Politics and the Avant-Garde*, in which ‘A Double Margin’ is anthologised, Suleiman (1990: XVII) swaps her choice of terminology for the more straightforwardly

positive nomenclature of ‘double allegiance’, by which she intends ‘on the one hand, an allegiance to the formal experiments and *some* of the cultural aspirations of the historical male avant-garde; on the other an allegiance to the feminist critique of dominant sexual ideology, *including* the sexual ideology of those same avant-gardes.’

According to Suleiman, an affiliation with the tradition of ‘women’s experimental writing’ may be freely expressed by women writers who generate work that engages in some way with coeval avant-garde practices but also, crucially, in which the manipulation of formal conventions is strongly motivated by a wish to articulate a specifically gendered experience. From the standpoint of my own research-in-practice, the concept of ‘double allegiance’ offered reassurance at times of creative insecurity, renewing my dedication to the feminist aims of my project, even at times in which the experimental nature of the writing process triggered great uncertainty. Furthermore, Suleiman’s looser conceptualisation of ‘women’s experimental writing’ enabled a positive alignment of my practice with that of my chosen authors on the basis of our mutual interest in form, while maintaining a fundamental awareness of each of our texts’ situatedness and individuality.

Aside from the role they have played in my own contemporary practice, these critical debates – and in particular the publication of Felski’s *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* – clearly marked a positive turning point in feminist literary studies. Since the publication of *Breaking the Sequence*, critical interest in women’s experimental fiction has only increased, and today, the field of academic research into women’s formally innovative practices is happily richer than ever. During the course of my doctoral

research, I have been able to draw upon the example of two recent critical anthologies: *Contemporary Women's Writing*, Volume 9, Issue 1 (2015) and Ellen E. Berry's *Women's Experimental Strategies: Negative Aesthetics and Feminist Critique* (2016). Both publications acknowledge their debt to Felski, while making a convincing case for a specialised study of individual experimental strategies that speak specifically to female experience. Berry's volume (2016: 18) extends the project of establishing a genealogy of experimentalism in women's writing begun with *Breaking the Sequence*, looking at contemporary texts in which formal experimentation 'shape[s] in unique ways understandings of what political expression is and could be in a contemporary moment [...] illuminating experiences, desires and strategies of refusal that are inexpressible/incomprehensible in the terms offered by traditional realist modes or in standard forms of oppositional critique.' Kaye Mitchell (2015: 8), writing as the guest editor of *Contemporary Women's Writing's* special issue dedicated to experimental writing, reaffirms the legacy of women's experimental writing as a valuable area of feminist literary accomplishment, 'holding that the experimental formal strategies of a text are germane to a consideration of its politics and that experimental practice might be one (although not the only) recourse of the feminist writer.'

It is in the spirit of contributing to this ongoing body of research that I have conceived of the three case studies that form the core of this commentary, as a complement to a reflection on my own located contemporary practice. For reasons of consistency and clarity, in my analysis I adhere to the generational model devised by Friedman and Fuchs, which classifies women's experimental texts into three

generations according to their most prolific phase; before 1930 (first generation), 1930-1960 (second generation), after 1960 (third generation), respectively: Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, Anna Kavan's *Who Are You?* and Lydia Davis's *The End of the Story*. In Chapters One to Three, I evaluate each book individually, before applying the same method to a reflective analysis on the composition of *Shelf Life*, tracing continuities and discontinuities between the formal strategies used in my work and in that of my chosen authors.

Chapter One:

On Virginia Woolf's  
*Jacob's Room*

Reflections on beginning a work of fiction to be called, perhaps, *Jacob's Room*.  
I think the main point is that it should be free.

Virginia Woolf – *Jacob's Room*, holograph draft

Virginia Woolf outlined her experimental agenda for *Jacob's Room* in her diary for the year 1920, some time before she had settled on a subject matter. Disavowing the realism of her first two novels, *The Voyage Out* (1915) and *Night and Day* (1919), in pursuit of 'a new form for a new novel', Woolf (1978: 13) wrote:

I figure that the approach will be entirely different this time: no scaffolding, scarcely a brick to be seen; all crepuscular, but the heart, the passion, humour, everything as bright as fire in the midst. Then I'll find room for so much – a gaiety – an inconsequence – a light-spirited stepping at my sweet will. Whether I'm sufficiently mistress of things – that's the doubt; but conceive mark on the wall, K.G. & unwritten novel taking hands and dancing in unity.

The novel that saw the light two years later (her first published independently through Hogarth House press) has since been widely recognised as Woolf's 'first modernist novel' (Hollander 2007: 41). This claim is, in many ways, correct, yet in line with the broader project of this commentary, I begin this chapter by sharing Waugh's views ([1989] 2012: 100) on Woolf's body of work more broadly, maintaining that a reading of *Jacob's Room* that purely foregrounds the novel's contiguity with coeval modernist practices 'prises [its] formal aesthetics away from their basis in a political feminist critique of the dominant patriarchal value which [Woolf] saw reflected in the conventions of traditional nineteenth century fiction

[...] overlook[ing] her commitment to the articulation of alternative modes of subjectivity which, in fact, place her close to the concerns of many contemporary women writers.’ As testified by the range of critical texts referenced in this chapter, feminist analyses of form in Woolf have proliferated since the publication of *Feminine Fictions*, yet Waugh’s claim above all speaks to my choice of *Jacob’s Room* as one of three foci of my critical analysis, thanks to its practical relevance in suggesting ways of structuring *Shelf Life* as a feminist work that challenges contemporary patriarchal structures through formal experimentation. In this chapter, I concentrate on the specific strategies devised by Woolf to approach similar challenges to the ones I set for myself in my own project, viewing *Jacob’s Room* as an attempt to problematise and reconfigure the narrative conventions of the popular genre of *Bildungsroman* for young men and focusing especially on the feminist implications of its innovative handling of multiple points of view. I shall then return to *Jacob’s Room* again in Chapter Four, to detail how it influenced the writing of *Shelf Life* from the perspective of my own creative process.

‘A Mark on the Wall,’ ‘Kew Gardens and ‘An Unwritten Novel’, the three stories identified by Woolf as the direct predecessors of *Jacob’s Room*, were written in the three years prior to the diary entry and later collected in *Monday or Tuesday* (1921), a collection which ‘marks Woolf’s first public compilation of fictional forms shaped by a female narrative consciousness’ as well as her ‘first tangible effort to break the sentences and sequences of conventional narration,’ according to Alice Staveley (1996: 263). Several of the experimental features in the stories are directly reworked

in the novel, such as the stream-of-consciousness meditation on ‘the inaccuracy of thought’ and the workings of memory of ‘A Mark on the Wall’ and the faltering deductive method of ‘An Unwritten Novel.’ Most significantly, as Edward Bishop and Justyna Kostkowska have highlighted, continuities are evident in Woolf’s use of a ‘smoothly shifting’ point of view which ‘invites the reader’s participation’ (Bishop 1991: 33-35) in ‘Kew Gardens’ as well as in the later novel, ‘demand[ing] a decentralisation of the traditional androcentric perspective [...] which carries with it consequences of a feminist [...] nature’ (Kostowska 2013: 19).

During the years in which she worked on the manuscript, considerations of the interconnectedness of sexual and textual politics were also articulated by Woolf through the medium of her critical writing. Her early uneasiness with realist conventions is most famously expressed in the essay ‘Modern Novels’ (1919), a polemical manifesto against the previous generation of writers, of which, according to Bishop (1991: 32), ‘Kew Gardens’ represents the ‘artistic application.’ In the essay, Woolf (1980: 33) writes, ‘Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged: life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.’ The following year, Woolf (1980: 193) turns her critical eye specifically to the conventional fictional representations of *women*, in ‘Men and Women’ (1920):

It is becoming daily more evident that Lady Macbeth, Cordelia, Ophelia, Clarissa, Dora, Diana, Helen and the rest are by no means what they pretend to be. Some are plainly men in disguise; others represent what men would like to be, or are conscious

of not being; or again they embody that dissatisfaction and despair which afflict most people when they reflect upon the sorry condition of the human race.

Women's creative energy, 'has been liberated,' Woolf (1980: 195) suggests, yet it must reckon with literary convention to meaningfully exert itself: '[I]nto which forms is it to flow?' she wonders, '[t]o try the accepted forms, to discard the unfit, to create others which are more fitting, is a task that must be accomplished before there is freedom or achievement.' Warning women writers against an approach to characterisation that simply mirrors the treatment of women as they are represented by male novelists, Woolf (1980: 195) continues: 'To cast out and incorporate in a person of the opposite sex all that we miss in ourselves and desire in the universe and detest in humanity is a deep and universal instinct on the part both of men and of women. But though it affords relief, it does not lead to understanding. Rochester is as great a travesty of the truth about men as Cordelia is of the truth about women.'

In the light of this critical stance, it seems fair to advance the suggestion that where the short story format had somehow restrained Woolf's creative thinking on these complex matters within the boundaries of length and unity of effect, she must have come to see that transferring her fictional exploration on to the broader narrative platform of the novel would allow her to test several of the same experimental operations at the same time, affording her room to explore female narrative consciousness with more freedom, across a larger canvas. In this chapter I argue that *Jacob's Room* both carries Woolf's early modernist aesthetics forward into the novel form, as a natural progression from her short stories, as well as developing

an ongoing interest in female narrative agency that prefigures her later feminist agenda in *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*. Accordingly, I survey Woolf's polemic against 'character-mongering' in *Jacob's Room* across two intersecting critical strands: on the one hand, as a modernist attack on conventional characterisation in realist fiction, on the other as a critique of the specifically gendered conventions that attempt to *make* Jacob into a character: a man, representative of patriarchal rule. In my analysis, I rely on Judith Butler's Foucauldian conception of gender as 'performative' – a construction that is constantly reinstated by individual subjects existing within the boundaries of a dominant power discourse. As Butler (1990: 33) writes: '*Gender* is not a noun, but neither is a set of free-floating attributes [...] Gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed.' I contend that the tension between individual subjectivity and character typification captured in *Jacob's Room*, though a modernist concern present elsewhere in Woolf's oeuvre, crucially expresses an understanding of gender as performance in its portrayal of the male protagonist, as well as offering an escape from sexualized social scripts through its choice of alternative narrative perspectives.

As many have observed, the storyline of *Jacob's Room* follows the popular model of the *Bildungsroman* for young men of Woolf's time. The genre typically adheres to a linear narrative pathway, focusing on the coming of age of a singular protagonist within a specific society and historical context. According to Franco Moretti (1987: 16), the dilemma successfully summarised in narratives of *Bildung* is articulated between the two opposing poles of *individuality* and *normality*:

It is not sufficient for modern bourgeois society simply to subdue the drives that oppose the standards of ‘normality’. It is also necessary that, as a ‘free individual’, not as a fearful subject but as a convinced citizen, one perceives the social norms as *one’s own*. [...] One’s formation as an individual in and for oneself coincides without rifts with one’s social integration as a simple *part of a whole*.

Literary conventions in the *Bildungsroman* genre vary, of course, depending on the gender of the protagonist and in accordance with the societal expectations they reflect. In *Jacob’s Room*, Jacob Flanders’ life follows the necessary formative steps towards the accomplishment of the ideal bourgeois man: he is the second male offspring of the Flanders family, is educated at Cambridge, enters the work force, has romantic and sexual experiences with women, travels the world to ‘find himself’. Despite this, as Judy Little (2007: 233) has noted, ‘Virginia Woolf drags in all the *Bildungsroman* scenery; then she lets Jacob walk aimlessly about, as if the stage were bare’. Though we follow the events of Jacob’s upbringing more or less chronologically, Little (2007: 243) writes, he ‘maintains his own obstinate mystery, and neither asks for revelation nor receives any.’

Jacob Flanders is frequently described as unaware of, or indifferent to, his own privileged status in society. At the end of Chapter One (JR: 8), we watch him sleep ‘profoundly unconscious’, having forgotten all about the sheep’s jaw he brought back from the beach, which now rests at his feet as a physical *memento mori* foreshadowing his death in World War One. Later, in a scene closely reminiscent of ‘An Unwritten Novel,’ we encounter Jacob as an adult for the first time through the eyes of old Mrs. Norman who sits opposite him on the train to Cambridge. The fact

of Jacob's gender is stated as potentially dangerous, as Mrs. Norman braces to defend herself, yet his lack of self-awareness makes it hard for the old woman to make up her mind about him. Jacob is 'youthful, indifferent, unconscious' as if built 'for knocking one down', but also, 'grave [and] unconscious [...] so out of place somehow'; in any case he seems 'absolutely indifferent to her presence' (JR: 22). Having appraised Jacob's inaccessibility through Mrs. Norman's account of him, the narrator is forced to admit for the first time in the novel, '[i]t's no use trying to sum people up' (JR: 22). Later still (JR: 93-94), in a scene at the theatre, Fanny Elmer, who has hopelessly fallen for Jacob, is taken with his self-composure and mysteriousness, two traits which she explicitly attributes to his age and gender:

Fanny thought, "What a beautiful voice!" She thought how little he said, yet how firm it was. She thought how young men are dignified and aloof, and how unconscious they are [...]. And forever the beauty of young men seems to be set in smoke [...]. Possibly they are soon to lose it. Possibly they look into the eyes of far-away heroes, and take their station among us half contemptuously [...], oh, but Mr. Flanders was only gone to get a programme.

The protracted inability to verify Jacob's conscious acceptance of his allocated social status as the protagonist of the coming-of-age novel creates obvious tension within a narrative genre that, as Moretti points out, is intended as summative of an ideal standard of 'normality'. Rachel Bowlby (1988: 101) describes *Jacob's Room* as 'both an interrogation of individuality and [...] a demonstration of the inescapability of typing' in the making – autobiographically and as perceived by others – of what is thought of as an individual self. Bowlby (1988: 102) writes:

[T]he biographical genre is undermined [...] [by] a breaking up of the narrative so that there can be no illusion of smooth development, of one thing following another in a logical, predetermined line; and on the other, a failure to give prominence to what are normally regarded as the chief turning points in a young man's progress. But this, ironically, only draws attention to what is in fact the typical, normative structure of the great man's biography. A great man is given due weight or gravity by being shown to resemble, rather than to differ from, every other: his greatness is a function of his life's proceeding, not exceptionally or idiosyncratically, but along well-known, recognizable lines.

Tellingly, Woolf reserves her harshest satire for the male characters who enforce such normative standards of masculinity. There is something 'rigid', for instance, about Captain Barfoot, who pursues Mrs. Flanders, as a potential father figure replacing her deceased husband, Seabrook: 'Did he think? Probably the same thoughts again and again [...]. Women would have felt, "Here is law. Here is order. Therefore we must cherish this man' (JR: 19). Jacob's Cambridge professors are caricatured: stingy old Huxtable who sits so still in meditation that it is not so hard to imagine him atop a sarcophagus, 'laying triumphant on a pillow of stone'; verbose Sopwith, always 'summing things up'; and cherub-faced Cowan, whose brain might well be 'Virgil's representative among us', but who is all too content to exist 'in his place, in his line' (JR: 29-31). In the final chapters of the novel, as war preparations are being made in Whitehall, one elderly employee's head, 'bald, red-veined, hollow-looking', acts as a chilling metonym of male power, 'representing all the heads in the building', the faceless authority decreeing 'that the course of history should shape

itself this way or that way, being manfully determined' (JR: 139). Here, the narrator seizes the chance to remark upon the large gulf that divides human experience from its static representation, again qualifying it along gendered lines. Unlike the marble busts of their predecessors, which line the walls of the patriarchal edifice, the men who represent history in the making are all too embodied, grotesquely alive: 'some were troubled with dyspepsia; one had at that very moment cracked the glass of his spectacles; another spoke in Glasgow to-morrow; altogether they looked too red, fat, pale or lean, to be dealing, as the marble heads had dealt, with the course of history' (JR: 140). Notably, the adjectives chosen by Woolf in this section express opposite concepts: red or pale, fat or lean, no individual male subject measures up alone to the power that is summoned by them as a unified category. History, represented by the 'marble heads', is the result of a homogenising process of typification, a literal casting in stone of the subject; in this sense, Jacob's failure to externalise the same values on account of his 'unconsciousness' preserves his intimate self from such ridicule.

