

TRACING THE WEAVE: READING AND INTERPRETING YOUNG ADULT FICTION

by

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(ABSTRACT)

This dissertation demonstrates how the study of young adult fiction can be illuminated by a working knowledge of contemporary literary theories, viewing these theories as strategies, approaches to interpretation. The text reflects the author's education in theory, his belief that a basic knowledge of theory provides a rich repertoire of new ways of reading, and his consideration of the ways in which theory can be used by both teachers and students in secondary and university classrooms. The text introduces literary theory to those who have little or no experience with it, explaining how theory establishes and explores relationships among author, reader, text, and cultural contexts. Its conversational style encourages readers to explore the practical applications of theory in their work. Each chapter discusses one theory and demonstrates its application in a close reading of one young adult text: Formalism (Virginia Hamilton's *M. C. Higgins, the Great*); archetypal theory (Gary Paulsen's *Dogsong*); structuralism/semiotics (Bruce Brooks' *The Moves Make the Man*); poststructuralism/deconstruction (Lois Lowry's *The Giver*); reader-response theories (Walter Dean Myers' *Fallen Angels*); feminism (Budge Wilson's short story collection

The Leaving); black aesthetics (Ernest Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying*); cultural studies (M. E. Kerr's *Night Kites*); and the application of several theories to Katherine Patterson's *Jacob Have I Loved*. The concluding chapter sets the voices of theorists and teachers into conversations about the implications for theory in the English classroom.

DEDICATION

For

my wife Carol

Song of Songs

and

my grandmother

Mildred Patterson Hudson

who first whispered "Teacher" in my ear

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"And gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche."

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CHAPTER ONE

Literature, Teaching, and Theory: How I Came to Write This Book

My wife Carol, the high school librarian, used to ask me: "Don't you ever read anything just for the pleasure of it?" Early in our marriage, I was appalled and not a little indignant at her question. After all, I was an English teacher; I read differently. I knew how to read, or that is what I thought. How my thinking about reading has changed in the last twenty-five years and how my wife's question has prodded me again (and again) to think about why I read and how I do it has created this book.

When I finished college, I set out to save the world through language and literature. I had an amazing repertoire of Great Works with which to lead my students out of ignorance and into literary, and, I was sure, universal, bliss. My senior English textbook confirmed my familiar landscape: *Beowulf*, *Canterbury Tales*, *Macbeth*, poetry metaphysical, romantic, Victorian, modern, and divine, and, as the case was in those days, no novel.

After a first day writing sample which horrified my students and horrified me even more (I graded the papers overnight, of course, and returned them the next day amid shrieks and lamentation), I plunged headlong into a lecture (carefully wrought) on the mysteries of the Anglo-Saxon epic poem. It did not take me long to realize how much my students valued what I had to say. They took copious notes, and I obliged them by writing difficult and unusual terms (caesura, for example) on the

blackboard. I was a miracle of delight, cast in the mold of all my favorite teachers who had known so much and who had shared it with me.

Soon, however, I sensed a dilemma, but I did not know how to solve it: I knew how to read literature, and they did not, at least not in that metaphoric, symbolic, rich web of language that Chaucer and Shakespeare have woven for us. Certainly it was my business to teach them how to read, but they seemed to hang too closely on my every word. I became the Ultimate Translator of the English Language, and for a while I relished this amazing power. After all, isn't that why I went to college? But I was growing uneasy, and I began to think hard about the joys of reading and of teaching reading.

As my secondary school career advanced, I became fascinated with teaching people how to use their own language, how to find a "voice" as a writer, and how to write about themselves and about literature. That led me to the point at which I began to explore with my students the voice of the writer, not just the "facts" of what a writer had said, but more complex ways of looking at how the writer might be leading us to think or read a certain way. That was the beginning of my life in theory, that time when I began to question the assumptions we make about language and how we use it, how others use it, how language influences, persuades, opens up imaginative landscapes in which we can travel. I was moving into theoretical territory, and I did a great deal of experimenting with my students, but I did not name what I was doing. I did not know to call it a reader-response approach; what I did

know was that my students thought I owned the literature we read together, thought that English teachers had special and nearly inaccessible ways of uncovering mystery in a poem or play. In that knowledge I began to work hard to help my students learn to read differently, to go beyond the elemental considerations of outlining plots, naming characters, collecting metaphors, searching for symbols, and stating themes.

How did I work at this? I began to search for ways of reading and thinking about literature that differed from what I knew. My undergraduate training had been mostly in what we call American New Criticism, a theoretical approach that was popular in the forties and fifties and continues to influence reading practices. It focuses only on what is inside the work, not on the author's life or the reader's subjective response to what is written. This is a comforting theory for trained readers, as we English teachers are, but it leaves the uninitiated out in the literary cold, unable to see and fathom the architecture and the elements that give a work its structural unity. I am getting more theoretical than I mean to at this point, so I'll leave my exploration of theoretical stances to another chapter. The point that I am making here is that I began to discover other ways of helping myself and my students look at literature.

You are probably wondering at this point why I didn't just go back to college and take some more courses to get the answers to my questions. The answer is simple. I was too caught up in life work to do that.

A little story will explain how I felt. One of the most important teachers in my life, my western civilization professor in undergraduate school, told our class one day that he was so wild about history because he had once had an affair with it and had never gotten over it. The image stuck in my mind. I envied him that passion, that intensity, and I did not know then that I had it, too. I have always been passionate about language and especially about stories—epic poems and the novel especially. I cannot resist the call of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, of Vergil's *Aeneid*, of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, of Dicken's *Bleak House*, of Eliot's *Middlemarch*, and Morrison's *Jazz*. What happened when I began to teach was that my passion for books found its complement in my passion for teaching. So, I was very busy teaching, pursuing my passions, and I did not take courses. I worked to solve my own problems; I read, constantly looking for answers to my pressing questions: How do I help students understand language and the value of literature? How do I teach them to read so that they can create and negotiate language in the world beyond the classroom? How do I get some of them ready for the college classroom? I was always searching. I am, of course, an autodidact: I like to teach myself. So, my search for ways of teaching and thinking was always geared to my students and my work. I enjoyed this life.

Let me backtrack for a moment to talk about some books that helped precipitate and continue my autodidacticism. In a college Shakespeare course we read E. M. W. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture*. That book was an absolute revelation to me because it helped me see for the first time where some of my English teachers had

gotten all those ideas about The Great Chain of Being, the relationship between the workings of the universe and the mind of man. For me it was full of answers to questions about the world of Shakespeare, and more importantly, it gave me a highly structured design from which to approach the worlds of the plays. When I began my career, I taught Shakespeare religiously from the Tillyard perspective with a good dose of Aristotle's *Poetics* thrown in to help my students see just what tragedy was all about.

At this point I will make another confession: Before literary theory, I was a person who loved to discover the order, balance, and symmetry in literary design. I still do, but theory is teaching me that there are other ways to look at literature, other ways of reading and that being uncertain about an interpretation is a very healthy intellectual state of mind. That is another reason I am writing this book: I want you to experience this uncertainty and the kinds of interpretive doors it can open for you. I am more than confident that you will find multiple ways of reading as exciting and useful as I have.

Back to the story. I have a habit of writing the date inside the cover of my new books, and so I can tell you that on December 10, 1968, I discovered a book that would later rock the frame of my being and bring most of my life as a reader into focus. This was Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, an astonishing book in which he theorizes a way of seeing the continuity in all literature, in which he classifies and categorizes literatures so as to make all of literary history intelligible, a book in which

he constructs a body for the field of literary criticism. I confess that I read a little of the "Polemical Introduction," discouraged at the outset by that word polemical, but the exigencies of my senior year got in the way of reading the whole book. Almost ten years later, dissatisfied with the way I was teaching literature, I began (on May 7, 1977) to plow through the complexities of Frye's vision, underlining (as I always do when I study a text) those passages that seemed to relate to my work, that intrigued me, or that happily helped me justify my ways with words. Frye's idea that "criticism deals with literature in terms of a specific conceptual framework" and that this framework "is not that of the literature itself" (6) stopped me in my tracks. I felt a full-faced challenge to my New Critical joy of working in the cocoon of the work.