The narrator of *Jacob's Room* thus repeatedly remarks on the protagonist's youth as a positive source of identity instability. Young men are viewed to some degree, as still 'transparent' (JR: 37) not quite yet shackled to the expectations of masculinity, since they have not fully made the norms of society 'their own'. In Chapter Four, the narrator follows Jacob Flanders and Timmy Durrant as they travel by boat along the Cornish coast. Timmy is described as a sweet adolescent struggling hard to behave like a man: '...the sight of him sitting there, with his hand on the

tiller, rosy-gilled, with a sprout of beard, looking sternly at the stars, then at a compass, spelling out quite correctly his page of the eternal lesson-book, would have moved a woman' (JR: 35). The observer leaves the reason why the sight of Timmy is 'moving' deliberately vague, indicating that different women might be moved by different things, depending on their individual perception. A young woman might be taken with Timmy in the way Clara Durrant, or Fanny Elmer fantasise about Jacob's mysteriousness, while an older woman, such as the narrator, or his mother, might look upon him as if watching a young boy playing at make-believe, touched by his tentative performance of masculinity. Yet the narrator soon warns us that, 'Jacob, of course, was not a woman' but another young man, for whom Timmy is 'no sight' (JR: 35) at all. As such, Jacob's presence in the boat serves to reinforce Timmy's gender performance, and conversely his own.

Though they are alone at sea, with nobody else to witness their exchange, the two boys are compelled to take each other seriously in order to preserve their individual gravitas, conversing 'without the least awkwardness' and 'in the most matter-of-fact way in the world' (JR: 36). Of the 'tremendous argument' on unspecified matters of 'scientific interest' that follows we do not hear a single word, aside from the beginnings of each sentence – 'now...', 'it follows...', 'that is so' (JR: 37) – markers of speech fulfilling a phatic function rather than conveying any meaningful exchange. What matters is that the conversation is being had and that the two young men are performing the role that is expected of them, their 'half-sentences [...] like flags set on top of buildings to the observer of external sights

down below' (JR: 37). Hence, the 'argument' between Jacob and Timmy also serves the purpose of making central the young man afresh, as an 'inheritor' of power (JR: 34), around which nature must arrange itself: 'What was the coast of Cornwall [...] but a screen happening to hang straight behind as his mind marched up?' (JR: 37).

According to Butler (1993: 2), gender performativity should be understood 'not as the act by which a subject brings into being what he/she names, but, rather, as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains,' and the exchange between Jacob and Timmy on the boat is only one of the many examples of this dynamic in *Jacob's Room*. In his own Foucauldian reading of the novel, Michael Olin-Hitt (1997: 133) suggests that *Jacob's Room* represents a reaction against the coercive process of typification of the modern era, suggesting that Woolf ultimately 'rescues Jacob by refusing to sum him up.' 'In [...] *Jacob's Room*, character is the vehicle for a discussion about narrative strategies, individuals, social power and the freedom from tyranny,' Olin-Hitt (1997: 128) argues. This might very well be the case, yet I agree with Kate Flint's suggestion (2007: 266) that formal analyses whose focus stops at the 'enigmatic young man' alone, run the risk of diverting our attention from the more explicitly feminist drive of a novel which is equally as concerned with 'the reworking of *women's* consciousnesses'. For the purpose of my own creative practice, in fact, I have been less interested in tracking the effects of Jacob's 'de-characterisation', than in understanding the feminist import of shifting the emphasis of the *Bildungsroman* genre from a linear representation of the male hero's coming-of-age, on to a plurality

of characters who witness his journey externally – a strategy which I also pursued in *Shelf Life*, in relation to the contemporary genre of chick lit.

It is no coincidence that, in Cambridge, we do not get to read Jacob's ironically titled essay 'Does History Consist of the Biographies of Great Men' (JR: 28-29) nor listen in on Jacob and Simeon's revelatory conversation on Julian the Apostate, or, again, look in on what happens between Jacob and Florinda behind closed doors, after he experiences a 'violent reversion towards male society' (JR: 64); rather, such uncertainties are not made public. Jacob's moments of temporary doubt are quickly smoothed over as the protagonist is reinscribed within the lines of his role in society by his external actions, which are factually stated: Jacob goes up to Cambridge, Jacob leaves the house at half-nine to go to work, or sits up late reading the *Globe*, looking 'terribly severe', 'judging life', and prompting the narrator to comment, dismally, 'When a child begins to read history one marvels, sorrowfully, to hear him spell out in his new voice the ancient words' (JR: 77).

As 'all history backs up' against Jacob's 'pane of glass' (JR: 37), it is revealed that his uncertainty is ultimately of an uncreative kind: since the effective performance of his gender and status is central to the maintenance of the bourgeois patriarchal order, he cannot envision a different course of action for himself. It is precisely because of his privileged positioning as the protagonist of the patriarchal plot that Jacob is least favourably positioned to willingly stray from it, and as such his potential for engaging a new path, personally and narratively, is fatally reabsorbed into the *Bildungsroman* pattern as he grows up. Moretti (1987: 16) writes: 'One must

*internalize* [society's norms] and fuse external compulsion and internal impulses [...]. This fusion is what we usually call "consent" or "legitimation." By refusing to publicly acknowledge his uncertainty, Jacob avoids acting 'out of character', allowing himself to be reinscribed within his expected role as 'part of a whole' – to be normalised, reduced to 'type'. At the same time, given our lack of direct access to Jacob's consciousness, the illusion that the young man's intimate experience of life neatly matches the guidelines provided for him is unsettled; although we are told that he looks 'satisfied', indeed 'masterly' (JR: 34), we are unable to match these impressions to his own subjective experience. This troubles the process of causation that constitutes the foundation of the *Bildungsroman* genre: without Jacob's outright consent to the accomplishment of his own coming-of-age narrative, his story unfolds as a series of unconnected events, thus *Jacob's Room* is, effectively, a plotless novel. Far from accidental, such plotlessness is the result of a conscious process of deconstruction. It is in part an expression of Woolf's new modernist aesthetics, and it is also aimed to directly question the nature of male agency, by pointing out that the same privilege that confers to young men the power to enact societal change (to be the protagonists of their own life story *and* of history) simultaneously blinds them to the possibility of change.

In *Jacob's Room*, access to the protagonist's consciousness is prevented through a sequence of dispersals of narrative authority. On a surface level, it appears that narrative authority is primarily subtracted from Jacob by the choice of an heterodiegetic narrator over a male 'I', speaking in first person. This external

narrator, however, does not claim a neutral perspective, but one that is explicitly marked by a different age and gender, 'granted ten years' seniority and a difference of sex' (JR: 74). Though she appears to have access to the consciousness of a number of characters in the novel, the narrator does not claim to have any privileged insight into the mind of the protagonist. Bowlby (1988: 101) observes that the narrator of *Jacob's Room* behaves as 'a detective gathering "hints"' and similarly, Alex Zwerdling (2007: 253) describes her as 'at best semiscient,' noting how instances of narrative omniscience in the novel are regularly counteracted by statements of limited perception. The narrator of *Jacob's Room* is able to offer us an aerial view of Scarborough, for instance, penetrating into the minds of several of its inhabitants, or to jump back and forth from the boat carrying Timmy and Jacob to the people awaiting its arrival on land, or, again, to travel across London, entering and exiting several minor characters' consciousnesses at will. She cannot, however, fathom what happens behind closed doors when Jacob is with a woman, nor hear his private conversations in his Cambridge quarters, not even directly witness his death – only testify, once again, to his unavailability. This makes for an anomalous point of view that is constantly refocusing, only occasionally privileging the perspective of a *super partes* narrator who can read the minds of her characters, while at other times acting as a simple witness, or 'character-bound narrator' (Bal 1985: 22) with an equally limited vision as that of other character-focalisers in the novel.

Despite her ability to access the minds of characters other than Jacob, the narrator of *Jacob's Room* shows no willingness to privilege any one perception as a

counterpoint to the protagonist's, nor limits the perspective to a single emotional truth. In her heterodiegetic capacity, she calls into question the very value of trusting individual judgement to report on another's life, and the ability for anyone to accurately 'represent' others: 'Nobody sees any one as he is... they see a whole – they see all sorts of things – they see themselves' (JR: 22). She spends time instead on naming over a hundred-and-fifty individual characters, many of whom only appear briefly in the text, an act which, according to Kristina Groover (2012: 54), 'calls attention to point of view and undermines the familiar distinction between "major" and "minor" characters.' The narrator's gifts of prescience are small and strictly commensurate to her positioning with regards to the story. Speaking as a self-conscious narrator (and given the biographical detail of her age and gender, one cannot fail to notice this is a narrator who has much in common with the author), she manifests an awareness of the conventional *Bildungsroman* trajectory by repeatedly directing the reader's attention to focus onto 'young men' as a category, the 'lawyers, doctors, members of Parliament, business men' (JR: 24) of tomorrow. Secondly, by choosing to tell the story in the narrative past tense she highlights her placement in time outside the timeline of the story, *after* the time of the events, which is why she is able to correctly report on the tragic destiny of the young men who will join 'the banks, laboratories, chancelleries and houses of business' which 'oar the world forward' (JR: 125) towards war. Her viewpoint is best exemplified in the chapters of the novel concerned with Jacob's education. Of the young Cambridge students, Woolf (JR: 32) writes:

What were they reading? Certainly there was a sense of concentration in the air. Behind the grey walls sat so many young men, some undoubtedly reading, magazines, shilling shockers, no doubt; legs, perhaps, over the arms of chairs; smoking; sprawling over tables, and writing while their heads went round in a circle as the pen moved – simple young men, these, who would – but there is no need to think of them grown old; [...] There were young men who read, lying in shallow armchairs, holding their books as if they had hold in their hands of something that would see them through.

Granted the advantages of historical hindsight and literary education, the narrator is able to foresee that Jacob's life will likely unfold according to the conventional male coming-of-age narrative and end in World War One, as many of the other young men from his generation did. While this forces her to arrange the events of Jacob's life from birth to death chronologically in the sequence suggested by the *Bildungsroman* model, she uses what scant narrative authority she has proleptically, to periodically remind the reader that Jacob's premature death constitutes the ending point of the novel. Since we are told that Jacob will not, after all, take his place in the patriarchal order as an adult, the meaningfulness of his self-accomplishment trajectory is undermined. The text is infused with the narrator's powerless exasperation in the face of patriarchal expectations for young men of her age; as Zwerdling (2007: 247) points out, '[Jacob's] growth from adolescence to young manhood takes place against the relentless ticking of a time bomb.' Because of her narrative positioning reflecting back on Jacob's story after the events, the narrator of *Jacob's Room* is in fact less favourably placed to steer the patriarchal

narrative away from its path of self-destruction than any of the characters we see directly interacting with him.

When it comes to capturing the ‘intensity’ of Jacob’s life, the narrator seems equally at a loss as the other characters who struggle to do so in the novel. The narrative point of view in *Jacob’s Room* is a democratic one, made up of discrete character-bound perspectives, one of which happens to belong to the narrator. Like other character-witnesses the narrator is often seen in the act of guessing about Jacob from her limited perspective, though she is able simultaneously to exploit her intimate connection with the reader to draw attention to the uncertainty that she shares with others. Where Jacob conceals his uncertainty from the public eye, the narrator’s role is to suggest to that same public that that very condition of doubt is a fundamental aspect of human perception. The opaqueness of Jacob’s motives, and the narrator’s investigative uncertainty work jointly to unsettle the *Bildungsroman* formula, raising far-reaching questions about the role played by literary characterisation within dominant power discourses. It is striking that the multiple points of view in *Jacob’s Room* remain at all times distinctly external to the central male character, conspicuously peripheral and reminiscent, in many senses, of the concentric argument that will later structure *Three Guineas*.

It is important to emphasise, at this point, that the large majority of the characters in *Jacob’s Room* are women, including those who appear very briefly. This is narratively significant with regards to point of view, given that the formative turning points by which Jacob achieves the classic plot of British bourgeois self-

accomplishment are often shrouded in the privacy of the male quarters. Jane Archer (1986: 35) has pointed out how the gendered nature of the narrator's exclusion is reinforced on a spatial and practical level by Woolf's choices of setting: 'Several obstacles impede the author's mobility. For one thing the walls of Jacob's room are not transparent, and just as the narrator of *A Room* was not allowed on the grass or in the libraries of Oxbridge, this narrator is denied access to the rooms of young male students [...] The narrators in these stories are neither absent nor omniscient. They are actively creative intelligences confronted by an unknowable world.' Woolf's shifting use of point of view specifically targets realist conventions that narrativise male identity, so that the narrator of *Jacob's Room* is engaged on two fronts simultaneously, on the one hand aiming to unsettle fixed representations of character, and on the other in making women central as speaking narrative subjects. It is on account of Woolf's aesthetic and feminist agenda that the narrator of *Jacob's Room* occupies these two discrete positions at the same time. On the level of the patriarchal macro-narrative of the *Bildungsroman* genre, I agree with Denise Delorey (1996: 97), that the narrator is 'not simply strategically heterodiegetic but definitively so by virtue of her gender.' Her awareness of her own limited narrative authority, however, suggests that the heterodiegetic narrator identifies with the collectivity of female character-focalisers through which she recounts Jacob's story, indicating that she simultaneously occupies a semi-homodiegetic position in relation to the other women who populate the story, contributing to a collective external narrative viewpoint that is circumscribed and defined by their mutual gender.

In *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* Shlomith Rimmon-Keenan (1983: 74) writes, with reference to Mieke Bal's theory of focalisation: 'Narratives [...] are not only focalised *by* someone but also *on* someone or something (Bal 1977: 29). In other words, focalisation has both a subject and an object. The subject (the "focaliser") is the agent whose perception orients the presentation, whereas the object (the "focalised") is what the focaliser perceives (Bal 1977: 33).' According to this distinction, in *Jacob's Room*, Jacob – the 'focalised' – is constituted as a (gendered, male) object, which is represented through a plurality of perceptions belonging to voiced subjects, or 'focalisers' – a range of secondary (mostly female) characters that includes the narrator. Just like the female narrator, the attention of each of the women in the novel is invariably focussed on Jacob, which turns the male subject of the *Bildungsroman* into an object of collective female observation. By situating her narrator as simultaneously external and internal to the story, Woolf thus achieves two complementary objectives. In her capacity as heterodiegetic narrator, she retains a first-person role in the creative deconstruction of male authority, which allows her to guide the reader's attention to consider the structural fallacies of patriarchy and its representational apparatuses. On the other hand, by admitting the limitations of her narrative authority in the face of marginalising power structures and pointing out the similarities she shares with the limited perspectives of other women in the novel, the female narrator also appears to be suggesting that such a deconstructive effort can only be effectively undertaken by women as a *collective* – a narrative politics whose import is not far from that of Woolf's later feminist writing.

As Delorey (1996: 97) has perceptively observed:

[Woolf's] subjectivity is paradoxically inscribed in her deconstructive narration of the subject [...] Rather than a 'simple' feminist co-optation or revision of the *Bildungsroman* genre, Woolf's approach to focalisation exposes the form itself – with its traditional articulation of a male social subject – as inadequate to modern (and not incidentally, feminine) subjectivity. She uses the form against itself to prove the lie of the 'I,' that pillar of subjectivity supporting the temple of war or what she would call later, in *A Room of One's Own*, 'the straight dark bar' that falls across the page when she tries to read.'

Placing herself on a level with other female character-focalisers in the novel, the narrator of *Jacob's Room* shares and multiplies her own narrative agency, granting other women in the novel the right to speak – sufficient authority, that is, to narrativise the male protagonist of *Bildung*, projecting multiple subjective perceptions onto Jacob's blank canvas. Since this creative energy is democratically shared among several female observers, differently marked by their age and status, it resists enacting the reverse process of typification Woolf warns against in 'Men and Women'. By opposing the narrative agency of an alliance of female uncertainties to the normative plot of the male *Bildungsroman*, the narrator of *Jacob's Room* suggests a narrative alternative that breaks away from conventional iterations of patriarchal power in fiction. As Waugh ([1989] 2012: 103) has suggested, Woolf's handling of point of view in *Jacob's Room* contributes to challenging the representational standards of 'an overmasculinised culture which worships the isolated, autonomous, rational, and

controlled “ego” [...] suggest[ing] an alternative view of human relations which emphasises provisionality but connectedness’.