Let me tell you that I did not understand all of Frye's *Anatomy*, and I did not finish it then (that would come years later; sadly, there is no date at the end of the book to tell me when I finished it. That's another little practice of mine; I like both beginnings and endings). What I did understand in 1977, however, was that Frye was giving me a way to organize an approach to literature through the concepts of myths and archetypes. Before I read Frye, I knew only a few archetypes, for example, the Fall of Man in the Garden of Eden. What happened to my teaching after *Anatomy* was that I began to set ancient and modern works into dialogue with each other, to put them in "conversation" with each other. My goal was to enable my students to sense the large framework within which literature does its work. For example, I'd

teach the creation story from Genesis along with Dylan Thomas's "Fern Hill" and Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party," working with my students to discuss how the ancient story of the fate of innocence has been retold, questioning why such a story continues to be reshaped, what we might think about ourselves in such a context: Where was our Eden? Our Fall? Or I might also teach *Alice in Wonderland* with these same works, adding the dimension of humor and satire to our explorations. I go into such detail in this story to point out that theorizing texts does not happen just as a consequence of taking a course or reading a book. It happens as an application of theory, what we are fond today of calling classroom "practice." Until I started my doctorate I had no idea that I was engaged in classroom "practice." I have always thought of my teaching as my work, but the word "practice" sets up a tidy little dichotomy between theory (how we talk about something) and practice (how we do it). This book is about both. As a student I am fascinated by the brilliance of theory and how we can connect it to the world we share with our students and colleagues.

For some years after I graduated from college, I'd return to campus for a visit, mostly to see my favorite professor and to go the bookstore. I wanted to see what professors were teaching so I could anticipate what my college-bound students might encounter after they left me. On one of those visits, I bought another book by Frye since I was deep in my *Anatomy of Criticism* period. Scanning the introduction to *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology*, I noted that the first two essays

promised Frye's "summarized statement of the critical program worked out in" the *Anatomy* as well as his "central principle about myth criticism" (1). I was ecstatic. Was this too much to hope for? Would Frye actually give me the keys to the verbal universe in these two essays? They turned out to be excellent for my purposes, and I will refer to them in the chapter on archetypal criticism, but what really caught my attention was Frye's statement in the first paragraph of the first essay. In pointing out that it is impossible to "learn literature" but that it is possible to learn the criticism of literature, Frye goes on to say that "teaching literature" cannot be done: "the criticism of literature is all that can be directly taught" (7). "Do I believe this?" I asked myself? I had not thought about teaching my students to be "critics"; after all, as they were always telling me, they weren't going to become English teachers. But Frye's language gave me plenty to think about, and I believe that this essay represented a turning point for me in teaching literature. I began to think about the ways in which my students read and studied texts, and I began to hear myself saying, "It may not matter how many books you read or what books you read; what matters is that you know how to read, that you know how to work with the language." I have emphasized these words so that you can hear me saying this to more than a decade of students. I said it because I believed it so passionately, and in those years I noticed that some of my students stayed after to talk about how they had worked out an interpretation alone, how they were reading another Toni Morrison novel since the complex characters of *Sula* had so intrigued them, or how they had not seen the

Biblical archetypes in *Lord of the Flies* when they read it alone. In these moments I applauded myself. "It's working," I told myself, and marched joyfully on.

I want you to understand that I did not consider myself theorizing texts in those days. I was teaching people, and language and literature were the elements in which we immersed ourselves. I believed that my ways of reading helped students connect the literature we read together to the much larger world outside the classroom, and this felt good to me.

Early in my doctoral study I had a course that began with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a novel I knew well, but only from a limited theoretical perspective. I had studied the structural elements of the novel and the psychology of its characters. Our approach to the novel opened up new ways of reading. We worked with *Heart of Darkness: A Case Study in Contemporary Criticism* in which editor Ross Murfin introduces the text through biographical and historical background materials and follows it with five essays that read the text from psychoanalytic, reader-response, feminist, deconstructionist, and new historicist perspectives. I devoured this book because it showed me how to read a novel with which I was very familiar from perspectives about which I had little knowledge. In addition, Murfin's first sentence in the Preface gave me a way to locate myself, my teaching, and my quest for ways of reading in the world of literary theory: "If asked to describe the way in which the study of literature is changing, most of us willing to venture an answer would say that it is becoming more theoretical" (v). Why is this so? Murfin answers that "an

awareness of theoretical issues and questions makes us more sophisticated readers, interpreters, and critics" (v). Just such an awareness had been my goal since I had enhanced my New Critical strategies with Frye's archetypal theory. As I read Murfin's explanations of how theory helps readers and what it accomplishes, I felt as though I had discovered a gold mine.

In his language Murfin addresses many of the ideas I worked with in my own reading and teaching. He says that theory helps us come up with "coherent interpretive strategies" (v); these I had thought of as ways of reading, but his word "strategies" gave me a new focus. It suggests a more careful method or plan. The word strategy derives from the Greek word *strategia* which refers to generalship and relates to the science and art of maneuvering forces (political, economic, psychological, and military) to support accepted policies. This intrigues me because Murfin observes that strategies help us both discover and examine the "assumptions that underlie our interpretive habits" (v). And here is the crucial idea for ways of reading: Murfin says that theory might encourage us to compare our assumptions to others and lead us to more than one critical conclusion about a piece of literature. My New Critical thinking had taught me that I could arrive at the one correct reading if I knew how to read formally. Even in his first paragraphs, Murfin was beginning to expand my theoretical horizons.

Theoretical approaches to reading can help us appreciate a wider range of interpretive possibilities, but theory does not demand that we choose one approach as

the best or only way. As we learn to develop our critical faculties through theory, each new approach we work with "adds incrementally to our understanding and appreciation not only of individual works but also of literature in general." The most important result of such inquiry is that we may be led to "write our own literary criticism, using a model and vocabulary that others have collectively shared, developed, and defended" (v-vi). In the years since I first read Murfin's short Preface, my understanding has developed in the incremental way he suggests, though not always smoothly and not always planned. My earlier fascinations with how to read have been heightened by the specific theoretical "models" (Murfin's word) and their attendant vocabularies to which I shall introduce you in this book.

Having provided a context for this book in terms of my own experience as a teacher and a student, I turn now to the ways in which my research has allowed me to pursue my fascination with literary theory.

After one semester of doctoral work, I was obliged to pass a qualifying exam to demonstrate my competency to proceed with my studies. Knowing of my interest in literary theory, my adviser set an exam question which related theory to classroom teaching. Since reader-response theory has become an important innovation in secondary school English teaching, she asked me to read four books relating to reader response, its history, and its basic ideas. In my essay she asked me to place reader-response theory within the larger framework of critical theory and to discuss the

application of theory as a way in which teachers might change their classroom practice.

That question and my subsequent wrestling with it marks the very moment in which the seed of this book was planted. The four books were Louise Rosenblatt's *Literature as Exploration* (4th ed., 1983), *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* (1978), Edmund Farrell and James Squires' *Transactions with Literature* (1990), a collection of essays related to Rosenblatt's theories, and Robert Probst's *Response and Analysis: Teaching Literature in Junior and Senior High School* (1988). I also worked with Ross Murfin's casebook on *Heart of Darkness* in which he has an essay introducing each theory and a fine glossary that helped me begin to learn the language of theory.

Here's what happened. It is important in terms of how I decided to work in this book. In my research I was completely overwhelmed by the theories, by their specialized languages, by how much there was to know, and especially by how to present it intelligibly in the context of the question my adviser had set for me. After a short overview of formalism, psychoanalytic criticism, other reader-response approaches besides Rosenblatt's, feminist criticism, deconstruction, and new historicism, I reached the conclusion that among these critical approaches, the most useful for the secondary school English classroom was reader-response theory because it focuses specifically on the interaction between the student reader and the text, and does not require specific training in critical apparatus. This was the easy way out, and I knew it, but I faced at that point what I believe most classroom teachers face when

they think of literary theory: fear of the gigantic field of theory, a sense that theory is something that university people work with, uncertainty about how to start learning about theory, and a suspicion that most literary theories are not going to be useful to them in their day-to-day work with students.

As a result of my research for this exam, I acquired some powerful new knowledge about literary theory and the secondary school, knowledge that piqued my interest and drove my thinking from the time of the exam until I proposed this book. A study by Arthur Applebee set me to thinking about how I might explore theory as ways of reading that could offer teachers alternatives to the traditional teaching of reading. After a series of curriculum-related studies based on book-length texts being taught, current anthologies, and current pedagogical practices in secondary schools, Applebee concluded that we need to develop a theory of teaching and learning literature that will help us rethink high school English instruction. This recalled my career-long concern about how we teach ways of reading. He also concluded that high school teachers "remain largely unaware of movements such as structuralism, feminist criticism, deconstruction, or recent developments in reader-response theory." In planning both curriculum and daily instruction, he continued, they rely on "genres and periods as organizing devices sometimes integrated with broad 'themes,' and New Critical approaches to individual texts" (*Transactions* 62-63). And here is his critical conclusion that led to my work: The neglect of contemporary critical theory "creates an unusual disjunction between scholarship and instruction," but, Applebee

acknowledges, contemporary critical movements have been little concerned with pedagogical applications (63). At the very heart of my work is my effort to bridge this gap between scholarship and pedagogy. Many secondary teachers are outstanding university students, and they are certainly being exposed to theory in some of their classes. What seems to be missing, however, is the connection between theory in the world of the university classroom and in the world of the secondary classroom. Young teachers as well as experienced ones could, I believe, profit from an introduction to the working principles of theory, some guidance in how to approach a new theory and to begin to work with it, and a clear demonstration of what a theoretical reading looks like. This is my work in this book.

My research following the qualifying exam has kept me thinking about Applebee's call for more work with theory in the teaching of literature, and research has also helped me focus my work. Here is how this happened.

Reading Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, I was struck by the way in which he addressed my concerns with ways of reading in his chapter "Tradition and Theory." Traditionally, from a New Critical stance, a text has been considered autonomous, but Graff points out how contemporary theory has changed this attitude:

If there is any point of agreement among decon-structionists, structuralists, reader-response critics, pragmatists, phenomenologists, speech-act theorists, and theoretically minded humanists, it is on the principle that texts are not, after all, autonomous and self-contained, that the meaning of any text in

itself depends for its comprehension on other texts and textualized frames of reference. (256)

Texts are cultural events, Graff says, and we ought to teach both graduate and undergraduate students how to situate themselves so that they can negotiate texts. He sees James Kincaid's new conception of literary studies as an important way of thinking about the future of teaching literature. From Kincaid's perspective, the traditional course which covers a certain body of material is an "impoverished ideal." In his reconception of the literature course, he favors theoretical approaches to reading and to the world:

Wouldn't it [the course] seek to define the subject matter, literature, and to discuss the various and competing assumptions about texts, language, meaning, culture, readers, and so forth that we make? Wouldn't it show that these things are themselves constructions, that there is considerable debate about such things as texts, about where meaning resides, about the importance of gender, about the relations of these things to historical situations? Wouldn't it show that these assumptions were not themselves innocent, that they were value-laden, interested, ideological? You are starting to suspect that this is a course in theory. And so it is. But all courses are courses in theory. One either smuggles it in or goes through customs with it openly. . . . We need to teach not the texts themselves but how we situate ourselves in reference to those texts. (262)

This re-envisioning of the teaching of literature at the university level has ramifications for secondary school teaching in the spirit of Applebee's call for more theorizing of texts. High school teachers traditionally teach "the texts in themselves," but I believe that Kincaid's final sentence points us in the direction of crucial reform

in teaching literature. Contemporary theory helps us situate ourselves in a variety of frameworks out of which we can construct meanings as we read.

I agree wholeheartedly with Kincaid's re-vision of the teaching of literature and his implication that theory should not be at all exclusionary but that it should be inclusionary, that it should help us better understand our world and ourselves. I like the way that critic Edward Said addresses the issue of the place of theory in the world in his essay "The Politics of Knowledge." Said writes about intellectuals and the full intellectual process, which he defines as the product of "historically informed research" and the "presentation of a coherent and carefully argued line" that takes into account alternatives. He insists that literary work be "human work, the actual participation of peoples in the making of human life." Such intellectual work, he says, is worldly, is situated in the world. It is about the world. He warns against any work that becomes too esoteric, that is "so rigidly constricted and so forbiddingly arcane as to exclude all but an audience of likeminded, already convinced persons." I have witnessed just this kind of attitude toward literary theory. Some believe theory to be the province of certain members of the academy who are privy to its mysteries, who can decode its signs, who sometimes even seem to breathe rarefied air. In this book I subscribe to Said's call for theoretical relevance, to his belief that although there are certainly many intellectual constituencies, "many arguments can be made to more than one audience and in different situations." If we cannot work this way in the world, he explains, then we are "dealing not with intellectual argument but with

dogma, or with a technological jargon designed specifically to repel all but a small handful of initiates or coteries" (Richter, *Falling*, 195-96). I do not mean to diminish the power of theoretical language, and I am aware that anyone who undertakes my task will be open to the criticism of oversimplification. My aim is to provide my readers with a point of entry into the exciting world of literary theory, to provide some approaches that might enable them to engage in rewarding intellectual work with literature. As a result, they might connect their work in the university to the work that they do in the world.

This leads me, finally, to a consideration of the texts with which I work in this book. They are popularly termed "young adult literature," a recent designation for contemporary texts that come out of a long line of distinguished books read by the young, among them *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Little Women*, the Horatio Alger stories, *Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Anne of Green Gables*, and *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*. When I began the serious study of the young adult novel, I selected my readings from a list that Ted Hipple had compiled of the best books of the seventies and eighties and published in *English Journal*. Nothing disappointed me as I read the books, and after each one I made notations about the various worlds in the works, about character relationships, and themes.

Literary theory was implicit in all my notes. For example, as I read Sue Ellen Bridgers' *Home Before Dark*, I was always thinking about feminist issues, about the construction of fourteen-year-old Stella's identity in the patriarchal world of her

father's history. When I read Bruce Brook's *The Moves Make the Man*, I was fascinated by the meta-narrative framework, the way in which Jay Foxworthy constructs the character of Bix Rivers out of memory and out of Bix's notebook. The social construction of motherhood in that book set me to thinking about my own mother and my family, about other families I have known, about memorable mothers. I was moving in and out of reader-response theory, of poststructural intertextuality as I read and re-read this amazing novel.

Walter Dean Myers' *Fallen Angels* soon became a novel that I talked about a great deal; it would not leave my mind. My cousin spent a year in Vietnam as Richie does in the novel, and even though we watched the war on the nightly news, fearing that our cousin might be blown to bits in Khe Sahn, I had not experienced the war up close as I did in Myers' novel. In that book I heard people say things that I suppose my cousin heard; I saw them behave in ways that I am sure he saw. When he came home, he would not talk about the war. Instead he shut himself in his room with pictures and slides of the war, living, I think, his own private hell in memory. Myers gave me a lens to see behind that closed door. When I finished the novel, I was overwhelmed to the point of tears, an emotional response that surprised me. Later, I also thought about the importance of references to film in the book, about the other historical events that surrounded the war, about other pieces of war literature that I knew; from that vantage point I was looking at the novel through the eyes of a cultural critic, seeing the text woven into many other aspects of our culture.

This is enough to say that I have chosen books to interpret that have had a profound effect on me. I have tried to choose books that represent the "Best of the Best" over the last two decades, and I have been careful to choose some books that have not been so much written about. In addition, I have chosen some very recent books because they represent, in my opinion, distinguished accomplishments in the field.

Although I shall not handle them chronologically, this list shows my effort to cover the last two decades with a variety of fine novels: Virginia Hamilton's *M. C. Higgins, the Great* (1974), Katherine Paterson's *Jacob Have I Loved* (1980), Bruce Brooks's *The Moves Make the Man* (1984), Gary Paulsen's *Dogsong* (1985), M. E. Kerr's *Night Kites* (1986), Walter Dean Myers' *Fallen Angels* (1988), Budge Wilson's short stories in *The Leaving* (1992), Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993), and Ernest Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993). I have framed my discussion of these young adult novels with Hamilton's and Gaines's books. With *M. C. Higgins, the Great* I want to demonstrate the extension of what may be called "children's literature" into the young adult field. Similarly, I want to extend my study of young adult novels into novels written for adults with *A Lesson Before Dying*. This framing lends order and coherence to the structural design of the book and leads naturally into my final chapter on the implications of theorizing young adult fiction in the classroom.

"Enough! or Too Much" as William Blake says in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Perkins, 72). Having introduced you to my teaching and my texts, in the next chapter I welcome you to the provocative world of literary theory.