Furthermore, this experimental narrative strategy raises an issue of legitimacy concerning patriarchal narratives in and of themselves. I agree with Pamela Caughie’s argument (1991: 72) that this is a question whose ultimate answer rests squarely in the hands of the reader, for in making visible the limitations of patriarchal power structures and their conventional representations in fiction, Woolf’s choice of experimental narrative perspective makes it impossible for them to assume the innocence of narrative strategies. As Caughie writes, *Jacob’s Room* ‘does not make us despair, but it does make us discriminate, it makes us aware of our habit of willingly assuming certain narrative points of view, [and] reconsider our relation to the narrative perspective and the relation of the narrative perspective to the thematic concerns’ (1991: 65). This seems to me the greatest accomplishment of the novel from a feminist perspective, and one which I took as a key inspiration for my own. By observing the male coming-of-age narrative of *Jacob’s Room* through a plurality of women’s perspectives, Woolf indicates the literary conventions of representation as co-responsible for the maintenance of discriminatory power structures – particularly concerning gender – demanding of the reader that they acknowledge the ways they are willing to consign human individuality to character typing in fiction, and conversely in society at large. With her rebuttal of Arnold Bennett’s review of *Jacob’s Room*, ‘Character in Fiction’ (1924), Woolf resumed the discussion on literary conventions begun five years earlier with ‘Modern Fiction’, writing from the

standpoint of her new experimental practice. Advocating against the ‘fatal [...] division between reader and writer’ and in favour of a ‘close and equal alliance’ (1980: 436) between an author and her audience, she invites her readers to actively contribute to rethinking the premises of fiction. Her call – ‘[y]our help is invoked in a good cause!’ (1980: 436) – is concerned as much with the fate of modern literature as it is with seeking a feminist path forward in society.

Chapter Two:  
On Anna Kavan's  
*Who Are You?*

I wish I knew how to make the book more acceptable...

Anna Kavan, letter to Peter Owen

A first draft of *Who Are You?*, Anna Kavan's penultimate novel, regarded by some as 'her most haunting inquiry into the loss of self' (Zambreno: n.d.) was produced in 1961, and submitted to her publisher Peter Owen the following year, who rejected it. Kavan took the manuscript to the independent Scorpion Press instead, who eventually published it in 1963. The publication of *Who Are You?* represents the only discontinuity in Kavan's history of collaboration with Owen, suggesting that she had reached a place of self-awareness and determination in her writing practice from which she was unwilling to accept editorial compromises that could mar the success of her creative agenda. Similarly to Woolf, Kavan (Callard 1992: 122) had by this point clearly identified the experimental priorities for her ensuing practice. This is made clear in a statement I will be quoting from at several points throughout this chapter:

I wanted to abandon realistic writing insofar as it describes exclusively events in the physical environment, and to make the reader aware of the existence of the different, though just as real, 'reality' which lies just beyond the surface of ordinary daily life and the surface aspect of things. I am convinced that a vast, exciting new territory is waiting to be explored by the writer in that direction.

Scholarship on Anna Kavan has had to reckon with a scarcity of reliable primary sources, as the author deliberately destroyed the majority of her diaries and

correspondence, with the statement above representing a rare surviving exception. Two major biographies have appeared since her death in 1968, *The Case of Anna Kavan* by David Callard (1992) and *A Stranger on Earth* (2006) by Jeremy Reed, yet as Victoria Carborne Walker (2017: 287) points out, both suffer from an ‘undisciplined approach,’ a tendency to ‘unreservedly attribute the words and feelings of her characters to their author.’ For these reasons, out of the three authors whose works I have chosen as case studies for this commentary, Kavan is the one whose political and aesthetic affiliations have been hardest to identify in terms of authorial statements of explicit commitment.

Fortunately, in so far as my own practice-led investigation is concerned, visible continuities are present through Kavan’s body of work that allow for a study of her sexual and textual politics through the evolution of her fiction. While I rely on the scant biographical material available where possible, in this chapter I consider *Who Are You?* chiefly in comparison to Kavan’s earlier realist novel *Let Me Alone*, and, briefly, in relation her final novel, *Ice*. In these novels, all similarly focused on the theme of female sexual trauma, Kavan’s approach to the subject shifts gradually from realism to a more experimental narrative mode, which foregrounds the issue of gender-based violence by placing increasing demands on the reader’s participation. I read these texts in the light of Cathy Caruth’s, Roberta Culbertson’s, Kali Tal’s and Michelle Balaev’s critical work on the representation of trauma in literature to counter biographical suggestions that conflate Kavan’s novels with her own biography, to track her creative turn to formal experimentation in seeking to

accommodate the traumatised female self through her fiction. In Chapter Four of this commentary, I shall then return to a more detailed discussion of how my understanding of Kavan's innovative literary strategies pertaining the representation of female experience led to a number of comparable choices in my own work.

The biographical sources we do have clearly suggest that the publication of *Who Are You?*, marked a full commitment to formal experimentation in Kavan's writing practice, which would only crystallise further during the final years of her life and career. A few years after the publication of *Who Are You?*, as Kavan was involved in the editing process of *Ice*, she would squarely reject an invitation to focus on strengthening the 'internal logic' and 'action' of the novel. Her words to Peter Owen editor Philip Inman (Callard 1992: 137-38), closely echo the creative rationale she had expressed at the time of writing *Who Are You?*:

When I started writing, I saw the story as one of those recurring dreams which at times become nightmare [...] In saying that the pursuit is too endless and drifting you seem to be objecting to the book as a whole, since the pursuit *is* the book. The girl's importance as a victim should be enough to justify the pursuing [...] As I've said, this is not realistic writing. It is meant to be a fantasy or a dream, and dreams are not logical.

Such rare surviving statements of authorial intent not only clearly indicate that Kavan was committed to developing a formal practice capable of exploring the submerged landscape of the psyche from a position of independent creative agency, but also squarely place that exploration in the context of a thematic investigation of gender-based violence against women. 'The girl' is a recurrent character in Kavan's oeuvre: a nameless young woman whose role is that of the 'victim' of a male pursuer

is the protagonist in both *Who Are You?* and *Ice*. Roberta Culbertson (1995: 169-170) has observed how the necessity to develop new narrative forms for recalling trauma memory is a common occurrence among survivors, leading to the inception, in some subjects, of a ‘dream-logic’ similar to the one evoked by Kavan:

[T]o be a survivor of one’s violation is precisely this: [...] the paradox of a known and felt truth that unfortunately obeys the logic of dreams rather than of speech and seems as unreachable, as other, as these, and as difficult to communicate and interpret, even to oneself. It is a paradox of the distance of one’s own experience.

In symmetrical ways, both *Who Are You?* and *Ice* seek to devise new narrative strategies for the representation of sexual trauma caused by men. The two ‘victims’ in *Who Are You?* and *Ice* entirely share their physical appearance and outward behaviour: slight, pale, childlike with white blonde hair, the girl is passive, yet quietly rebellious in her unresponsiveness, manifesting a cool detachment from reality. In both novels, the girl is subjected to unbearable suffering at the hands of an older male figure, whose only priority is that of asserting patriarchal control over her body and mind.

In *Who Are You?* the pursuit takes place strictly within the context of a conventional heterosexual relationship – albeit one that has been displaced to a claustrophobic, crumbling villa in colonial Burma. More action-driven, the apocalyptic *Ice* follows an unnamed narrator as he chases the girl he is obsessed with across a world that is being rapidly engulfed by ice, as a consequence of nuclear catastrophe. To win the girl back, the narrator must fight off the Warden, who is in many ways a double of the protagonist himself, in that both men are defined by their

wish to exert complete domination over the girl. One major difference in the use of point of view is apparent between the two novels: in *Who Are You?* Kavan employs an heterodiegetic narrator who provides insight into the girl's psychology, in contrast to the obstructive autodiegetic male narrator of *Ice*. Although we also occasionally gain access to other characters' consciousnesses, the narrator of *Who Are You?* is bound to the character of the girl, whose physical location determines the range of what the speaker can ascertain.

If the late *Ice* provides the closest formal reference point for *Who Are You?*, its story is likely to have been inspired by a much earlier work. *Who Are You?* is a substantial reworking of a short portion of an earlier, more conventional novel titled *Let Me Alone*. First published in 1930 under Kavan's married name, Helen Ferguson, the novel has been deemed largely autobiographical, partly due to the author's choice to adopt its protagonist's moniker as a pen name later in her career. A 'bildungsroman with a dark side' (Walker 2012: 149), *Let Me Alone* follows the unhappy upbringing of Anna-Marie Forrester and the events leading to her abusive marriage with the much older Matthew Kavan. Anna-Marie is depicted by Kavan (LMA: 43) as a detached teenager, to whom the world appears as 'a vague and unconvincing place, minatory and yet unreal, like a species of prolonged, unacute nightmare.' Anna-Marie's new husband takes her to live with him in his dilapidated colonial mansion, as it becomes rapidly obvious that their union is ill fated. Once in Burma, Matthew regularly subjects the girl to physical and psychological abuse. "The

horror,' the narrator reports (LMA: 288), 'was gradually inflicting a permanent injury, a sort of unhealing bruise was coming on her mind.'

The story of *Let Me Alone* unfolds chronologically, if at an uneven pace, with many reflective sections in which the same images are obsessively expounded, as if in an attempt to sharpen the focus of a particular scene or character. This technique is particularly effective in subsequent descriptions of Matthew Kavan, which enact a process of gradual dehumanisation mirroring the girl's growing horror of him. The following four extracts follow from one another in the space of less than a hundred pages:

[T]hin, neat and youngish, with a brown, dry, regular face that looked curiously buttoned up [...]. His eyes were clear, but rather prominent and drab (LMA: 102).

[A] curiously inexpressive head, very round and smooth, almost ball-like, with the short, dark, stiff, rather dead looking hair clinging so close, like a dark felt covering [...] His long, brown, thin arms seemed to possess an enormous, monkeyish strength, as they swung up and down, and in his blue eyes an infallible judgement lurked, also somewhat simian. (LMA: 106)

She wished that his head were not quite so round, not quite so much like a smooth, dark ball bobbing up and down [...] The covering of hair appeared so very dry and dead and insentient. So much more like a stiff covering than a living, growing part of a human body. (LMA: 130)

But still she looked at his hot, opaque blue eyes, and his meaningless head. She even saw the fists hanging clenched, strange leathery fruits dangling at the ends of his long arms [...] she looked: but not as one looks at a man. She felt no connection. (LMA: 186)

While this strategy is effective on occasion, elsewhere the writing simply feels repetitive and, perhaps, poorly edited. Despite choosing to operate within the conventions of the realist novel, it appears that Ferguson is struggling to connect character to plot. Much of this is due to the fact that the female protagonist, Anna-Marie, is depicted as a deeply traumatised individual, who has trouble relating to reality. In her influential study of trauma and narrative, *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth (1996: 7) writes:

The story of trauma [...] as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality [...] rather attests to its endless impact on a life [...]. Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it? [A] kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival.

Likewise, Anna-Marie hurtles through life in a state of existential crisis. The events of her life unfold chronologically from childhood to adulthood in the manner of the *Bildungsroman*, but because Anna-Marie's perception has been shaped by trauma since childhood, her emotional response is paralysis: a complete inability to conform to the societal narratives available for young women of her era and background. In the face of her new husband's first major aggression (LMA: 154), for instance, Anna-Marie reacts by blocking out all emotion:

Her mind was a kind of blank and half consciously she wondered why she had no more feeling. She was quite cold, cold as a stone, as though she would never feel anything any more [...] she was not really affected. She felt herself aloof.

She seemed not to be there at all, really.

Anna-Marie's conditions worsen once she arrives at the house in Naunggy, where repeated instances of marital rape force her to retreat into a condition of complete emotional detachment (LMA: 286), to protect herself from an unbearable reality:

She was simply not there. She had no contact with anything. There was no meaning in the world in which she now moved, it was made up of shapes and noises, without reality or consequence. [...] The loneliness completely extinguished her, it washed over even her fictitious self. She was nothing.

*Let Me Alone* relies heavily on action to propel the narrative forward, but though this progresses in a linear fashion, Anna-Marie herself does not: she does not grow psychologically as she ages, nor does she ever appear in control of her own story. Rather than the central actor of a plot, she is depicted as the passive victim of an inescapable fate, and as a result, as a conventional realist novel, *Let Me Alone* fails to engage the reader's attention. There is no narrative tension, so the character of Anna-Marie, especially, 'falls flat', lacking the emotional complexity to trigger the reader's identification beyond obvious human sympathy towards her terrible circumstances.

Due to these and other technical flaws, *Let Me Alone* and the rest of the Ferguson novels have been largely disregarded by Kavan scholars, who view them as little more than clues to connect the sparse sources that make up her biography,

rather than literary objects worth of critical scrutiny. Yet, as Sybil Baker (2018) has noted, these more conventional, less controlled novels do offer an insight into some of the persistent thematic concerns of Kavan's later work, particularly that of unequal power relations between men and women, given their specific focus on 'the creative resistance of the female protagonists.' Sceptical of the Ferguson production Margaret Crosland (1981: 190) is also prepared to rescue *Let Me Alone* in her survey of twentieth-century English women novelists *Beyond the Lighthouse*, specifically on account of its statement of 'undeniable individuality,' which she views as a result of the author's realisation of the need for a room of her own. Certainly, several places in *Let Me Alone* resonate with clear-eyed feminist rage (LMA: 143), such as the scene in which Matthew Kavan kisses Anna-Marie on their wedding night:

He kissed her on the mouth, with relish, ignoring her resistance; also as if he owned her. He made her feel his predominance; the brainless, brute predominance of the husband. The triumph of pure brain. He infuriated her. He lighted a flame of sheerest anger in her heart. She suffered shamefully at that moment. But in her heart, the black flame kindled, indestructible.

Later in the same chapter (LMA: 151), the narrator places the fault of Anna-Marie's loss of self squarely on her husband:

She, personally, did not exist as far as he was concerned, he had reduced her to a sort of extension of himself. [...] as if he prided himself on his rights over her. And he was going to excise them, too. Oh yes, he meant to extract his husband's pound of flesh. There was something a bit pasha-like in his attitude towards her. The age-old, man-to-woman tyrannous condescension.

Despite explicitly acknowledging the existence of patriarchy, *Let Me Alone* hinges on the casting of a white female protagonist as its primary subject, making central a specific experience of oppression in a colonial context in which much more complex power dynamics are at play. 'Class and gender are much stronger preoccupations in the Helen Ferguson novels than in Kavan's later writing,' Victoria Walker (2012: 46) correctly observes, 'Ferguson explores the oppressive nature of traditional family life and social expectation, particularly for young women, in greater detail than in her more oblique work. Her treatment of race does not differ dramatically across her writing and is an area of neglect in her work.' That the privileged white girl at the centre of *Let Me Alone*, carries the name 'Anna Kavan' further complicates things, especially when one takes into account the correspondence between the story narrated in *Let Me Alone* and some of the events in the author's own life. The same troublingly limited, self-centring perspective, at any rate, remains unvaried in *Who Are You?*

It is this narrowness of focus, I think, that has rightfully preoccupied feminist critics, prompting Crosland (1981: 190), for one, to wonder: 'Does the author care principally about women as if they were facets of herself and do these characters have any depth?' Yet to admit that Kavan's fiction stems from a limited realm of experience should not automatically lead us to believe that 'the girl' in *Who Are You?* or 'Anna-Marie Kavan' in *Let Me Alone* are direct fictional representations of their author. Nor should it disqualify these novels from providing an interesting, albeit biased, object of observation, as examples of experimental narrative strategies that

may be adapted to bring gendered power dynamics into question in a contemporary context, as was the purpose of my own creative investigation with *Shelf Life*.

Brian Aldiss (1991: 15-16) hypothesises a congruence between the adoption of the name ‘Anna Kavan’ and Kavan’s own experimental literary project, by implying a degree of unconscious overlap between the character of the Ferguson novel and the author who chose the same name as her pseudonym:

The chilly sexuality in the novel *Let Me Alone*, in its very title, perhaps conveys something of what was happening to Helen Edmonds [...] Helen Ferguson evidently felt that she had defined herself in the character of Anna, who so courts yet fears isolation. Shortly thereafter, her own marriage failing, she [...] changed her name by deed poll to that of the character she had invented, Anna Kavan. Art inundated nature. [...] Anna Kavan had converted herself, as writers sometimes do, but rarely so deliberately. From now on, the realm of fantasy commanded her, and she it.

The level of agency exerted by Kavan in taking on a new identity and experimental practice appears unclear in Aldiss’ account: on the one hand, he stresses her verifiable ‘conversion’ to a new avant-garde practice and persona, stating that she ‘deliberately’ committed to a merging of the two; yet at the same time he challenges the degree of control Kavan held on her new experimental practice by suggesting a co-penetration between life and art – an ‘inundation’ – that brings into question her ability to exercise full control on her fictional material.

As we have seen, the primary biographical sources we do have tell a different story, attesting to the development of a consciously innovative writing practice that culminated in the choice to seek independent publication over compromise. My own

view is more closely aligned to L. Timmel Duchamp's reframing of Aldiss' question (2001), which takes into account Kavan's demonstrable interest in the representation of sexual trauma: 'What would impel a writer to fling off both of the names bestowed on her at birth and adopt the name she had put to the characterisation of an intelligent, promising proto-feminist bullied and brutalised and finally transformed into an easily-dominated victim?' I, too, tend to read the gesture as one of 'defiant self-creation.'

The label of proto-feminism seems particularly appropriate, given the limitations of Kavan's feminist politics and her obsessive narrowing of narrative focus onto a unique subject. Walker (2012: 54) echoes Duchamp's view, taking aim at reductionist feminist analyses that fail, albeit in good faith, to account for Kavan's complex creative standpoint:

The concentration on Kavan's writing as a confessional practice has overlooked the performative elements of her work [...]. I argue that Kavan's adoption of her character's name indicates not a tendency towards autobiography but an enduring fascination with the mechanisms, and the transformative potential, of fiction.

I would argue that *Who Are You?* represents Anna Kavan's deliberate reformulation of the 'Anna Kavan' character in fictional terms. In *Let Me Alone* Kavan had strived for a realist representation of sexual trauma, possibly drawing a degree of inspiration from her own autobiography. Having found the realist form unfit to accommodate the reality of the traumatic experience, in *Who Are You?* Kavan reconfigured the same narrative material from a position of greater awareness of self and creative practice. In adopting the name of the protagonist of *Let Me Alone* as her

creative persona, Kavan acknowledged a personal connection to the character of 'Anna Kavan', nevertheless, in *Who Are You?*, she effectively rewrote her previous identity out of existence, definitively emancipating her person from her fiction.

*Who Are You?* covers about one-sixth of the action of *Let Me Alone*, picking up the narrative after the couple's arrival in Burma. To the reader of the earlier novel, the point of view feels immediately familiar. Once again, we are guided along by a heterodiegetic narrator focalised mostly through the female protagonist. The narrative focus in *Who Are You?* however, is much narrower than in its predecessor, excising most of the context surrounding the abusive relationship between husband and wife. Both characters have been stripped of their names and are now known simply as 'Mr Dog Head' and 'the girl' and in *Who Are You?* they have already been living in the colonial location for some time. Not much happens in terms of action: the girl is manifestly disgusted with her husband who routinely abuses her. She briefly befriends a young white man known as 'Suède Boots' but is caught by her husband and sexually violated by him as punishment. It is implied that the girl might be pregnant as, panicked, she runs from the house during a violent monsoon. Drunk and angry Mr Dog Head returns to his game of tennis, and as he wrestles a surreally large rat, he knocks over a wardrobe that crushes him under its weight. At this point, the novel spectacularly loops back to the beginning and starts afresh, covering the same action in more compressed form.

Much greater narrative control is ascertainable in this novel, which immediately appears tauter, tidier at the level of syntax. *Who Are You?* is much shorter

than its predecessor, and the narrative tense has switched from the past simple to the present, allowing for a sense of immediacy and sustained tension, despite minimal action. The name of the colonial location is not provided, yet the landscape and the weather are obsessively rendered, in long accumulative passages describing the stifling heat, the strange sounds and suffocating isolation of the colonial setting. This technique was a feature in *Let Me Alone* too, which reappears in a more distilled, controlled form in *Who Are You?* as Walker (2012: 159-61) has meticulously demonstrated.

Minor characters that were featured in *Let Me Alone* are conflated in *Who Are You?*, as is the case of ‘Suède Boots’, who carries features of both Findlay and Whitaker, two young white men with whom Anna-Marie establishes a rapport in the earlier novel. Meanwhile, the central characters seem to have undergone an extreme version of the process of ‘sketching’ we have seen applied to Matthew Kavan in *Let Me Alone*. In *Who Are You?* characters are introduced as types, organised by a clear authorial intention driven towards stylisation rather than realism.

Céline Magot’s remarks on characterisation in *Ice* are helpful in considering Kavan’s treatment of her female protagonist in *Who Are You?* ‘The object of the quest,’ Magot (2016) writes, ‘seems both inaccessible and unreal. To use E. M. Forster’s categories, it could be said that she is both round and flat: she is “constructed round a single idea or quality” (an attractive elusive girl), yet she keeps changing in this unsettling story.’ In realist terms, the characterisation of Anna-Marie’s is one of the least accomplished features of *Let Me Alone*: as we have seen,

her flat character has been perceived by critics as a failure of the author who intended to make her inhabit the realist plot and failed. Yet, the same approach, unrestrained by realist conventions, represents one of the most interesting experimental features of *Who Are You?*

In her notes to the novel (Callard 1992: 122), Kavan explains her use of flat characters in *Who Are You?*:

By avoiding any detailed characterisation or plot, I wanted to free the reader from the actual written word, so that he would not be trapped in a piece of reportage, but stimulated to relate what is written to his own and the whole human condition, which of course is again different for each individual.

In *Who Are You?*, Matthew Kavan's 'flat unreality' (LMA: 150) is taken to the extreme, as he is entirely stripped of human nature. He is depicted as a senseless brute, with a 'curious inborn conviction of his own superiority which is quite unshakeable', (WAY: 13) and who blames '[the girl] totally for not appreciating the privilege of being married to him' (WAY: 21). His character is ironically introduced in Chapter Three (WAY: 13) as he is being tended to at dinner:

Aggressive and overbearing physically as well as by nature, [...] with bright blue eyes that can flare up like rockets. The reddish tinge of his close-cut hair has been lightened by exposure to the tropical sun, and it clings to his skull like short fur. Without being exceptionally hairy, his arms share this close pelt, which appears to cover his whole body. [...] Nevertheless, it would be distinctly far-fetched to say there was any resemblance to a hungry dog in the eagerness with which he consumes whatever is on his plate, leaving it perfectly clean.

On the other hand, the girl is directly cast in the role of the sacrificial victim, just as her counterpart will be in *Ice*. ““Everything always goes wrong with me...”” she tells Suéde Boots, while on her face is ‘the helplessly apprehensive look of a child’ (WAY: 54). The contrast between the girl’s innocent appearance and the claustrophobic context of the colonial house is amplified by Kavan’s conventional symbolic use of the colour white, a device she will exploit further in her final novel *Ice*. We first encounter the girl as she steps onto the balcony of the house at night (WAY: 11-12):

[A] young girl emerges, advancing towards the rails – they cut her off at the knee seen from below, as she leans upon them. The light from inside the house isn’t bright enough to show the colour of her dress, which is probably white [...]. Her hair, no darker than her dress, hangs almost shoulder length in a long, childish bob, unskillfully imitating the style known as ‘page boy’.

Psychologically, ‘the girl’ is characterised by a complete rejection of the external world and of her husband in particular. Like Anna-Marie, she experiences a sense of detachment from reality. But if upon arriving in Burma, Anna-Marie gradually loses contact with the world, becoming ‘extinguished by loneliness’ (LMA: 286) as a result of her circumstances, the girl in *Who Are You?* has already irreversibly shed the identities she used to inhabit (WAY: 30):

Is it her life? It hardly seems so. A picture comes to her of her school friends, enjoying themselves in pretty dresses and gay surroundings, or else at the university, as she ought to be. Who am I? she wonders vaguely. Why am I here? Is she the girl who won the scholarship last year? Or the girl living in this awful heat, with the stranger who’s

married her for some unknown reason, with whom it's impossible to communicate?

Her questions remain unanswered; both alternatives seem equally dreamlike, unreal.

Again, a number of Duchamp's observations about *Ice* are applicable to *Who Are You?* About *Ice*, Kavan (Callard 1992: 137-38) had written that, '[t]he girl's importance as a victim should be enough to justify the pursuing.' Mindful of this authorial stance, Duchamp (2001) observes:

The novel's characters are not personalities but archetypal figures in a pattern that is repeated synchronically throughout the narrative, points mapping a relation the narrator presents as inescapable, in which each figure is constituted by its relation with the other two [...] But it is the pattern that is central and key; 'the girl' is simply a role: 'Her part was to suffer; that was known and accepted'.

There is only one pursuer in *Who Are You?*, though Mr Dog Head's urge to both possess and destroy the girl follows precisely that of the narrator and the Warden in *Ice*. As a flat character, Mr Dog Head may well be summed up by the sentence, 'He blames [his wife] for everything' (WAY: 20). His character exists purely in relation to the girl he pursues. We know, however, that the reverse is not true of the girl, for whom the experience of sexual violence has erected an 'impassable barrier' from reality (WAY: 60). Chris R. Morgan (2018) writes, 'The characters in *Who Are You?* move in a world where the individual psyche is emaciated, in the case of the girl, inflamed, in the case of Mr Dog Head, or romanticised, in the case of Suède Boots.' However, looking more closely we can see that the naming of the husband and of the young man occurs as a result of internal focalisation on the girl: the male characters earn their names because of what the girl notices in them, and are in turn

portrayed as flat, ‘unreal’ characters representing the opposite patriarchal archetypes of violence and romance, as they appear in her eyes.

As I have noted before, the point of view in *Who Are You?* corresponds more closely to that of its early predecessor, *Let Me Alone*, than its first-person, masculine reversal in *Ice*. As a character-focaliser ‘the girl’ allows us an insight into her consciousness similar to that we are entitled to in *Let Me Alone*, a point of access that is obstructed by the autodiegetic first-person male narrator in the later novel. My argument is that by combining the sympathetic narrative perspective of *Let Me Alone* with the female archetype later developed in *Ice*, *Who Are You?* is able to conjure the proto-feminist concerns of Kavan’s early work in a newly effective experimental form. As Baker (2018) has perceptively observed: ‘It’s rare that an author would publish three different narrative conclusions to the same basic story. By doing so, Kavan reveals the power of re-vision, of offering new resolutions to old problems.’

In her work on fairytale and form Kate Bernheimer (2009: 67) claims that ‘flatness [...] allows depth of response in the reader [...] dovetail[ing] with the technique of abstraction.’ Kavan uses flatness in a similar way in *Who Are You?*: by turning her two central characters into archetypes of victim and pursuer, marked uniquely by their gender and belonging to opposite categories of power, she externalises the patriarchal dynamic between husband and wife in its essential, most abstract form, exposing its fundamentally violent character. Faced with the objective matter of gender-based violence against women, the reader is forced to flesh out an individual response that uncomfortably engages their own personal experience of

sexual power dynamics. To produce an answer to the question of the girl's identity – who are you? – entails a creative act on behalf of the reader – it demands that they 'relate' to the girl's story. Michelle Balaev (2008: 155) accounts for this literary strategy in her survey of trauma narratives:

The trick of trauma in fiction is that the individual protagonist functions to express a unique personal traumatic experience, yet the protagonist also functions to represent and convey an event that was experienced by a group of people [...] The traumatized protagonist in fiction brings into awareness the specificity of individual trauma that is often connected to larger social factors and cultural values or ideologies. We can see that the trauma novel provides a picture of the individual that suffers, but paints it in such a way as to suggest that this protagonist is an 'everyperson' figure.

The girl's lack of features, bar those of gender, youth and victimhood, creates a central vacancy in the novel, a permeable access point that invites the reader to step in. As we do so, we are made to inhabit an experience of sexual violence from the position of the survivor, to go through what they went through. The sense of individual responsibility imparted to the reader, is accentuated by the choice of the narrative present tense and the accumulation of claustrophobic detail throughout the novel, especially pertaining to the landscape (the stifling heat, the insects, the obsessive bird cries in the trees), that make for an unpleasantly intimate reading experience, in which the reader's perception is aligned closely to that of the protagonist.

After she is forced into marriage in *Let Me Alone*, a 'blankness' (LMA: 187) gradually descends on Anna-Marie's mind, until, exhausted, she is forced to relent

to her husband: ‘There was something inevitable about him. It no longer seemed worthwhile to resist. [...] he ravished her. He simply took her body and ravished her’ (LMA: 250-51). Afterwards, she is left in pieces. ‘Something was broken and destroyed in her. She had come to an end. It was all repulsive and strange, and incoherent. There was no rational sequence of cause and effect,’ Ferguson writes (LMA: 314). Sexual trauma creates a fracture, irreversibly shattering Anna-Marie’s identity and disrupting her relationship with the external world. ‘In this sort of violation,’ writes Culbertson (1995: 171), ‘one is not merely invaded by another, but literally taken; the wounding in this sort of circumstance becomes a physical marker of one’s clear permeability, one’s flowing into the world, and one’s being entered by it.’ Within the framework of the realist novel, the traumatic sexual event seals Anna-Marie’s fate as a dysfunctional protagonist, incapable of action, only of survival, fitting Cathy Caruth’s description of the traumatised individual (1996: 61), for whom the experience of trauma causes a ‘break in the mind’s experience of time.’

In *Who Are You?*, however, loneliness has long extinguished the girl, ‘washing over even her fictitious self’ (LMA: 286), wholly denying her any possibility for action: the girl’s identity is a frightful void that the reader is called to inhabit in order to activate her as a protagonist. As Balaev (2008: 159) puts it:

The narrative strategy of silence may create a ‘gap’ in time or feeling that allows the reader to imagine what might or could have happened to the protagonist, thereby broadening the meaning and effects of the experience [...]. [T]he narrative [is structured] into a form that attempts to *embody* the psychological ‘action’ of traumatic memory or dissociation.

In *Who Are You?* the girl represents precisely this: a ‘gap in feeling’, through which the reader is invited to experientially engage with the narrative of sexual trauma. Unlike Anna-Marie, the girl is not inert in narrative terms: she is not expected to act as a round character tied to the duties of plot, but instead acts a flat archetype engineered to plunge the reader into the condition of female victimhood.

This works jointly with Kavan’s choice of point of view. Caruth (1996: 61) writes: ‘The problem of survival, in trauma [...] emerges specifically as the question: What does it mean for *consciousness* to survive?’ Kavan attempts to provide an answer by focalising her heterodiegetic narrator through the traumatised character of the girl. As Kavan (Van Hove 2017: 363) once wrote in *Horizon*: ‘Characters come fully alive only through the elucidation of subconscious tensions which determine the basic patterns of human behaviour.’ In *Who Are You?*, such behavioural patterns are observed from a distinctly feminine narrative placement. At several points throughout the novel, as is particularly noticeable in the description of Mr Dog Head reported above, the heterodiegetic narrator’s tone is inflected with a mean streak of irony, distinctly sympathetic to the girl and not entirely dissimilar to the narrator’s tone in *Jacob’s Room*. Tonally, the heterodiegetic narrator’s voice is in fact consistent with the rest of Kavan’s work investigating gender, suggesting that as a flat character-focaliser the girl simultaneously provides a vessel for the creative consciousness of the author as well as an access point for the reader’s. For both author and narrator ‘the girl’ acts as a blank canvas onto which an individual, experiential reaction to

trauma can be projected. In turn, occupying the girl's narrative position forces us to take on her archetypal identity as a female victim of sexual violence.