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CHAPTER TWO

Author, Text, Reader, World: Entering the Landscape of Theory

In *Professing Literature*, Gerald Graff defines literary theory as inquiry, at once opening up the subject and dispelling unnecessary anxiety about its relationship to practice. We can think of it, he says, "simply as an inquiry into assumptions, premises, and legitimating principles and concepts" (252). His use of the disarming term "simply" gently rebukes those who offer resistance to theory because they see it as "a system or foundational discourse that aims to 'govern' critical practice from some outside metaphysical standpoint." Graff's subsequent elaboration of his simple definition affords an excellent starting point for the consideration of theory and the work that it does in the world:

Thus, another way of describing literary theory is as a discourse that treats literature as in some respect a problem and seeks to formulate that problem in general terms. Theory is what is generated when some aspect of literature, its nature, its history, its place in society, its conditions of production and reception, its meaning in general, or the meanings of particular works, ceases to be given and becomes a question to be argued in a generalized way. Theory is what inevitably arises when literary conventions and critical definitions once taken for granted have become objects of generalized discussion and dispute. (252)

How shall we begin this inquiry? From Graff's definition I begin with some preliminary questions that I shall answer in this chapter:

1. What constitutes the world of contemporary literary theory?
2. What are the tasks of theory? What questions does it ask? What questions do we ask of it?
3. What is the relationship between theory, writers, readers, texts, and the world? In other words, what in the world do we do with theory?

Panoramic Views: Mapping the Terrain

In his introduction to *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, David Richter offers us access to the world of theory, invites us to participate in a conversation where "the very abundance of voices and vocabularies can be intimidating to the newcomer seeking to enter the conversation" (2). He takes us on a geography trip through the "critical terrain," mapping out the history of critical theory. The value of his geography for my purposes is that—while he sets the historical landscape in perspective—he offers an entry point into the most important relationships in the theoretical conversation: relationships among author, text, reader, world.

Richter frames his geography with the questions that critical theory has asked since the ancients explored language. These are the same questions we ask today:

What is the nature of the work of art? What are its sources in the artist, in the literary scene, in the society for which it is produced? What are its properties, uses, powers, and value? How is the nature of literature circumscribed by the properties of language itself, by the gender of the writer or the reader, by the

intrinsic limitations of the human mind? What are literature's effects on individuals and on communities? (1-2)

These questions, he says, "have inspired an ongoing conversation that is continually modified by new voices from different cultural matrices, which join in with other critical languages, other norms, other views of the world" (2). These new voices are the foci of my attention.

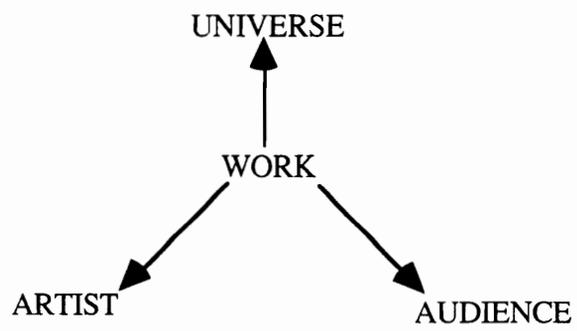
Richter maps out the principal orientation of four theories that have influenced the new voices. In classical antiquity mimetic theories expressed a relationship between the work of art and the world outside it, holding that the work was an imitation, a copy of that physical world. Rhetorical theories popular at the end of the classical world and into the Middle Ages and Renaissance shifted the focus of theory to the work and the audience, to principles of pleasure, appreciation, and instruction. The next shift in relationships focused on the artist and the work of art; these expressive theories emerged in the late eighteenth century and continued into most of the nineteenth century. Developing in the early twentieth century, formal theories focused on the aesthetics of the work of literature, seeing it as a unified whole, a finished work of art which should be studied without reference to its creator or to the world in which it was created. Richter points out that all four theories continue to exert influence on present developments in the complex world of theory (2-3).

To clarify the relationships among the areas of concern in theory, Richter gathers together illuminating diagrams or maps from other theorists. These maps allow us to see the changing interplay of text, writer, reader, and world.

The Co-ordinates of Art Criticism

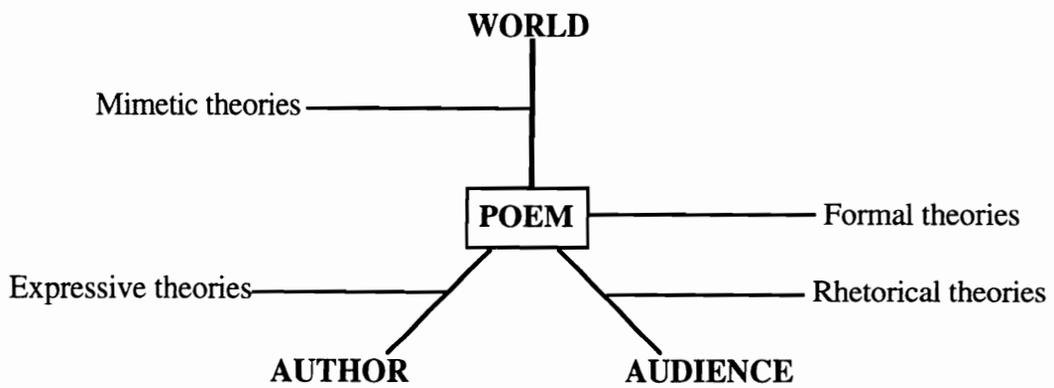
In *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), M. H. Abrams offers a simple triangular diagram of theoretical relationships (Figure 1), explaining each term carefully and designating them as "co-ordinates of art criticism" (6). He describes the components of his conception, beginning with the centrality of the work as artifact and moving then to the artist, an "artificer," a maker. The third element he terms universe to represent "existing things," an "objective state of affairs" from which the work takes its subject. Finally, he defines the audience as "the listeners, spectators, or readers" to whose attention the work "becomes available" (6). The diagram suggests a triangular shape although Abrams does not inscribe the terms in one. He draws arrows from the central term work outward to each of the other co-ordinates, suggesting that they depend on the work for their meaning in the schema.

Richter modifies the language of Abrams' diagram and adds the four critical orientations to it (Figure 2). These orientations are not separate entities; they overlap in their considerations, each one addressing all the components in the diagram but in different degrees (3). Richter's changes in terminology are more literature-specific. He replaces work with poem, a term that the Formalists used to mean any piece of literature. The artist becomes an author, and the word universe sheds its Platonic overtones to become world. He retains Abrams' inclusive term audience.



M. H. Abrams' Co-ordinates of Art Criticism

Figure 1



Richter's Modification of Abrams' Map

Figure 2

From Formalism to Cultural Studies

I begin my work with Formalism which emerged as a reaction to the excessive romantic tendencies of nineteenth century critical theories. In the way that historical cycles have emerged as a form of the classical-romantic conflict, modern contemporary theories came into being in reaction to the excesses of Formalism, to its belief that a competent reader could give an objective reading, could discover the one correct reading of a work of art.

As an orientation to my treatment of the theories in this book, I illustrate (Figure 3) how theories have moved away from Formalism and its narrow avenues for reading literature. What follows in successive chapters will work out this panoramic view, and I urge you to return to this representation as a touchstone of my thinking. I posit the extremes of early twentieth century Formalism and the most recent developments in theory which come under the aegis of the broad term cultural studies, a term that implicates in some way components of all the theories I explore. One of the most important developments in theory in the last three decades is that it has opened up, moved far beyond the Formalists' narrow confinement inside the work of art. My diagram represents the range of exciting interpretive possibilities for the modern reader.

Perhaps the most powerful shift indicated in Figure 3 is the shift from the term work of art to text. The work of art is a closed entity, finished, complete, an object for observation and admiration. A text is woven, something made with spaces

FORMALISM-----	CULTURAL STUDIES
Aesthetics-----	Ideologies
The Work of Art-----	Text, Intertext, Context, Textuality
The Work Centered-----	The Text Decentered
Author as Artist-----	What is an Author?
The Reader as Audience-----	The Reader as Writer
Competent Reader/Critic-----	Culturally Aware Readers
Critical Tools, Critical Faculties-----	Experience/Knowledge
One "Correct" Reading-----	No "Correct" Reading
Theory as Privilege-----	Theory as Possibilities
White, Male, Heterosexual World-----	Multi-cultural World
The Canon of Great Books-----	Expanding the Canon/No Canon
Microscopic Vision-----	Telescopic Vision