Having established her flat protagonist, Kavan lays out the fictional 'dream logic' of the traumatic experience itself. In her keystone study of trauma literature *Worlds of Hurt*, Kalí Tal (1996: 15) argues that, '[a]ccurate representation of trauma can never be achieved without recreating the event since, by its very definition, trauma lies beyond the bounds of 'normal' conception,' a theory which, according to Balaev (2008: 150) marks the inception of 'the shattering trope' in literary criticism of trauma fiction: the expectation that traumatic experience will invariably lead to a fracturing of the subject, and must therefore be represented by a suitably fragmented formal surface. Yet Kavan's novel does not rely on fragmentation to embody the traumatic experience in the text, but rather on controlled accumulation.

Balaev (2008: 151) convincingly argues against the 'shattering trope' of trauma fiction with an argument reminiscent of Felski's confutation of the existence of fixed 'feminist aesthetics', claiming that 'presenting trauma as inherently pathologic perpetuates the notion that all responses to any kind of traumatic experience produce a dissolute consciousness.' This, according to Balaev, is tantamount to denying the victim agency to shape their own narrative of survival in response to their specific circumstances. In *Who Are You?* the girl is presented as a flat character, passive and devoid of feeling precisely because her consciousness has survived the traumatic event. Her 'flatness', however, simultaneously performs an active narrative function in the novel, enlisting the reader to step into the girl's position and express

a personalised reaction to the experience of sexual trauma, where hers is (or has been) muted. Kavan's choice of flat characterization purposely offers the girl's identity up for interpretation on the part of the reader. As Balaev (2008: 159, emphasis mine) notes:

The multiplicity of determinate meaning produced within the narrative, and the various new meanings that arise out of the traumatic experience that causes a reformulation of perception of self and world, indicate that each author portrays an alternative perspective on the meaning of traumatic experience that emphasizes the *reformulation of identity*, not simply the destruction of the self.

Kavan's manipulation of narrative time in *Who Are You?* not only exceptionally emphasises this process of identity reformulation but stages it by directly involving the reader. The novel begins conventionally enough, linearly unfolding. About two-thirds of the way into the novel, however, as the action seemingly reaches its climax, the story rewinds back to the beginning. After he discovers her talking to Suéde Boots, Mr Dog Head sexually attacks the girl, who runs from the house in the middle of a monsoon. The next morning, however, Suéde Boots calls in for tea at the villa, as if nothing unusual has happened. From this point onward, the same events begin to unfold once again, in a more compressed form. The present tense lends itself well to 'the loop' (Reed 2006: 149), creating an illusion of continuity between two alternate dimensions. Suéde Boots openly alludes to this in the second retelling (WAY: 100): 'If I hadn't killed the snake on that particular day [...] I wouldn't be here with you now. This wouldn't be real – something else would. You'd have been another you, instead of the one you are now.' As Walker

(2012: 188-89) argues:

Experiencing [*Who Are You?*]'s temporality as a reader is an unsettling recurring dream, or a dream within a dream. In fiction, as in dream, the linear constraints of time do not apply but the predominant realism of the rest of the text sits uneasily with the sudden shift [...] The duplication of these passages suggests a circularity to the events, a sequence that has begun before the reader accesses the scene and will continue in endless repetition.

By introducing the time loop Kavan traps the reader in the continuity of the trauma narrative, enhancing the experiential aspect of their engagement with the story. As a proto-feminist text, the success of *Who Are You?* lies not so much in seeking to initiate a collective practice of sexual liberation, as *Jacob's Room* aimed to do, but in forcefully prompting an individual practice of consciousness-raising on the matter of sexual violence.

Morgan (2018) has suggested that, 'In encountering a work by Anna Kavan, the first thing that needs to be understood is that Anna Kavan is difficult. Kavan lived a difficult life, and she took elements of that life to write some exceedingly difficult books.' Nevertheless, *Who Are You?* is not coincidentally difficult because it stems from the author's difficult lived experience, but deliberately so, in that Kavan chooses to directly implicate the reader, inviting them to individually engage with the experience of a young woman's sexual trauma. Its claustrophobic, trying character is engineered by a writer fully in control of her material, as is clear from the opening page that Kavan intended to include in the novel (Walker 2012: 168-69):

There's no answer to the brain-fever bird's question because the process of becoming an individual is complete only when life is. [...] The people in this story live through the same situations twice over. But they are not the same, and the outcome is different, because the element of nightmare which predominates in the first experience is in abeyance later. Their identities are equally real or unreal in both cases. The you of the birds' question could be either, or both of them – or neither.

In the final version of the events the narrator appears coolly detached, and the abuse of the girl is presented merely as fact. The ending is less dramatic: the girl's pregnancy is not mentioned, and 'as soon as he makes an effort' Mr Dog Head 'quite easily dislodges' the wardrobe that has fallen upon him (WAY: 115). The destiny of the girl remains unaccounted for. We see her last (WAY: 113) on the doorstep of the house gazing out at the monsoon, as she contemplates her condition in objective terms:

[A]ll she has to do is walk out of the place [...] How simple it seems. The thing that she's thought almost impossible, is really perfectly easy.

But she still doesn't move, nothing to do with the storm keeps her standing there: perhaps is her belief in her own unchangeable bad luck; or perhaps a constitutional fear of any decisive step.

After the worst of the storm has passed, however, we are not sure whether the girl has actually left the premises or returned to her quarters (WAY: 116): 'The occupant of the room must be keeping quiet deliberately; or else sleeping soundly. It is also possible that she is not there at all, and the room is empty.' If the ambiguity proved liberating for Kavan, we cannot tell from the sources we have. This certainly

is not the case for the reader, who has just been forced to witness a second iteration of the same horror with no pre-emptive warning, and ultimately denied catharsis.

As Walker (2012: 170) has observed, ‘What really changes in this second run of events is not the outcome itself, which remains deliberately indeterminate, but that the girl understands that she has some choice in it.’ *Who Are You* is the novel in which Anna Kavan expresses this understanding and that marks her reclamation of full creative agency as a woman writer. Far from simply representing her own life in the narrative, with *Who Are You?* Kavan demands of the reader that they develop their own strategy to survive sexual violence. If all too often Helen Ferguson has been written into *Let Me Alone*, with *Who Are You?* Anna Kavan writes herself out of her own biography: she writes the reader in.

Chapter Three:

On Lydia Davis's  
*The End of the Story*

I really can't bear it, and never could, when someone refuses to listen to me for as long as I want to talk.

Lydia Davis, *The End of the Story*

The final case study in this commentary, Lydia Davis's only novel to date, *The End of the Story* (1995) was published nine years after her first major collection of short stories, *Break It Down* (1986). Despite Friedman and Fuchs' inclusion of Davis in *Breaking the Sequence*, which rightly indicates her as one of the most important contemporary women experimentalists in the English language, Davis (McCaffery 1996: 76-77) herself has never openly stated a commitment to writing from a strongly situated perspective of gender; historically, her allegiance to the feminist cause has been rather tepid:

I specifically *resisted* feminism when I was first writing. I have never had a program in my writing. I never said to myself that I was going to write about women's issues and speak for women. I suppose I have *acted* like a feminist in certain ways, and I have believed in most or all of the things that feminists believe in, so it wasn't that I was opposed to their goals theoretically or emotionally. But I have never been an activist.

Perhaps as a consequence of her tentative feminist positioning, no comprehensive study of Davis's treatment of sexual difference has so far been attempted. Nevertheless, a particular thematic focus on heterosexual romantic relations is significant, especially in her early works. The pervasive presence of, as Beverly Haviland puts it, a 'sexual malaise,' the consequence of an 'almost willingly acquiescence' to a 'vaguely hostile order defined by someone else' (Knight 2008:

199) is equally detectable in *Break It Down* and *The End of the Story*. In both the stories and the novel, these perceived limitations are typically counteracted by a manically active analytical consciousness, in most cases that of a woman, trying painfully to make sense of an order that discomforts her, blocking or limiting her understanding and agency.

Kasia Boddy (2000: 220) has written on the prominence of difficult heterosexual romantic relationships as a thematic focus in Davis's early works, in her entry for *The Columbia Companion to the Twentieth-Century American Short Story*:

Davis's parables are most successful when they examine the problems of communication between men and women and the strategies each uses to interpret the other's words and actions. In stories such as "The Letter," "Break It Down," "Story," [...] the lover tries to "figure out" the behaviour of the loved one.

Not only do the stories in *Break It Down* share thematic and formal similarities with *The End of the Story*, but a degree of continuity between the early stories and the novel seems to have been explicitly intended by the author, as Christopher J. Knight (2008: 203) has noted: '*The End of the Story*'s tenor is remarkably self-conscious, beginning with the title, which [...] makes explicit reference to an earlier Davis narrative, "Story" [...] the first story in Davis's more widely circulated 1986 collection *Break It Down*.' All the stories Boddy mentions are indeed directly reworked in the novel, as well as a fourth from the same collection, titled "The Mouse". While there is no room in this commentary for an extended analysis of *The End of the Story* vis-à-vis its early predecessors, it seems relevant to suggest that these thematic and stylistic commonalities point at an ongoing area of concern surrounding gender politics in

Davis's practice, which she clearly felt the need to explore in a more expansive narrative form – a move not dissimilar to the progression from Woolf's early modernist stories to *Jacob's Room*.

Davis (Boaz 2003: 39) has repeatedly claimed that the events in *The End of the Story* stem out of, 'a rather banal situation,' and that 'the interest for her in that novel was not the story [...] but in *thoroughness*, that is, looking at something from every side.' Yet, if the events comprised in *The End of the Story* are neither interesting per se, nor new, as they have already been recounted in the stories, it follows that a particular formal interest in exploring the possibilities of the novel genre must have been central to Davis's creative agenda for the project. Where the stories of *Break It Down* engage the theme of gendered power dynamics and communicative difficulties within heterosexual couples by capturing individual instances of incomprehension, the analytical process that propels the storytelling is allowed more room for expansion in the novel, unrestrained by considerations of length and unity of purpose. This allows (and at times forces) the narrator to entertain a range of endless possibilities – a tentative approach that, not accidentally, mirrors Davis's recollections of her own writing process (Knight 1999: 539-40): 'I had to find a structure for it through trial and error [...] I was very troubled as I worked on the novel by something that doesn't trouble me when I'm writing stories, and that is the question I bring up in [*The End of the Story*], that it could have gone in any number of different directions.' The narrator of *The End of the Story* (EOS: 191) explicitly links

her 'trouble' with writing a novel to her difficulty in perceiving herself as somebody capable of producing one:

When I started trying to write this novel, years ago, I thought I looked pretty much like a translator but not at all like a novelist. Now on certain days I think I am beginning to look like a novelist. Glancing in the mirror, I said to myself, maybe as long as I do not look like a person who has written a novel, I will have to go on working on this, and when at last I look like a person who could have written a novel, I will be able to finish it.

My argument in this chapter is that Davis's commitment to a thorough exploration of the theme of frustrated heterosexual romance in *The End of the Story* is bolstered by a corresponding urge to establish and legitimise the workings of female creative authority. These creative priorities find their articulation in the more expansive form of the novel through the unfolding of a continuous, simultaneous process of deconstruction of narrative conventions and of heterosexual power relations. In this sense, the distancing and control strategies employed by Davis in the novel strive to achieve an aim comparable with Kavan's reclamation of female creative agency in *Who Are You?*, though Davis's technique has perhaps more in common with Woolf's foregrounding of a self-aware female narrator, as we shall see in more detail in what follows.

The premise of *The End of the Story* is familiar enough to the reader of Davis's short stories: a middle-aged writer and translator, now married, is compelled to write a novel about an affair she had with a young student at the university where she taught creative writing. Her lover initiated the break-up, painfully for the narrator,

who still holds feelings for him and who, for years, has been dealing with the emotional fallout of his leaving her. Her retrospective shame is made worse by her initial illusion of holding power over the relationship, given her age and position.

In an interview with Francine Prose (1997), Davis has discussed the subject of unrequited love as particularly fascinating to her: ‘Obsessive or foiled or frustrated love is very compelling because you don’t have control over it. It’s the most extreme example of not being able to control another person.’ Not unlike the protagonist of *Shelf Life*, the narrator of *The End of the Story* is obsessed with control, precisely because the very act that sets the novel into motion is one over which she has no authority. In both novels, the male lover’s departure is the unshakeable fact that sets the narrative into motion, and from which the narrator must simultaneously recover – to find emotional closure – and work backwards – to achieve intellectual understanding.

Prose (1997) describes *The End of the Story* as a ‘novel about the self watching the self write.’ The writer-narrator device allows the reader privileged access to female creative consciousness, allowing us to experience the creative act as it happens. Hilton Als (1995: 104) further suggests that *The End of the Story* is ‘a work that is concerned less with the story itself than with the compulsion to tell it.’ It is this self-conscious fictional narrator, whose obsessions and compulsions we get to know intimately, who explicitly goes about establishing the correct order for the material of the previous stories, placing them within the new novel framework. The narrative perspective and fragmentary structure of *The End of the Story* work jointly

to plunge us into the workings of one particular woman's mind – an effect deliberately intended by Davis (Knight 1999: 539):

With hindsight, I can say that what I really wanted, probably, was for this novel to read as though it were a person's spontaneous thought. And the way we think is not orderly, chronological, but by association [...] I wanted [the novel] to follow that motion of the mind so completely that reading it, you would feel as though you were thinking it yourself.

Like the stories, *The End of the Story* is concerned with gender politics within the heterosexual couple, yet in the more spacious form of the novel Davis's primary interest ceases to be that of finding a narrative resolution to individual occurrences of frustrated female agency. She does not view each of the episodes she includes as a relevant turning point in an overarching plot – for they are, as stated, 'banal' events – rather she is interested in considering their impact on an overarching female consciousness.

It is worth noting, at this point, that although the novel makes no explicit feminist statement in political terms, Davis lists among her inspirations for *The End of the Story*, Marguerite Duras' *The Lover* and Elizabeth Hardwick's *Sleepless Nights* – two authors who do not appear elsewhere among her inspirations for the short stories. Typically shy around discussions of feminism in fiction writing, Davis (Boast and Johnson 2006) has spontaneously pointed out that the two novels that influenced *The End of the Story* 'are both by women, it's true, and they're taking fragments of things and exploring them and not necessarily putting them together in a strict linear form.' What Davis (Aguilar and Fronth-Nygren 2015) particularly

appreciates in Duras' and Hardwick's writing is 'the impression that you're stepping inside someone's mind,' akin to the 'internal feeling' she wished to achieve in *The End of the Story*. Notably, in all three cases, that experience is grounded in the explicitly gendered perception of a female protagonist.

Likewise, Davis's self-conscious narrator proceeds associatively, by expansion, attaching more narrative units to the existing ones, broadening her investigation as it suits the functioning of her mind. This free-ranging, fragmentary approach breaks individual memories into interlinked scenes of equivalent value, rather than imposing a progression of chapters, according to Davis (2019: 207) 'in what Barthes would think of as a horizontal structure – equal increments – rather than as a hierarchical structure, in which the parts are subordinated to an ultimate governing point or meaning.' Knight (2008: 209) terms this process 'spatial structuring': 'a set of juxtaposed elements rather than as a linear series of unfolding events,' a definition which helpfully flags the simultaneous and continuous lateral progression of the novel.

Even as these narrative priorities are being established, however, the narrator's confidence is failing her. She feels that her endeavour is not quite legitimate (EOS: 11): 'Maybe I did not want to have to choose a place to start, maybe I wanted all the parts of the story to be told at the same time. As Vincent says, I often want more than is possible.' Significantly, her crisis of confidence is triggered by the perceived judgement of the main male authority in her life in the present time of the novel, her husband Vincent. Vincent repeatedly voices his opinion of what he

deems appropriate material for a novel (EOS: 167): ‘His standards are very high [...] he thinks I should leave out my feelings, or most of them.’

The narrator’s creative self-doubt is noticeably absent in the male characters she interacts with. Her male writer friends appear to have established proficient writing routines (EOS: 86):

I complained to another friend about my confusion over this book. He had asked me a direct and clear question, like ‘How far along are you?’ or ‘How much do you have left to do?’ as though I should be able to answer that. He said he always knew exactly how much he had left to do on a book. He said he wrote about a page a day and always knew that he had, say, 100 pages left to write. Only one book of his, he said, was confusing, and for that book he had made elaborate diagrams.

Even the narrator’s young lover seems intent on negotiating the Western canon with the confidence of an equal contender, a fact which is doubly unnerving since he is a much less experienced writer than her (EOS: 43-44):

He was angry with certain men and he was indignant at certain great writers, and the two feelings came from the same sort of disappointment, I thought. He was always reading the great writers, as though determined to know all the best that had ever been written. He would read most of what one great writer had written, then he would become indignant. [...] It was as though these writers had failed him. To be great meant to be perfect in his eyes. [...] Maybe he had to see how they failed if he was to find a place in that world for himself.

The narrator of *The End of the Story*, conversely, appears to be labouring under a double bind: on the one hand, she is trying to overcome the leftover emotion she feels towards her former lover; on the other, she is attempting to represent a

woman's creative process through a textual form that does not immediately bend to her purpose. Nikolai Duffy (2005: 164) summarises this feeling well in comparison with the earlier story 'Break It Down', in which a (male) narrator attempts to break an affair down into its composing parts by calculating how much money he has spent on each date:

*The End of the Story* is both a novel that tells the tale of a difficult affair and one that tells the tale of the difficulty of writing a novel (about a difficult affair). In the former instance, and as with 'Break It Down', the narrative reflects the image of the affair; in the latter, that reflection forms the very subject matter of the novel's self-analysis.

Accordingly, the narrative thrust of the novel is at a slant to that of the stories: *The End of the Story* is not so much concerned with narrative resolution as it is with building a novelistic structure that legitimises female narrative consciousness as it struggles to recover from a failed heterosexual affair. The narrator is anxious about the remembered interactions with her former lover, just as she is anxious about her ability to piece them together in the correct way; the memory of her lack of agency in the breakdown of her relationship affects her present confidence. Because it has not been emotionally processed, the shame that the break-up has engendered hinders her present analytical and creative faculties. She is caught in frustration as she attempts to write (EOS: 22): 'I am inefficient in the way I work on the novel, and that inefficiency infects other things I try to do.'

The narrator's objective in the novel is two-fold: to exhaust the subject of heterosexual romantic conflict through sustained analysis, and to emotionally archive the painful event of the break-up. Recovery of female creative agency in the

novel rests on the narrator's ability to emancipate herself from the context that caused her to write the story in the first place, and vice versa. Anne McConnell (2018: 530) observes that the narrator of *The End of the Story* has a particular 'desire to purge her experience [...] and maybe even to try to make sense of it through narrative. [...] The narrator can announce the "death" of the events and details of her life with her lover once she commits them to writing—a sort of writing that frees her to write.'

In order to gain agency over the failed heterosexual romance, then, the narrator must nurture twin resources of narrative distance and narrative control. McConnell (2018: 527) further notes how, in *The End of the Story*, the act of writing has the peculiar quality of 'inscrib[ing] distance at the heart of the relationship and the story of that relationship.' Since we are invited to occupy space within the narrator's mind, closely observing her composition of the novel, we are detached from narrative action: we never emotionally inhabit the narrative of the past relationship but witness it through her present consciousness. This puts us at an advantage from the narrator-writer, as the memories occur to her vividly and directly; we experience her creative uncertainty, but do not bear its emotional load, aware as we are of narrative artifice.

For the narrator, however, the same narrative distance is difficult to achieve, if sorely needed, first and foremost to emancipate herself from the pain of the break-up. To be able to examine her subject thoroughly, the narrator must first achieve sufficient distance from the emotional repercussions of the analysis itself. This need

for distance, as Davis (EOS: 197) recalls, informed her use of point of view during the creative process of the novel:

Certain things I wrote down in the first person, and others, the most painful things, I think, or the most embarrassing, I wrote down in the third person. Then a day came when I had used she for I so long that even the third person was too close to me and I needed another person, even farther away than the third person. But there was no other person.

Another consistent way in which the narrator of *The End of the Story* establishes a productive distance from the subject of her narrative, is by refusing to particularise her former lover. We have very few pieces of information about him, bar the repetition of few, physical traits, and, most notably, his young age – twelve years her junior – a fact to which the narrator returns repeatedly. The first time that she meets him, the narrator fails to catch his name, leading to an awkward situation after they spend the night together for the first time. Too embarrassed to ask him for his name at that point, the narrator spends several more intimate occasions with him without knowing it (EOS: 35):

I did not know what his last name was, and I was not sure of his first name [...]. And because I did not have a name for him, he continued to seem like a stranger, even though he was very quickly becoming so close to me. When I did learn his name [...] because I learned it only after I knew him so well, his name also seemed strangely arbitrary, as though it did not have to be that one but could have been any other.

When the man's real name is revealed to the narrator by a friend, she is almost displeased, as if by acquiring definition in the world her lover is already drawing away from her. McConnell (2018: 529) observes that '[t]he man's anonymity and lack of

definition allowed for his character to be written by the narrator without the limitations imposed by his reality.’ Learning additional information about her lover detracts from the narrator’s full capacity to imagine ‘him’, allowing him to exist as a character in his own story, beyond her control (EOS: 37): ‘Knowing his name, after I had waited so many days to learn it,’ the narrator tensely remarks, ‘seemed to increase his reality. It gave him a place in the world that he had not had before, and it allowed him to belong more to the day than he had before.’

The narrator ponders the question of what to name her male character at length (EOS: 38): ‘For a long time, I did not know what to call him in the novel, or what to call myself either.’ Eventually she chooses not to name him at all, nor does she choose a name for herself, setting up the couple in isolation from the relative solidity of the fictional world. Her young lover’s life outside of the couple does not interest the narrator much and on the few occasions in which he appears confident in his own environment, such as in a bar with one of his professors, or at a literary reading, she is either bored or irritated – not so much because the attention is not focused on her, but because the fact that it is being focused on him lends him agency beyond the boundaries of their couple.

Neither does she think that she should be similarly inscribed within those self-same boundaries: she is equally unimpressed when he appears unexpectedly, disrupting her interactions with friends of her age or giving into public displays of affection at her workplace. There is a marked partiality in the narrator’s perspective, which she admits to openly, at several points in the novel. She recalls feeling

unenthusiastic about her lover's other activities (EOS: 73): 'I'm not sure my interest and respect could have been aroused by anything in his life except the very same things and people that aroused my interest and respect in my own life.' Likewise, she concedes that she can act rather selfishly towards him (EOS: 81): 'I simply wanted everything to be the way I chose it to be, quick or slow', as well as confessing to her double standards (EOS: 140): 'I did not want him to see another woman, though I could see another man. I could see another man because that did not hurt me, and I avoided what would hurt me and went after what would give me pleasure.'

'He,' in the novel, is always defined in relation to the 'I' of the speaker, though this does not necessarily bring the two central characters any closer. The self-conscious nature of the narrator is obstructive: the sprawling, outwards movement of her storytelling style, coupled with her reluctance to particularise the male character, contribute to keeping him at the edges of the story. The narrator projects her lover's image obsessively on to various surfaces, producing different versions of him, in dreamscapes, fantasies, inexact memories, typeset pages and journal entries. In an exemplary moment, she wakes up from a dream in which she had read a poem by him that she quite liked, but because she has not had a chance to read anything by him yet, she realises that it was her mind, asleep, that composed something to her taste (EOS: 36-37). McConnell (2018: 528) correctly views these authorial interferences as enacting a process of gradual erasure of the man, and of the narrator's relationship with him, through what she calls 'the narrator's act of composing her lover [...] the narrator's authorship of his character and the narrator's

desire that her lover fulfil a personage that has already begun to take shape in her story.’

The narrator pursues similar aims of distance and control through content selection as well as form. Episodes of profound incomprehension between her and her lover are privileged in the novel over any depiction of real intimacy. The distance between the two central characters is explored much more often than their closeness: we spend more time alone in the narrator’s room thinking about her lover in his absence, than we witness him spending time with her. On the occasions they do see each other, their time together is nearly always fraught in some way: he seems to be always coming and going from her house without much notice; they share awkward meals out and play games of cards to conceal their mutual boredom. We witness few genuinely tender moments. The emotional content of the story is deferred: we are ‘focusing on something else’ (Wachtel 2008). Feeling, Davis reiterates (Knight 1999: 541-42), simply ‘was not the point’ of the exercise:

There was a question in my mind about the love scene. Should there be a love scene, and actual, fulfilling, love scene? I always resisted that. At first, I didn’t know why. Then, I finally, obviously, could see: well, it isn’t the point of the book, so it shifts the book into the wrong direction, to the wrong place [...] So the only love scene between her and her young lover is described by implication [...] That tickles me, the idea of portraying a love scene by describing anything that is its opposite.

It makes logical sense that painful happy memories of the love affair should be kept at bay in this context, given that one of the tasks the narrator has set herself is to overcome the emotional pain of the break-up. Accumulating descriptions of

‘anything opposite’ to a love scene, coupled with a lack of characterisation of the lover, serve this end well. On the one hand, the choice of two nameless protagonists universalises the heterosexual romance and its demise, distancing it from the narrator’s painful personal experience; on the other, the scene selection largely privileges instances of miscommunication between the two lovers, of times when things were somewhat already ‘wrong’ even while the relationship was still ongoing.

In a review of *The End of the Story* Davis was much pleased with, Michael Hoffman (1996) perceptively expounded on this dynamic thus: ‘Davis insists on *now* much more than *then* – she sees her story in a rear-view mirror [...] she offers not an evocation of togetherness or remembered sensuality but the shapes of her curiosity, the physical pleasures of intellection.’ The choice of pronouns for the protagonist and her lover clearly marks the creative subject – the narrator’s ‘I’ – as separate from the object of her narrative – ‘him’ – while the structural texture of the novel promotes allegiance to the female narrator’s fragmented subjectivity. “‘I’ and “‘he’”, Hoffman continues, are ‘two pronouns which tell the whole of her story, the “I” somehow implying and persisting into the present, the “he” receding into some minute, mythological past.’

Frye (1986: 56) has highlighted the political potential held by autodiegetic female narrators in contemporary novels written by women after postmodernism, making particular reference to the kind of self-aware stance adopted by Davis in *The End of the Story*:

Centered in an “I,” plot becomes overtly a function of an individual human consciousness; as an openly subjective act [...] The visible process of narrative construction and narrative selection, reinforced by a cultural context predisposed to notice literary self-consciousness, becomes an overt reminder of human agency and human fallibility; events must be selected and described *by someone*; stories must be told *by someone* [...] When the protagonist of the novel is made her own narrator, she thus achieves a very immediate kind of agency and a capacity to renew our notion of plot. She is the *agent* by which events come into being as part of her story.

As the novel progresses, the narrator’s confidence in her own creative agency grows as she begins to see that recovery from the break-up is intimately connected to her willingness to undertake the difficult process of constructing a new formal framework capable of accommodating her subjective experience of the heterosexual affair. If she wishes to heal from the break-up, the narrator realises, she must reclaim full narrative control over that same experience, circumventing the narrative expectations of novel writing that do not suit her purpose: telling *her* truth, rather than *the* truth. Gradually, the narrator comes to explicitly express this understanding (EOS: 50):

When I first started working on the novel, I thought I had to keep very close to the facts about certain things, including his life [...] Because I had wanted to write these things for so long, I thought I had to tell the truth about them. But the surprising thing was that after I had written them the way they were, I found I could change them or take them out, as though by writing them once I had satisfied whatever it was I had to satisfy.

The metanarrative framework further encourages a splitting of the narrator's function in both reliable and unreliable directions. The narrator talks candidly and honestly about process, yet by means of prioritising her own perception she obfuscates the events of the relationship as they have happened. Later in the novel (EOS: 106) the narrator's choices take on a self-confessedly biased character: 'I see that I'm shifting the truth around a little, at certain points accidentally, but at others deliberately. I am rearranging what actually happened so that it is not only less confusing and more believable, but also more acceptable or palatable.'

From this point onwards (EOS: 135), the narrator begins to revisit the same scenes several times, 'working more systematically' and 'feeling more in control', framing them over with the same analytical fervour of the female narrators in early stories like 'The Letter' and 'Story' and growing more and more self-assured as she progresses. She recounts the last time she sees her lover, their first encounter, her lowest point, driving or walking around town looking for his rusty white Volvo, spying on him in his flat at night, relentlessly editing down each memory as she gains more creative control. The aftermath of their final argument, before he breaks things off with her, is told in a three-part fragmentary summary spaced out over more than twenty pages. 'The way it ended' (EOS: 116) begins with the two lovers in bed after a quarrel: '[I]n his sleep, he murmured something. I leaned over and asked him what he had said, though I thought he would only go on sleeping. But he said the same thing again, a purely gentle and loving thing' (EOS: 117). A long passage about novel

composition follows, before the narrator returns to the same scene as before, now adding more detail (EOS: 121-22):

When I wrote down what happened during the fifth quarrel he and I had, I left out what he said when I was watching him sleep. I said it was a gentle and loving thing, but I did not say what his actual words were. He said, "You're so beautiful." But now I don't think it was gentle and loving, after all. I think it was a cry of frustration. He knew he was more helpless than he wanted to be, that if he hadn't found me so beautiful he could've worked his way free of me as he knew he should.

She returns to the scene once more a few pages later (EOS: 125), as she finally archives the events of their final quarrel:

I think I did not at first write down the actual words he spoke because I was afraid this would seem vain, even though the novel claims to be fiction and not a story about me, and even though it was only his opinion, not necessarily the truth.

Two aspects are striking in the narrator's treatment of this final intimate scene: the self-reflexive progression that gradually draws us out of the scene to place us squarely within the consciousness of the narrator, and the reference to her lover's helplessness. From a tightly minimalist depiction of the scene, lacking fundamental lines of dialogue, we move into the narrator's analytical space as she re-examines the interaction in detail, and finally to a retrospective explanation of her creative process in writing it, presented for the reader's benefit. The narrator's creative agency grows with each retelling, while, progressively displaced in each scene, is a male lover who appears not so much in control of the relationship as he might have initially seemed. Towards the end of the novel the act of writing comes to perform a straightforwardly

reclamatory function (EOS: 197), becoming an active tool through which the narrator regains power over the partner who evades her:

If this was the only way to possess him now, then I was doing all I could. And for a brief time, it worked, as though I was forcing him to give me something after all, as though I had some power over him now, or was saving something that would be lost otherwise. In fact, I was not forcing him to give me something, but taking it myself. I didn't have him, but I had this writing and he could not take it away from me.

It is interesting to note the earnest tone adopted by the narrator when addressing the reader directly, as she strives to explain properly her narrative choices. Unlike the narrators of the stories in *Break It Down*, who are emotionally invested in the relationship that is being depicted, this narrator is progressively more concerned with tending to her relationship with the reader. As Knight (2008: 205) has highlighted:

In the mirroring scenes of spying in "Story" and *The End of the Story*, the description is more developed in the latter, as is the sense of the narrator's own wrongdoing. Here, the narrator is quite conscious that she has acted not only badly but also unethically, and that she stands in danger of losing her reader's sympathies, unless she can convince them that the circumstances were somehow extenuating.

Davis's self-conscious narrator, however, holds herself accountable to the reader, by demanding their complicity in a mutual bond of narrative accountability. Establishing this collaborative relationship was an explicit priority of Davis's (Knight 1999: 543):

I wanted to incorporate this sense of how many possibilities there were and how it could take a different direction at any time. I deliberately wanted to pull back the

curtain and show the mistakes being made, the work going into the novel. My intention was not to be avant-garde, or postmodern, but more just to reach out to the reader, bring the reader in.

This is relevant, of course, to a practice-led feminist reading of the novel that begins from an assumption that novelistic conventions mutually interact with social scripts concerning gender. Frye (1986: 44, emphasis mine) has stressed the essential role of the reader in the functioning of first-person narratives written by women, pointing out the importance of establishing a positive triangulation between writer, character and reader as a means to activate the potential for enacting social change in a fictional text:

In a feminist redefinition of the conventions [...] social reality derives from the recognition that the *structuring activity* is a shared human need and is the effect of the culturally available paradigms by which people interpret the world around them. [...] Through a paradigm centered in female experience [...] the novelistic claim to portray a view of social reality becomes a means of access to newly shared experience and provides the possibility, through the writer-character-reader triad, for a sense of community in the *new shared reality*.