Changes in Theoretical Perspectives

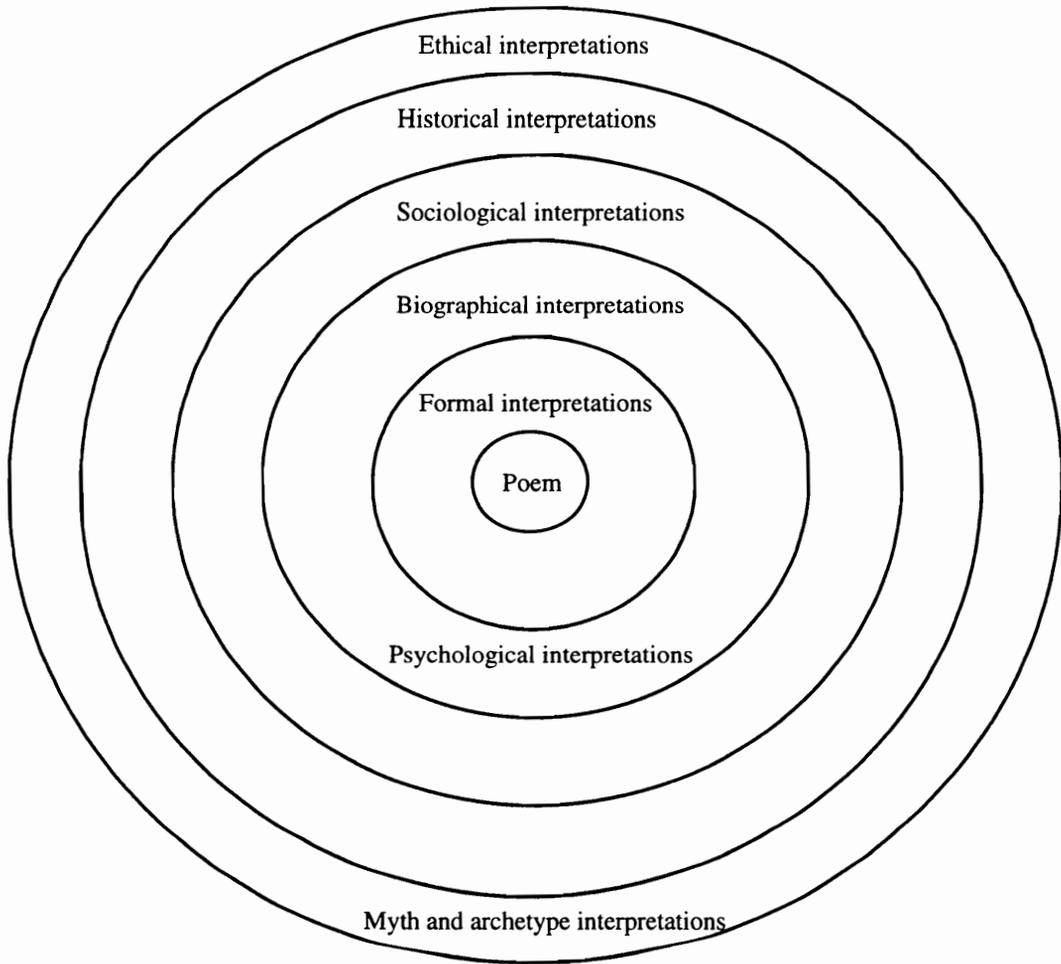
Figure 3

between its strands, something that is never finished, is always in the process of becoming each time its words play in the minds of readers. Contemporary theories explore these spaces, open them up, make them problematic. As Richter observes: "The text is no longer the poem isolated at the center of the diagram. Rather textuality—the condition of inscription within language—is implicated in all our knowledge of the world, of reading, of expression" (8).

My panoramic representation might appear to suggest that theory is becoming everything and to invite the charge that if it can be everything, then it is nothing. This is not so. One of the most exciting developments in theory is the way in which it perceives knowledge: Knowledge is not restricted to the received wisdom of the ages. Knowledge is a construction, and there are many ways to build what we know, among them reading and interpreting literature. Contemporary theory serves us by offering us many ways of reading, many ways of constructing the world of a text, of connecting that world to any world we know, of constructing ourselves.

Mapping Critical Tasks

Given my context of panoramic changes in modern theoretical perspectives, I return to Richter's maps of theoretical relationships. He follows his modification of Abrams' schema with a series of concentric circles (Figure 4) which he borrows from R.S. Crane and Norman Friedman. He uses this map to clarify the interrelationships of critical tasks and to focus on the variety of approaches we can take to a literary



Crane and Friedman's Map

Figure 4

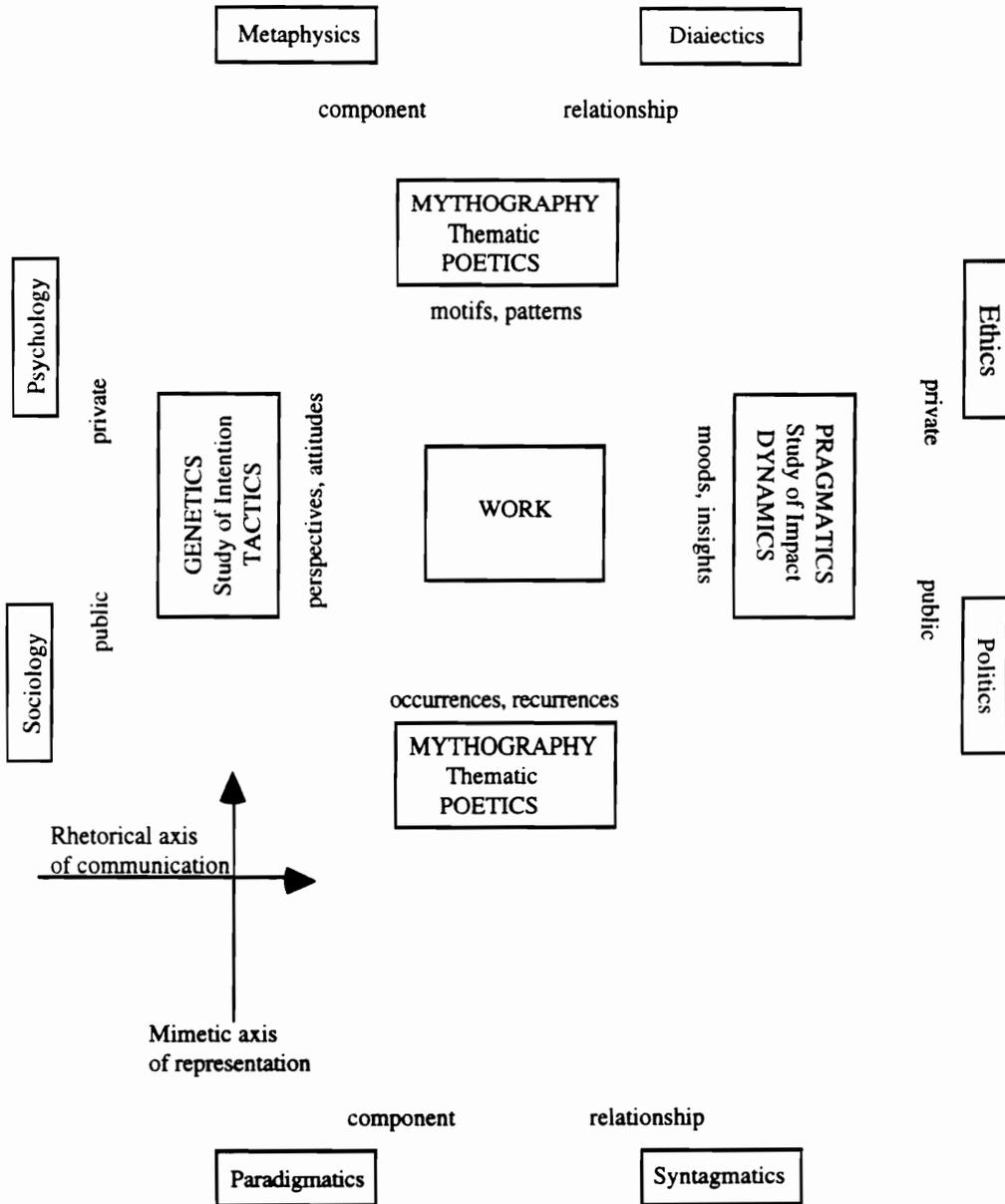
text. These approaches point to the ways of reading through which I explore young adult fiction in the following chapters.

Figure 4 suggests a series of expanding and overlapping foci in the act of reading, moving outward from the Formalists' microscopic focus on the poem. The poem remains at the center, but, formalistic analysis exhausted, it is studied in ever-expanding contexts, including biographical, psychological, sociological, historical, and ethical. The widest circle of mythic and archetypal approaches places the poem in the largest context, locating it in the universality of literary traditions which have preceded it (9).

Mapping Communication and Representation

The most complicated map that Richter offers (Figure 5) comes from Paul Hernadi. It encompasses the components of the previous two maps but specifically introduces the element of language into the theoretical relationships. The work remains centered, but the shape has metamorphosed from triangle to rectangle, situating the work on two axes. On one axis the work stands between author and reader; on the other it stands between the world and the language systems that signify the world (11).