Similarly to the notion of 'spatial structuring' devised by Knight with regards to *The End of the Story*, Frye defines the 'structuring activity' of storytelling by stressing its continuous and progressive character, a description which in turns corresponds to the narrator (and Davis's own) testimony of novel writing. From the standpoint of my research-in-practice, this reading of *The End of the Story* nurtured my own understanding that, for women who wish to write novels, negotiating formal

conventions is a process that must be undertaken continuously, and which will not work if it is not undertaken as part of a conversation with other women readers.

In *The End of the Story*, the authorial construction of ‘a new shared reality’ is dependent on the creative participation of its reader. The novel ends with a bitter cup of tea, brought to the exhausted narrator by a bookshop assistant, after she has failed to locate her former lover in an unfamiliar city. This is the point in which she decides that she will stop looking for him. The narrator admits that she had been looking for ‘an act of ceremony to end the story,’ and both Duffy and Knight correctly highlight the ‘protective’ character of the ritual she is seeking (Duffy 2005: 169). ‘The narrator [...] liked this image,’ writes Knight (2008: 207), ‘because [...] she was looking for something of this nature to confirm the notion that this part of her life was over. The narrator and reader, accordingly, conspire to forge a sense of ending.’ To invoke the help of reader in finding an ending to her break-up story does not signal a failure on the part of the narrator but corresponds to a wish for her narrative authority to be recognised and legitimised. In the final chapter of this commentary, I discuss how this stance has helped, in conjunction with Woolf’s handling of plural narrators and Kavan’s use of abstraction techniques, in formulating the formal framework of *Shelf Life*.

Chapter Four:  
Sexual, Textual Politics  
&  
The Writing of *Shelf Life*

It is especially appropriate to turn to my own novel to conclude this commentary after discussions of Woolf, Kavan and Davis, as the final version of the manuscript would have looked very different without my critical explorations of their work. This chapter examines the narrative choices I have made in writing *Shelf Life*, and how they were shaped by careful consideration of the critical debates surrounding women's experimental writing practices, offering a detailed explanation of how I adapted a range of individual narrative strategies from my three chosen case studies, to suit the purpose of producing a novel intended to encourage political reflection on contemporary gender politics. Before then, however, it is necessary to offer a brief appraisal of the chick lit genre, which, for the reasons I have outlined in my introduction, offered the narrative model I took as a starting point for my creative investigation.

In the introduction to *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (2006: 3, emphasis mine) define chick lit as: 'a form of women's fiction on the basis of *subject matter, character, audience* and *narrative style* [... which] features single women in their twenties and thirties "navigating their generation's

challenge of balancing demanding careers with personal relationships.” The most striking peculiarity of the genre, indeed, lies in the demographic correspondence of its ‘writer-character-reader triad’ (Frye 1986: 44), whereby chick lit novels are for the most part written by, for, and about, contemporary women in their twenties and thirties. Also significant, on a thematic level, is the centrality of relationship status – or ‘singledom’ – which, alongside gender and generational belonging, explicitly characterises the chick lit protagonist in relation to the heterosexual romantic order and, simultaneously, as a woman existing independently from a male partner. Tonally, the chick lit text is characterised by humour and intimacy: narrators are usually autodiegetic and self-reflexive, speaking openly about their insecurities – often through the form of the diary – thus facilitating readers’ empathy. Not uncommonly, chick lit novels derive their conventional love plots from the romance genre, on occasion adapting popular classics of women’s fiction for the contemporary context, and typically ending in marriage or romantic reconciliation, matched by a similar success in the professional sphere.

This is the case of *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, considered by many the ‘urtext’ (Ferriss and Young 2006: 4) of chick lit, which I shall consider briefly here as an exemplary model of the genre. Loosely inspired by Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Helen Fielding’s breakthrough novel was first published in 1997, and went on to sell over fifteen million copies worldwide over the next three decades, its popularity further raised by the publication of a sequel, *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* and an adaptation of both books into a hugely successful movie franchise. Over the following years,

Fielding's commercial success spawned countless imitations, as well as bringing mainstream recognition to other women writers already operating in a similar vein.

Whelehan (2005: 4-5) tracks the evolution of chick lit as a genre in relation to the Women's Movement and its associated literatures:

For thousands of women the experience of reading *Bridget Jones's Diary* might not have been life-changing, but it facilitated a shift in the way contemporary young women's lives were discussed and described. Here was the generation who should be profiting from the activism of their feminist mothers, lamenting an excess of freedom and stumbling under the burden of choice and autonomy. It seemed that *Bridget Jones's Diary* revealed an anxiety about the legacy of the Women's Movement in the 1990s and spoke to a new generation of women about the complexities of their lives.

As a consequence of its mainstream circulation and generational reach, by the time I came to writing in the late 2000s, the chick lit genre had gained a prescriptive power of its own over women of my generation. With their formulaic quests for Mr. Right, the fulfilment of career ambitions and simultaneous acquisition of a fashionable wardrobe to match, these postfeminist fictions of white Western female independence had represented one of the few flourishing areas in the shrinking publishing market of the 2000s, meaning that a large number of young women chose to read them over literary fiction. Chick lit's 'generational challenge,' however, is notably accomplished only once the protagonist becomes comfortably inscribed within the neoliberal value-system, learning to exist as an 'independent woman' in compliance with societal expectations, not unlike the protagonists of *Bildungsroman* I have discussed in Chapter One of this commentary.

Indeed, several critics have made an association between the two genres, such as Stephanie Harzewski (2011: 48) who, in *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, offers a critical interpretation of *Bridget Jones* as ‘ironic *Bildungsroman*’, suggesting, more broadly, that, ‘Chick lit raises the question to what extent the female *Bildungsroman* (with a middle-class, heterosexual protagonist) can dissociate itself from the marriage plot and the marriage plot from the money novel’ (2011: 23). Fielding’s *Bridget Jones* opens accordingly (1997: 2-3), with a tongue-in-cheek list of dos and don’ts, most of which will hopefully facilitate Bridget’s objective of winning a man’s affection while successfully advancing her within the neoliberal career order. Bridget’s list of ‘New Year’s resolutions’ features declarations of independence like ‘I will not sulk about having no boyfriend, but develop inner poise and authority and sense of self as a woman of substance, complete *without* boyfriend’, alongside self-prescriptions for a ‘healthier lifestyle’ that will help with achieving society’s expectations of success for heterosexual, middle-class white women, such as, ‘Reduce circumference of thighs by 3 inches’, ‘Improve career and find new job with potential’, ‘Form functional relationship with responsible adult’.

If, in spite of the victories achieved by the Women’s Movement, self-determination for the postfeminist ‘chick’ is evidently still very much tied to nineteenth-century romantic motifs and propelled by an anxiety to appease the demands of contemporary patriarchy, in lieu of confronting the explicit tension still existing between women’s real and idealised selves the chick lit protagonist typically defuses it through self-reflexive humour. Such humour provides reassurance and

relief to readers struggling under similar pressures, by lowering the stakes of women's plight for self-determination. Harzewski (2006: 37) writes:

Chick lit (...) responds to upheavals in the dating and mating order through a mixed strategy of dramatization, farce and satire. Daughters of educated baby-boomers, chick lit heroines, in their degree of sexual autonomy and professional choices, stand as direct beneficiaries of the women's liberation movement, yet they shift earlier feminist agendas, such as equal pay per equal work to lifestyle choices.

My work on *Jacob's Room*, which informs the discussion in Chapter One above, provided the initial impulse to consider chick lit as a conventional narrative framework that could be used to introduce a reflection upon the normative limitations imposed on women's identities in contemporary society. As we have seen, Woolf bends the normative framework of the coming-of-age novel into a polemical critique of the patriarchal society of her time by applying a range of modernist narrative techniques to the conventional *Bildungsroman's* narrative scheme. This strategy undermines the genre's prescriptive function as a representation of the conventional social script for young bourgeois men. Similarly, with *Shelf Life*, I sought to expose the popular 'lifestyle choices' pursued by chick lit protagonists as a fixed range of limited options for self-determination, available uniquely to a narrow demographic of women, resulting from a network of complex strategies of control exerted on those same women's free will, and ultimately engineered to make them complicit in the power structures of contemporary patriarchy.

My use of multiple narrative perspectives in *Shelf Life* was largely inspired by Woolf's handling of point of view in *Jacob's Room*, though I also borrowed from other

contemporary experimental women authors for my formal framework. I thought it appropriate, in this context, to draw especially from the postmodern fictions of contemporary women authors who interrogated a similar creative and social positioning as mine. Among the early influences for *Shelf Life* were Jennifer Egan's Pulitzer-winning *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2011), which employs a variety of different textual formats (including a twelve-year-old girl's PowerPoint presentation), Leanne Shapton's break-up novel *Important Artifacts and Personal Property From the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris* (2009), which takes the shape of an auction catalogue listing a former couple's shared belongings, Sheila Heti's dramatised exploration of female friendship and identity in *How Should a Person Be?* (2012), Marie Calloway's memoir in screenshots *What Purpose Did I Serve in Your Life* (2013), and Jenny Offill and Maggie Nelson's *Kunstlerromane* in poetic fragments, *Dept. of Speculation* (2014) and *Bluets* (2009). I was attracted to these books, primarily, because of their inventive narrative structure: each deployed a unique formal framework devised with the purpose of holding together distinct perspectives and/or reproducing contemporary textual formats and languages, reflecting the variety of communicative stimuli that shapes lived experience in the Age of Information Technology. Some of these authors, like Calloway, Heti, Nelson and Offill, explicitly foregrounded the theme of female identity, while others played a more subtle 'enabling' function in my practice, showing me new creative possibilities for the novel.

Tonally and stylistically, I was also drawn to the deadpan minimalism of authors like Ann Beattie, Lydia Davis, A. M. Homes and Grace Paley, whose short stories, especially, held a particular fascination for a second-language writer like myself, with their commitment to a mostly Anglo-Saxon lexicon and a plain, paratactical sentence structure. I intuited that this combination could generate space for readerly interpretation within the syntax of a story in ways not immediately discernible to a romance language speaker, and so I studied these texts closely to understand how they functioned at the level of the sentence. In Davis's and Homes's works especially, I perceived a productive tension at work between realism and abstraction in their use of limited characterisation and everyday settings, which opened up a space of potential for the reader to become actively involved in the text, sketching in the missing details from a known picture. A similar narrative dynamic, as we have seen, propels Kavan's *Who Are You?* and Davis's *The End of the Story*, and it was through developing the critical analyses that I have included in chapters Two and Three of this commentary that I began to see how I might incorporate the same effects in my own writing.

As I have suggested in my introduction and discussion of the critical debates that informed my practice, in the first instance my decision to adopt a fragmentary formal framework encompassing different analogical and digital languages, answered a mimetic purpose: a direct aim to speak to my own lived experience by truthfully representing how contemporary women's identities are formed in response to multiple communication stimuli and underlying power structures. The shopping list

device was first devised in response to this need for simultaneity, but I also offer it as an index to the novel, to polemically engage chick lit's suggestion that a woman is made of the sum of her purchases. Each of the objects on the shopping list prompts access to a different facet of Ruth's identity-formation narrative, articulating it through the perspectives of people who know her, as well as through the variety of digital languages that regulate communication in the society she exists within. The shopping list thus comes to stand metonymically for Ruth herself, echoing similar lists in chick lit literature (Kinsella, 2000: 15), but also highlighting what falls between the cracks of these conventional narratives through the use of dissonant textual surfaces and perspectives, opening up potential spaces of conflict and negotiation between individual narrative occurrences that the reader is invited to fill in.

This intertextual framework further fitted my aim of undermining the conventional chick lit narrative, since textual hybridity is one of the most prominent features of the genre. As Heike Missler (2017: 32) has noted:

The confessional narrative [of chick lit] can take the form of a diary or the more classic first person or third person omniscient, into which other text forms, such as letters, emails, bank statements, bills, text messages, or even recipes can be inserted. Chick lit novels are indeed generic cannibals in that they do not only combine different text forms, but draw on the style and language of other texts as well.

Intertextuality in chick lit novels plays an identificatory function, acting as a cultural setting which binds the narrator to the same narrative context as the reader. Chick lit protagonists quote from self-help literature and women's magazines, use mobile

phones and computers to communicate much like their readers, who can in this way more directly ‘relate’ to the protagonist. As Missler (2017: 33) puts it, the ‘reason why chick lit makes excessive reference to brand names and trends and why heroines are familiar with new forms of communication [...] is of course to mark them as firmly rooted in the readers’ present and thus to further heighten the moments of recognition of the complexities of one’s own reality’.

At the same time, as Frye and Duplessis have suggested, such literary conventions act as cognitive strategies that seal the reader’s co-participation in the cultural paradigm inhabited by the chick lit narrator. Chick lit novels represent the different ways in which women communicate with others in contemporary society, but do not question how these new communicative means in and of themselves contribute to shaping a woman’s psyche and sense of identity. My own mimetic approach incorporates the same forms of communication represented in chick lit as part of a polyphonic framework, attributing equal narrative authority to literary and non-literary textual items. In doing so, I intended to raise the question of intertextuality to the level of narrative composition, rather than simply making it functional to a contemporary reader’s identification with the protagonist: in my novel, digital languages are not simply used to establish a setting that readers can relate to, but directly contribute to shaping the story. The chat server Alanna uses to talk to her friends in ‘Tampons’ and ‘Deo’ provides a private space of complicity through which Ruth can be narrativised as an outcast, though later the more intimate medium of the diary in ‘Pizza’ and ‘Tomatoes’ gives a more complex picture of their

relationship. Most notably, Neil – Ruth’s former partner – inhabits a slightly different identity depending on whether he is emailing, texting or using a dating app, which he adjusts to fit the girl he is trying to manipulate.

As I have discussed in my introduction, one of the main reasons for my interest in chick lit lay in its success with a large audience of young women. From a feminist standpoint, the genre’s popularity represented a cause for concern, given its prescriptive script, but also seemed to hold huge political potential in terms of reaching a large audience. In undertaking my project, I hoped that the popularity of the chick lit formula would help me attract a broader readership through traditional publishing channels than a more experimental literary work might do, not least reaching out to readers particularly attached to the original model. Through targeted formal disruption, I hoped to escape the unproductive critical binary Ferriss and Young (2006: 9) have identified in the feminist reception of the genre:

Reactions to Chick Lit are divided between those who expect literature by and about women to advance the political activism of feminism, to represent women's struggles in patriarchal culture and offer inspiring images of strong, powerful women, and those who argue instead that it should portray the reality of young women grappling with real life. [...]

Is chick lit advancing the cause of feminism by appealing to female audiences and featuring empowered, professional women? Or does it rehearse the same patriarchal narrative of romance and performance of femininity that feminists once rejected?

From my own creative standpoint, the ‘feminist trouble’ with chick lit did not so much lie in the identities it represented, although, politically, I, too, objected to the idea that the conventional chick lit protagonist could be best placed to advance the feminist cause. This was less so, however, because of these characters’ individual reliance on male affection as a source of identity and happiness: I was troubled above all by the strength of their numbers, in other words, by the pervasiveness and homogeneity of chick lit as widely disseminated popular fiction that had had an impact on shaping my generation’s psyche, providing young women with biased early formative understandings of feminist ideas (Hollows and Moseley 2006: 2).

I hasten to add that by no means was I the only author from my generation to be troubled by this concern: many other young feminist writers have acknowledged the negative effects of postfeminist narratives as a misleading entry point into feminism, and their efforts have been helpful in providing a contemporary context for my own enquiry. In Jessica Andrews’ experimental coming-of-age novel in ‘memory-fragment[s]’ (Williams 2019) *Saltwater* (2019), the late-twenties narrator recalls her years as a teenager of the ‘Girl Power’ generation, highlighting a retrospective anxiety surrounding her early perceptions of gender: ‘We look at pictures in magazines and watch music videos in ICT and someone says that nothing tastes as good as skinny feels and we scoff at that but somehow it gets in’ (Andrews 2019: 144). Others among my contemporaries working with an essentially realist idiom have raised wide-reaching questions about power and privilege in the mainstream debate on feminism and identity, with their ambivalent representations

of white middle-class femininity. By far the most prominent example among them is Sally Rooney, whose two novels *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *Normal People* (2018) have achieved huge popularity, already listing one hugely popular TV adaptation. Finally, it does not seem altogether unlikely that it is in response to the postfeminist normative script that autofiction written by white women (often experimental in form, like *Saltwater*) has especially thrived in recent years, both as a particularising reaction to social scripts regulating femininity and signalling an explicit narrowing of perspective that acknowledges a narrator's specific social positioning and its associated privileges, through direct identification with the author.