Much of the very specific language of this third map goes beyond my practical ambitions, but I include it here because it represents the sometimes bewildering



Hernadi's Map

Figure 5

complexities of the world of theory. Its language also describes the concerns of the specific theories with which I will explore young adult texts: formalism, archetypal (mythic) criticism, structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, reader-response theories, and cultural studies (including feminism and black aesthetics).

Richter concludes, as one might expect of a modern theorist, that "in the long run, all maps are inadequate and none is wholly innocent" (14). He notes that we learn through experience to make our own maps, and this is precisely what I propose as the result of my work: I hope that you will consider the geography of theory that we explore together, will develop ways of reading that are congenial with your needs and ambitions, and will consider these theories as ways to develop a reading eclecticism, to find what works, and to use it.

Theory and Conversation

Richter exits his introduction by encouraging us to learn to live in uncertainty in the world of theory, telling us that theory cannot establish "an ultimate order," that there will be no "tidy and harmonious chorus of voices" (14). He proposes the act of conversation as an alternative to seeking theoretical harmony, setting the different voices at play, engaging them "in contrapuntal dialogue with each other." As we enter that dialogue, we become "participants in an ancient and exalted conversation" (14). Richter's dialogue reminds me of another powerful conversation metaphor that

has helped me think of my work as a possibility in the face of the impossibility of mastering the enormous and burgeoning field of theory:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defence; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending on the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the conversation still in progress. (Burke 95-96)

Before you go off to that party alone, let me have a talk with you so that when you decide to "put in your oar," you may feel a little more comfortable in the conversation.

Practical Routes

Moving from the sweeping panoramic vision of theory that Richter provides, we approach the practical nature of critical work. How do we engage these various critical perspectives in the act of reading? In *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction*, Ann Jefferson and David Robey offer some guidance as they locate the abstractions of theory in the world of concrete experiences with literature: "Literary theory is not something that has developed in a vacuum, but has

arisen for the most part in response to the problems encountered by readers, critics and scholars in their practical contact with texts" (13). They focus, as Richter does, on the questions that theory enables us to answer, noting that "the point of literary theory is to draw attention to these questions," to make them problematic, to show the different ways of answering them. "Established ways of answering them," they say, "should not be taken for granted" (13). First, they posit a definition of literature to which the questions refer: "the author sends a literary text about reality to the reader in language" (13). Each time I read this definition I am amazed that they do not italicize what I consider to be the most important word in contemporary theory: text. They acknowledge that their definition is in a sense "pure fiction" and that it "covers a range of possibilities only," all its components being open to challenge and most theories concentrating on some of these components more than others (13). They do not point out that it is the nature of textuality, the openness of the woven language, that invites such possibilities in interpretations.

Jefferson and Robey seem to derive their definition from a series of transformations that Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson work out diagrammatically in *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. Selden and Widdowson also begin their explorations with the questions that theory asks. They begin with Roman Jakobson's schema for linguistic communication to elaborate the concepts of author, reality, reader, and language:

forms that it should take" (22). I agree with them in this. They speculate that "all theories of literature have an implied theory of reading, even if readers are not their explicit preoccupation" (23). This focus on reading is at the heart of my work with young adult fiction and leads me to the final consideration of this chapter: How do we read literature? How do we describe the work of analysis and synthesis that must go into a response to a text? For the purposes of this book I mean by "reading" an act, a performance in language and about language, an act that leads to interpretation. Although the act of reading will figure prominently in the theory chapters, as a way of introducing the concept here, I mean act as that which is not passive. A reader is actively engaged in negotiating the language of a text, actively making meaning.

The Road to Intrepretation

Interpretation is an act of analysis and synthesis of the woven words of a text. I take the metaphor in the title of my book from Donald G. Marshall's essay "Literary Interpretation" in which he states that interpretation aims "to *trace the weave* (emphasis mine) of thoughts, feelings, words, figures, sounds, and representations in a text, a weaving taken up into the thinking and feeling that constitutes readers' diverse response" (166). I am involved in a double act of interpretation: My aim is to interpret, to explain, various literary theories and to use them to interpret young adult fiction.

Marshall aptly describes my location as interpreter between theory and my readers and in so doing clarifies one of the particular challenges of this project:

Thus interpreters, whose aim is to help an audience understand, must take account of that audience's knowledge, interests, ways of talking, and membership—whether students, generally educated nonprofessionals, or other professional interpreters. (165)

In considering my audience, I know from my experience in public school teaching that most secondary teachers were not participating in conversations about theory. I also know that most of them, if they thought of themselves as theorizing at all, were practicing some form of close reading of the literature they taught, some variation of formalism. I agree with Marshall that "good teachers always try to discern and respond to the questions students at any stage actually have" (164). I also believe that if I can help my colleagues gain access to theory, I can help them answer these questions in new ways.

Another important audience for my work is composed of undergraduate and graduate students who are making the transition from their studies to professional work. They may, as Marshall observes, often find this transition awkward, and in the process they may become especially skeptical about the act of interpretation. They may think that they are "learning to play a highly artificial game" (164). This is not the case, he explains, and I agree with him that "as students learn the varied interpretive practices within the profession, they come to see the genuine insights and issues that underlie those practices" (164).

Learning to interpret a text presumes an act of communication in the world and promises a rewarding connection to the world:

Knowing how to interpret a text means knowing what to say about it to enhance a particular audience's understanding of it against the background of that audience's whole form of life. To understand a text is to find in our own form of life points of contact with the form of life of which the text is a witness. (176)

The power of interpretation emerges when we have a working knowledge of theoretical perspectives, an adventuresome spirit to explore theoretical terrains, and a love of language and literature that continually nurtures the soul of inquiry.

Going Shopping

Given, then, the nature of theory, its critical tasks, its rewards, and its burgeoning complexities, how do we gain access to it, work with it in our world? Jonathan Culler, the well-known American structuralist, offers a sensible and encouraging answer: "There are innumerable entries, and you always begin where you are." The field, he says, is so "vast and impossible to master" that we cannot even try to cover it (225). Although he is addressing university students who are considering the serious pursuit of theoretical studies, his advice applies to anyone seeking an entry into theory and its practice, and he contends that "anyone who asks to enter the field has most probably already entered it in some way—has already engaged in some kind of thinking about literature and culture" (225).

Culler creates a clever shopping metaphor to elaborate on the entry to theory. He likens the theoretically curious to shoppers "confronted with shelves of detergents and hyperbolic claims about the superior power of each" (225). With the emergence of each new theory in recent decades, its major proponents have considered it an advance over previous ways of investigating texts. Culler suggests this brand name power: "Goes deeper! Handles the toughest jobs! Nontoxic! Brings out all the dirt of the past! Leaves no residue! Harmful or fatal if swallowed!" (225). I am particularly amused by the inclusion of "Nontoxic!" and "Harmful or fatal if swallowed!" Theory will not poison you. On the other hand, ingesting it or failing to understand the limitations of its uses may lead to literary disaster.

From his humorous look at the availability of competing theories, Culler suggests an approach to working with theory that I heartily endorse and that I practice in this book:

The view that competing discourses are methods of interpretation or ways of approaching literary works takes each as a partial vision, more appropriate to some books than to others. (225)

In our practice we must realize that we cannot theorize each text within the same framework. Culler simplifies his concept of "a partial vision" by referring to the explicit concerns of specific theories:

Marxism suits novels about the impact of social and economic organization on personal experience; psychoanalysis, novels whose protagonists or narrators or authors behave strangely; deconstruction, those concerned with the intricacies and

instabilities of language and representation; feminism, those about relations between the sexes or about the condition of women.
(225)

In theoretical debates, such a practical approach to theory, he continues, is rarely mentioned, but I believe that it is exactly this approach that helps us open up the world of theory to those unfamiliar with it. Although competing theories have their unique preoccupations, each may be useful to limited degrees in other explorations; for example, the theoretical orientations of feminist criticism may be quite illuminating for works which seem to ignore feminist issues (225).

Culler concludes that "with its open horizon of questioning, theory can lead you anywhere." In that case, we need to ask ourselves where we are and "what theoretical questions organize the particular region of discourses" with which we are principally engaged. Pursuing this direction, he tells us, we may find theory to be "a contesting of divisions, the positing of new boundaries, the unearthing of new questions, and the investigation of new configurations of texts" (226). He implies an invitation to challenging, provocative, and exciting work with texts. This applies particularly to my work with young adult texts which have been too little theorized and whose boundaries, I believe, welcome extension by a larger world of readers and interpreters.