In a recent article in the *New Yorker*, Katy Waldman (2020), I think rather ungenerously, condemns a number of these contemporary novels as 'self-reflexivity traps', writing that, '[a]esthetic and commercial incentives drive authors toward the "authentic," and a newly legible form of authenticity, under [...] late capitalism, is a kind of pained complicity.' One has to acknowledge that Rooney's huge popularity has already set in motion the process of 'mainstream appropriation' Carroll has warned against, with publishers increasingly seeking to capitalise on similar works of fiction: accusations that a new mass-marketed women's genre – 'chic lit' (Hill, 2020) – is currently being established might indeed be founded. Having said that, in my view it is hardly likely that a vibrantly political debut novel like *Conversations with Friends* would have been written with the market in mind, however much its popularity might have been aided later by a successful marketing strategy (which is

in any case the work of publishing houses, not authors). What Waldman sees as a disingenuous attempt at authenticity strikes me as a genuine acknowledgement of the limits of an author's own subjectivity in writing about female identity. On one point, however, I do find myself in agreement: that self-awareness should not be envisioned as a finish line, but a starting point in contemporary feminist politics. To be clear, I do not think this excludes the efforts of other young women writers like Rooney, yet in my own project, I did explicitly raise the question of how formal innovation could be used to advance from acknowledging the privilege and situatedness of white middle-class female experience, to exposing the prescriptive character and disproportionate visibility of its conventional mainstream representations. If I have chosen to move away from realism, I have done so proceeding from 'a belief in the politics of form, and thus from the conviction that to ignore the workings of narrative techniques is to neglect a significant dimension of textual politics' (Smith 2008; 4).

The experimental strategies I adopted in pursuit of this agenda were largely devised through closely reading the texts of the three authors I have discussed in this commentary, and later applied to my own manuscript. Over the course of my doctoral research, *Jacob's Room*, *Who Are You?* and *The End of the Story* acted as steady reference points in my growing understanding of the tradition of women's experimental writing, and I returned to them many times over for inspiration and guidance as my own project evolved. As a creative writer, however, it was ultimately through applying the same strategies in practice that I felt able to formulate the

feminist interpretations that are included in this commentary, and it is as part of this specific line of enquiry that I dedicate the remainder of this commentary to acknowledging and further detailing the specific areas of overlap between my own work and that of my chosen authors.

As I have mentioned before, I found myself essentially aligned with Woolf's project for *Jacob's Room*, in that I, too, aimed to deconstruct a set genre from within, exploiting readers' familiarity with its conventions to expose their prescriptive character. Like Woolf I sought to 'withdraw consent' from the reductive typing found in chick lit by disrupting some of the conventions by which identification between reader and protagonist are typically encouraged. I hoped to achieve this through the introduction of a range of conflicting unreliable narrative perspectives, simultaneously striving to represent female characters through a textual hybridity more appropriate to representing the reality of growing up under the pressures of contemporary patriarchy. I envisioned Ruth's character, like Jacob, as the focal point of a number of different narratives, although the manner and communication of such narratives grew in response to my own historical and geographical context and the aforementioned contemporary literary influences, to include a range of different analogical and digital textual languages.

Thematically, as well as stylistically, I took inspiration from Davis, in my focus on frustrated heterosexual relations. Ruth's predicament is most similar to that of the narrator in *The End of the Story*: in both novels, the male lover's abandonment prompts the retrospective telling of the story. Both female narrators openly

acknowledge that they have no control over the break-up, so that their sense of identity similarly comes to hinge on their recovery from the failed heterosexual romance. Davis's treatment of the theme of sexual malaise in her novel further informed the scene selection in mine. There is no fulfilling love scene in *Shelf Life* either: the turning points in the romance between Ruth and Neil, such as their first meeting, their initial infatuation and most of the details of their long-term relationship, all happen off stage. By narrating her own recovery Ruth similarly builds distance from her failed relationship, analysing her affair retrospectively, 'breaking it down' into comprehensible part. Both narrators are obsessed with 'ideas of order' (Jarolim 2014: 813) and anxious about establishing the correct narrative sequence for their story – an act which they believe might aid them in emotionally recovering from their respective break-ups. In both novels the reader is denied emotional access to the romantic plot, so that the female narrator's process of emancipation and self-understanding can be foregrounded.

The circular structure of *Shelf Life*, which loops back to the beginning from a slanted perspective in its last chapter is of course indebted above all to Kavan's *Who Are You?* Although less extreme than the relationship between 'the girl' and Mr. Dog Head, Ruth's engagement with Neil effects similar results on the protagonist's psyche: the unbalanced power dynamic between them leads to a complete erasure of her self. Like Kavan's, my novel is bookended by two mirroring scenes. In the opening chapter of *Shelf Life*, we encounter Ruth in her autodiegetic capacity, as she wakes up alone for the first time and discovers the shopping list that will act as an

index for her story. One year later, in the final chapter, Ruth is viewed externally by a different autodiegetic narrator – a nameless ‘girl’, who, like Kavan’s protagonist, is uniquely identified by her gender and youth – as she purchases a selection of the objects on the shopping list provided in the opening chapter. The novel remains open-ended, although one might draw their own conclusions from the fact that the items on the shopping list that led to other characters’ perspectives are missing from the list of goods that the woman eventually purchases in the supermarket. What is actually going to happen to Ruth Beadle? As Felski (1989: 133) notes of most novels of self-discovery, in *Shelf Life* ‘the resolution [...] also functions as a beginning; the heroine’s new self-knowledge creates a basis for future negotiation between the subject and society, the outcome of which is projected beyond the bounds of the text.’ The shopping list device holds the different perspectives together in a ‘horizontal structure’ similar to that sought by Davis and is similarly engineered to draw the reader into Ruth’s mind, but where *The End of the Story* eventually provides emotional closure by requesting the reader’s co-participation in ‘ending the story’, like *Who Are You?*, *Shelf Life* hands over that creative and political responsibility to the reader.

To the same end, I had initially conceived of the novel as a series of individual, self-contained short stories that could be read in any order. Later I became worried that this approach would result in a lack of focus and a level of incoherence that provided no emotional access point to the novel. Eventually, the narrative spine of *Shelf Life* came to be formed by a series of chapters written from Ruth’s point of

view; though Ruth is but one of many distinct autodiegetic narrators we encounter in the novel, she is by far the most consistent voice among them. Her narrative advances chronologically, providing an anchor for the reader's identification: like a chick lit heroine, she intimately confides in the reader. I needed to retain these conventional features to be able to build a protagonist that could inhabit the chick lit story, while resisting being subsumed into its plot. In order for the novel to achieve its purpose, Ruth had to be somebody that the reader could identify with, but not draw comfort or direction from – explicitly *not* a model to follow. If the chick lit paradigm had to be maintained in order to expose its problematic pervasiveness, I could not write a protagonist who consciously rejected its model of female accomplishment, for such a protagonist would have simply walked away from the conventions of the genre entirely. I needed to create a protagonist who experienced the full pressure of contemporary patriarchy's normalising demands on women, while remaining discrete – somewhat *external*, like Jacob – to them. To the other characters in the novel, indeed, Ruth appears as similarly opaque, somebody who 'excels at being normal' (SL: 61) or 'seriously non-descript' (SL: 80).

Nevertheless, where by virtue of his gendered privilege Jacob is naturally located at the centre of the *Bildungsroman* plot, Ruth Beadle has dedicated her life to eschewing the same centrality. She is a reluctant protagonist, taking to the stage of her life against her will and only once that space has been vacated by her former partner. While in the relationship, Ruth's self-perception had been articulated in relation to her partner, as she declares in the chapter titled 'Apples', in which she

describes herself as ‘his Other Quarter’ (SL: 45). Once their relationship abruptly ends, unsurprisingly, at Neil’s behest, Ruth is suddenly exposed to societal pressures to exist as an ‘independent woman’, finding herself in a spotlight she has been carefully avoiding all her life. ‘I have never been a person alone’ (SL: 14) she admits, to her own surprise, the morning after he leaves her, and it is this very realisation that prompts the unfolding of the novel. Just like a conventional chick lit heroine, Ruth must now learn to negotiate her presentation, career and relationships independently – as a ‘singleton’. Yet she is explicitly an unfit protagonist, and so the journey she and the reader undertake together looks rather different, as much as a result of a different handling of narrative form, as of narrative content.

DuPlessis (1985: 54) writes that a ‘writer expresses dissent from an ideological formation by attacking elements of narrative that repeat, sustain or embody the values and attitudes in question’. As we have seen, the key strategy of formal disruption adopted by Woolf in *Jacob’s Room* concerns narrative point of view. Caughie (1991: 64) has remarked on the ‘obstructive’ nature of the narrator in *Jacob’s Room* and elsewhere in Woolf’s fiction, observing that her ‘characters and narrators do not present a consistent theory of self and world. Instead, they make us self-conscious of theorising about self and world by making the narrative strategies self-conscious [...] draw[ing] attention [...] to the ways in which characters and, by implication, notions of identity are produced.’ Similarly in *Shelf Life* I aimed to break up the illusion of linearity of the chick lit model by introducing conflicting narrative points of view, in order to explore how different and coexisting perspectives of Ruth

(including her own, self-reflexive understanding of herself) come to bear on the foundation of her identity, pressuring her into avenues for self-determination that do not match her personality and needs. The shopping list device allowed me to present these different points of view simultaneously, alongside Ruth's own and with equal authority, interrupting the linearity of her identity-formation narrative on a structural level. The coexistence of Ruth's narration with other discrete, non-chronological perspectives of her, further challenges her reliability as a narrator, undermining the illusion of comfort that the sympathetic chick lit protagonist offers. While chapters in Neil's voice only confirm his predatory character, in line with Mr. Dog Head's domineering stance, other female characters who appear as 'flat' in Ruth's account of them, come into sharp relief once they take centre stage in their own dedicated chapters. One such character is Alanna, who Ruth paints as a 'dumb blonde' stock character, but who is actually revealed to be much more complex and caring. Unlike Kavan's girl, Ruth is both a victim and an actor in her interaction with other women, both actively marginalised by others and responsible for her own exclusion due of her passive acceptance of her outcast status.

In an interview for BBC's programme *Bookworm*, Fielding said: 'Single women today, sort of in their thirties, are perhaps a new type of woman that hasn't really got an identity. [...] Women have said to me: [*Bridget Jones's Diary*] makes us feel that we're part of a club and not the only ones that feel stupid' (Whelehan 2005: 187). In the wake of Neil's abandonment, Ruth finds herself similarly without an identity, yet her new condition strikes her as tragic, setting her apart from the

characteristically humorous chick lit protagonist. Ruth's analytical reaction to the break-up is similar to the narrator's in *The End of the Story*, though her submissive psychological state more closely recalls that of 'the girl' in *Who Are You?* We see how Ruth's mind works, with the same degree of intimacy as we get to know the mind of the narrator in Davis's novel, yet the workings of that mind, moulded by exclusion and trauma, operate in ways more akin to the psychology of Kavan's protagonist. Chapters narrated by Ruth are claustrophobic, characterised both by extreme self-reflexivity and effacement, as she is overwhelmed by the burden of choice: the stakes of existing independently herself from her male partner, for Ruth and Kavan's 'girl' both, coincide with actual survival, with the choice to exist at all. As in a Kavan-esque 'unacute nightmare', the narrative of Ruth's conscious mind gradually merges with repressed dreams of gendered violence and queer desire, to culminate in the ambiguous, chaotic events of the 'Conditioner' and 'Steak' chapters.

Ruth's loneliness and desperation are largely due to her inability to belong to Fielding's aforementioned 'club', for she daily comes into contact with other women, but lacks the language to proficiently engage in the code of same-gender interactions, unacquainted and uncomfortable as she is with the accoutrements of mandated femininity. Similarly to Jacob, Ruth appears 'out of place', 'unconscious,' somewhat abstracted from her peers: both eerily normal and unremarkably strange. Where in *Jacob's Room* the young man's lack of experience in performing masculinity opens up an indefinite space of potential where escaping patriarchal typification might still be possible, accounts of Ruth Beadle as a teenager (both internal and external) describe

her as a young woman troubled by a sense of inadequacy so profound that it outwardly defines her in her relationship with others, especially other women. It is partly due to the unachievable standard of 'successful' femininity that she sees embodied in Alanna, that nineteen-year-old Ruth is persuaded to enter the relationship with Neil, subscribing to a passive role within the heterosexual couple that exempts her from having to seek a personal route towards independence. Conversely, it is her failure to successfully perform her gender that singles her out from other women, making her vulnerable to Neil's predatory instincts. She is both culpable for not seeking a way beyond a restrictive social script, and a tangible victim of it. Unsurprisingly, once she is newly 'single', Ruth struggles to conjure a new identity as an independent woman, and this is because, unlike Jacob, she is unacquainted with the social performance of her gender. Where Jacob falls easily within the role of the bourgeois young male, Ruth observes the exchanges between other women from the outside in, inappropriate to them.

Jacob's commitment to the patriarchal narrative is unverifiable through his own voice yet made explicit through his actions. Ruth, on the other hand, voices her sense of unbelonging to her new independent condition as a single woman even as she goes about identifying a survival strategy by which she might best go along with it. Like a chick lit heroine, she deeply craves normality: even at her most bereaved, she seeks an indication of what an acceptable recovery might look like. As Whelehan (2005: 179) suggests:

Everywhere in contemporary chick lit the heroines seem to be on a quest for rules or commanding logic which clarify the meaning of the dating game, yet in virtually every novel the rulebook is thrown out when The One comes through, and the romance breaks every convention as the narrative draws to a close [...] [These conventions] suggest that the readers of chick lit are searching for some logic and delimiting structure to their lives which the burden of seemingly free choice has taken away.

Accomplishment of the romantic telos of chick lit, however, is ultimately thwarted in *Shelf Life*, as the effort it takes Ruth to seek guidance to recover from her unhealthy association with the masculine hampers any meaningful prospect of future relationships. 'The One', for Ruth, has come and gone, and with him the possibility for romance has been irretrievably missed. In the aftermath of her break-up, Ruth feels that the prescriptive social scripts for women are unfit to rescue her from her identity-less state, since she has never previously identified herself with her gender, nor associated with others on the basis of it: she gazes uncomprehendingly at Alanna's social interactions, feeling completely out of place in organising the hen-do. Stagnation and solitude are obvious conditions that follow from Ruth's inability to engage her condition with humour and resilience of the chick lit protagonist. Her acknowledgment of the tragic nature of her predicament raises the question of heterosexual romance as a narrative of power in women's lives still capable of enacting patriarchal effacement, reconverting the matter of female independence from a series of 'lifestyle choice' to a series of existential questions, in a reversal of the chick lit paradigm. Some relief is eventually found in the association with other women, as it happens at Alanna's party, in 'Conditioner', but even that celebration

of female unity is externally surveilled, sanctioned as acceptable – an ephemeral, carnivalesque subversion of the existing patriarchal order. As we reach the end of the novel, the protagonist’s pathway toward independence and belonging to a community of women remains open-ended: instead of providing an authorial solution to Ruth’s dilemma of survival and personal accountability, I offer the reader a permeable text, as an invitation to participate in an act of collective rewriting of her potential identity.

I have ended each of the case studies included in this commentary with some considerations concerning the active role of the reader, and the key function that I believe their engagement plays in *Jacob’s Room*, *Who Are You?* and *The End of the Story*. Likewise, a resolution to Ruth’s paralysis can only be provided through the reader’s participation to the collective construction of a new shared reality. While I have been able to explain the choices I made in writing *Shelf Life*, and the intentions behind them, I cannot similarly account for a reader’s reaction to my own novel – nor do I wish to. To write this novel has been an experiment: my own attempt, to quote Woolf once more, at trying the accepted forms, discarding the unfit and finding others more fitting. As such, the process of writing it has required placing my full trust in the reader, and I can only end this thesis with the hope that my efforts shall be accepted by them in good faith, and that they might offer a meaningful contribution to our ongoing processes of understanding ourselves as women.

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