Travelling in the State of Theory

In introducing the ways of reading which I shall explore, I turn to David Richter's most recent book, *Falling into Theory: Conflicting Views on Reading Literature* (1994) in which he defines theory as "the sort of talk we talk when a consensus breaks down" (8). He discusses the present state of theoretical debate with the metaphor that "we have fallen into a state of theory" (3); by this he means that our traditional ways of reading have come under vigorous attack over the last three decades. We no longer agree on the validity of the basic assumptions in our field; he calls these assumptions a "paradigm," borrowing the term from Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. A paradigm is "a framework of generally accepted assumptions and perspectives that enables researchers to solve problems and answer questions whose relationship to accepted ideas is well understood within the profession" (2). In short, we have "lost our consensus" (3) about this framework and are located in a transitional phase between paradigms, a phase that Kuhn calls a "scientific revolution" in terms of knowledge, and that Richter calls a "state of theory" in terms of language and literature.

I am especially interested in Richter's statement that "even the notion of how we read literature is subject to debate" (4) and in his belief that "there is nothing mysterious about theory" (8). He demystifies theory with a simple example:

Two teenagers arguing about whether one of their teachers is open-minded or wishy-washy, or about whether it is a band's material or performance technique that makes it so great, can get quickly to the edge of some region of theory, where fundamental

questions about values and quality, means and ends, public and private experience are raised. (8)

As this example illustrates, we are always theorizing when we question and speculate about our world.

Richter extends his notion of theorizing to classroom practice by focusing on the possibilities of interpretation from the teacher's point of view. While some instructors presume that each student can, with the requisite practice, come up with the same "correct" reading, others presume "that there are many 'correct' readings but that misreading is possible and avoidable." Yet another group presumes that "since the reader constitutes the text, there can be no such thing as an 'incorrect' way of reading" (10). These presumptions fall within the panoramic range of theoretical possibilities which I have suggested in Figure 3, and they reflect the individual theories which I explore in the following chapters.

Mapping our Journey

Although we have fallen into this state of theory over the last three decades, I shall not handle theories as they have appeared chronologically. In their development, theories have reacted and responded to frameworks which preceded them but not in any neat and tidy way; rather, considerable overlapping and borrowing have occurred which make a chronological approach somewhat confusing. Even though many avant garde theorists decry formalistic practices, such practices

have informed the development of newer theories and continue to be employed in many classrooms.

In my approach I group theories into three areas of focus: (1) Theories that deal in some way with structural matters in the text; here I handle formalism, archetypal theory, structuralism, and post-structuralism/deconstruction. (2) Theories which focus on the reader of the text; here I include several variations on reader-response theory. (3) Theories that move beyond reader and text to explore the full range of interactions among author, text, reader, and world; here I include feminism, black aesthetics, and cultural studies. A brief overview of each theory will serve to indicate the principal distinctions as I see them and to introduce my metaphor of tracing the weave as a way of reading texts.

Theories of Structures

Formalism

Formalism, by which I also mean American New Criticism, sees the work of literature as self-contained, a finished work of art understandable without reference to its author or to the emotional response of the reader. We trace the weave of images, plot, character, and theme, and our close reading reveals patterns that produce order, harmony, and unity in the structures of the work.

Archetypal Criticism

Archetypal criticism also focuses on patterns, but it sees the text woven into the larger patterns of literary history. Archetypes are plots, characters, images, and themes that are continuations and reworkings of familiar elements in myths and folktales. In our reading we trace these recurring elements and consider them to be manifestations of a shared human experience, referred to as the collective unconscious. Archetypal criticism reflects principles of Jungian psychology; it explores the psyche, especially dreams.

Structuralism

Language is a system of signs (semiotics) through which we structure and organize our ideas and understand our experiences. Language is a cultural code, and when we read, we make meaning by decoding words as signs. Signs, however, do not mean by themselves; they depend on relationships with other signs within a system, and when we read, we trace the weave of these relationships within the text. Structuralists see language as the unifying element in the text and in the world.

Post-structuralism/Deconstruction

According to theorists who reacted to structuralism, a language system cannot produce unity. A single text cannot stand alone because it is a compilation of many texts, or intertexts, and we find meanings in the ways in which these intertexts relate to each other. No single "correct" reading exists; instead, multiple meanings emerge as we examine the complicated ways in which the language of the text contradicts

itself. Deconstruction claims that texts are in the process of falling apart. When we trace the weave, then, we discover how the text is unraveling.

Reader-Response Theories

These theories hold that reading is an event, a process that takes place between reader and text. They consider the ways in which readers respond personally to texts, how a reader's personal history gets embedded in the text. Some theories open up gaps or indeterminacies in the text to explore what has been left out of the text. All reader-response theories see the reader as an active participant in the creation of the text. Our interpretation arises out of the ways in which we weave ourselves into the text as we read it. Reading is, then, an interaction or a transaction with a text.

Cultural Studies

This term includes theories which are broadly interdisciplinary and intertextual. The text is located in a complex web of discourses that may seem non-literary, including psychology, anthropology, sociology, politics, economics, and ethics. Cultural studies as a theory calls into question what actually constitutes a text and includes film, advertisements, television sitcoms, and other elements of the popular culture as texts that can be "read."

Feminism operates on the principle that gender is the fundamental category for literary inquiry; similarly, the new black aesthetics sees race as the fundamental

category, and both affirm the importance of locating the literary text in broader cultural contexts.

Destinations

Where will we be after we complete this journey that I have mapped out? In our classrooms, I hope. Teaching. And travelling in the landscapes of theory.

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CHAPTER THREE

M. C. Higgins, the Great: The Well-Wrought Novel

In *M. C. Higgins, the Great*, Virginia Hamilton tells a coming-of-age story about thirteen-year-old Mayo Cornelius Higgins. Black and poor, he lives with his family halfway up the side of Sarah's Mountain, just a few miles from the Ohio River. In the late summer days of the novel, M. C. watches over his younger siblings, Lennie Pool, Macie Pearl, and Harper while his parents, Jones and Banina Higgins, work in the nearby steel town of Harenton. Strip mining operations threaten the family's safety and future; a dangerous spoil heap perched atop the mountain ominously slides toward them in its own seepage. M. C.'s concern for his family's safety motivates his behavior as Hamilton weaves him in and out of character relationships during the three days and nights which the novel spans. His perspective, his world view, changes as he interacts with two strangers, with his strange neighbors, and with his family.

The central conflict of the novel arises out of M. C.'s conviction that the family must leave their home and his father's belief that they must stay and continue the history begun there by their ancestors. Their legacy is symbolized in the story of Jones's great grandmother Sarah, her escape from slavery, and her arrival on the mountain. Handed down through oral tradition, it is the thread that unifies the novel's concerns with past, present, and future.

The novel opens in the age of M. C.'s innocence and moves into the age of experience. Hamilton frames the theme of approaching maturation in two symbols. At the beginning of the novel, M. C. is the self-proclaimed hero of his own life, a carefree observer of the world who sits atop a forty-foot flagpole outfitted with a seat and bicycle pedals, a gift from his father for his excellence as a swimmer. Often proclaiming "I've got a ticket to ride," he understands his greatness as acrobat, hunter, swimmer, adventurer, and caretaker of his siblings. After the departure of Lewis and Lurhetta at the end of the novel, he creates a metaphoric "ticket to ride" into adulthood as he descends the pole and begins to build a wall to protect his family and home from the sliding spoil heap. The wall is more than a physical barrier; it rises as a symbol of M. C.'s developing sense of personal responsibility, as a solid affirmation of the novel's theme that we are our history, that we cannot escape it, and that we are ennobled in our efforts to preserve it. M. C.'s surprising final act, his commitment to an idea much greater than himself, redefines him as a character and amplifies his greatness.

An Introduction to Formalism

Form is not thought of merely as a sort of container for the story; it is, rather, the total principle of organization and affects every aspect of the composition.

Brooks and Warren (684)

Rather than an extrinsic element, a mere outer structure, a "container" for a story, form is intrinsic, intimately connected to all the elements of fiction. Formalism offers a way of reading which traces the interconnections of plot, character and theme in the weave of narrative, the way in which they interpenetrate each other to create a totality, a finished work of art.

Formalism represents a "method of critical exegesis and explication" (Richter 726) more than it represents an organized body of theory. The following list illustrates the full range of procedures involved in a formalistic reading:

1. Select a short text, often a metaphysical or modern poem;
2. rule out "genetic" critical approaches;
3. avoid "receptionist" inquiry;
4. assume the text to be an autonomous, ahistorical, spatial object;
5. presuppose the text to be both intricate and complex and efficient and unified;
6. carry out multiple retrospective readings;
7. conceive each text as a drama of conflicting forces;
8. focus continually on the text and its manifold semantic and rhetorical interrelations;
9. insist on the fundamentally metaphorical and therefore miraculous powers of literary language;
10. eschew paraphrase and summary to make clear that such statements are not equivalent to poetic meaning;
11. seek an overall balanced or unified comprehensive structure of harmonized textual elements;
12. subordinate incongruities and conflicts;
13. see paradox, ambiguity, and irony as subduing divergences and insuring unifying structure;
14. treat (intrinsic) meaning as just one element of structure;
15. note in passing cognitive, experiential dimensions of the text; and
16. try to be the ideal reader and create the one, true reading, which subsumes multiple readings. (Leitch 35)

From this list I shall focus on the (1) the autonomy of the work and its relation to the author and the reader; (2) the unity of structures; and (3) the role that irony plays in this unity.

Items 1-4 in Leitch's list reflect the Formalists' belief that neither knowledge of the author's intent nor an individual reader's emotional responses to the work are necessary to a successful interpretation. An "ideal reader," carefully trained and skilled in practice, can, they believe, by focusing only on the work itself, achieve the ideal, the one "correct reading."

The autonomy of the work was addressed by two prominent American theorists, W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, who focused on fallacious readings that privileged author or reader. They named the mistake of placing too much emphasis on the author as "the intentional fallacy" and the equally dangerous mistake of placing too much emphasis on the reader's emotional response as "the affective fallacy."

The final sentence of "The Intentional Fallacy" sums up Wimsatt and Beardsley's argument succinctly: "Critical inquiries are not settled by consulting the oracle" (Lodge 344). The author, in other words, is not the all-knowing, final authority on the work, not the spokesperson of the divine, as were the oracles of the Greeks to whom Wimsatt and Beardsley allude. Using the word poem to refer to any work of art, they locate the poem in the world: "The poem is not the critic's own and not the author's (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend it or control it)." The poem is a public event: "It belongs to the

public. It is embodied in language, the peculiar possession of the public, and it is about the human being, an object of public knowledge" (335). Critics, then, can approach the poem in an objective way.

In the companion essay, "The Affective Fallacy," Wimsatt and Beardsley warn that when critics inform their readings with material outside the work, "the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear" (345). They make the point that "the form of a poem is not to be identified with the psychological process undergone by its audience" (Richter *Critical*, 727), that "an interpretive emphasis on the reader is not only unnecessary but dangerous" (Mailloux 66). "The Affective Fallacy" ends with a sentence as sharply focused as the one that ends "The Intentional Fallacy": "In short, though cultures have changed, poems remain and explain" (357). Wimsatt and Beardsley arrive at this conclusion by pointing out that the poem's "completeness, balance, and tension" survive because the work's emotional content is presented in the objects of the poem's discourse and as "a pattern of knowledge" (Lodge 356). In other words, the emotional content of the work of art is already inside the work, not inside the reader or critic. To look for an emotional response in criticism is to move the focus away from the totality of the world enclosed in the art object.

These fallacies isolate the work of art as the only locus of inquiry. We can achieve a successful reading "by making the closest possible examination of what the poem says as a poem" (Brooks xi). What is not on the page does not matter.

Formalism and Fiction

In collaboration with Robert Penn Warren, Brooks wrote two textbooks, *Understanding Poetry* and *Understanding Fiction*, in which these two theorists made the principles and practice of formalism accessible to students and their teachers.

Brooks and Warren open *Understanding Fiction* with a "Letter to the Teacher" in which they provide an overview of their theoretical perspectives. In their "first article of faith" they address their primary focus—structural unity: Structure "must involve a vital and functional relationship between the idea" (or theme) "and the other elements in that structure—plot style, character, and the like." In their second article of faith, they address theme: Good fiction "must involve an idea of some real significance for mature and thoughtful human beings" (xvii). Theme is important, they explain, "in so far as it is incorporated into the total structure—insofar as the story lives out the idea and, in the process of living, modifies the idea" (xviii). I focus my reading of *M. C. Higgins, the Great* on the way in which these three major components—plot, character, and theme—create the organic wholeness of Hamilton's novel.

Organic harmony in fiction is achieved when plot, character, and theme are so closely related that the reader feels an "expressive interpenetration among them, a set of vital relationships." Within these vital relationships fiction must exhibit conflict and tension that result in some kind of resolution, "however provisional and

marginal." Conflict works on three levels, the most obvious as (1) "a collision of interests in the external world," more subtly and sophisticated as (2) "a division of interests in the self," and most subtly in (3) "the alignment of judgments and sympathies on the part of the author—the problem of his own self-division" (Brooks and Warren xvii). In my analysis of Hamilton's novel I shall deal with the first two of these levels as I study the way in which M. C.'s interactions with other characters lead to the resolution of his internal conflicts.

Unity is also achieved through the resolution of what Brooks and Warren call "ironical ambivalence," a condition that provides a "psychological center for tension" for either the main character or for the audience (xix). Irony may be defined in a number of ways:

1. The tendency of any word, but particularly words combined in poetry, to suggest more than one meaning;
2. The tendency of a good poem to include a significant number and subtle variety of factors at odds with what is apparently being said in the poem. (Childs 121)

Warren specifies the relationship between irony and structure: "As a dramatic tension—as a balancing and reconciliation—of opposite or discordant qualities, a poem is ironic in structure" (Childs 121). This is particularly true in *M. C. Higgins, the Great* where the reader is more aware than M. C. of the ironies which exist between his dreams of escape and the motivations of the characters who represent freedom to him. The novel is a *tour de force* of ironic balances out of which the unity of the structure emerges.

At the heart of the formalist method is the careful process of close reading; in a short poem formalists pay attention to the many possibilities of meaning in every word in a line. The process of moving from line to line gradually reveals the work's structural unity. Several items on Leitch's list of procedures inform my close reading of *M. C. Higgins, the Great*. First, in terms of the spoken language of Hamilton's characters, I "eschew paraphrase and summary." This is a novel of character, rich and complex in the ways in which dialogue creates the people who inhabit the fictional world. The language sings in the poetry of regional speech, and I quote considerably in order to fully represent the characters. Second, my reading depends on "the fundamentally metaphoric and therefore miraculous powers of literary language"; I trace the way Hamilton creates her magical world in rich weavings of imagery and symbolism.

Framing the Novel

As a work of art, *M. C. Higgins, the Great* is a balanced structure framed by two contrasting images. When we get our first glimpse of M. C. in Chapter 1, he is greeting the sunrise, raising his arms high to the sky and opening them wide. In this grand gesture he literally opens up the world of the novel of which he is the center. He senses himself beyond the control of gravity ("I'm standing in midair, he thought") and declares his power to "Bounce the sun beside me if I want" (2). This

sets up the first balancing image when, as Chapter 2 opens, we see him perched atop the shining steel flagpole, where, almost godlike, he imagines himself as creator of the natural world:

He raised his arm so that his hand seemed to slide over the perfect roll and curve of the hill range before him to the south. He fluffed the trees out there and smoothed out the sky. All was still and ordered, the way he liked to pretend he arranged it every day. (27)

Similarly, he imagines himself constructing the human world:

The steel town of Harenton looked close enough to touch. He reached for it and pushed and shoved pieces of the town together until he had it just right. He smoothed out the stacks of the steel mill, sweeping them clean of dust and run-off gases. He placed boats in the river. (27-28)

"Now," he said softly, "you're looking good" (28). This powerful image early in the novel introduces us to M. C. and helps us to understand his innocent world view: He is great, and he can do, he believes, almost anything.

At the end of the novel Hamilton balances these open-armed images with contrasting images that symbolize the changes in her hero. Mirroring his initial act of creation from his steel perch, she pictures his last pole ride as an imagined act of destruction born of his frustration with the events of the past three days:

High up in the air, he swung his pole in the sweeping arc. He thrust the knife at forming clouds. The fog was lifting far off on the Ohio. So M. C. stabbed the river and cut it in two. He sliced the chimneys of the steel mill, barely visible. And he cried out once as his pole swayed and swooped, chopping up the mist shrouded town of Harenton. (267)

The image of the shroud suggests the death of a world M. C. once created so effortlessly. In the opening of the novel, he had circumscribed a world in the gentle arcs of the pole. Now with a cry of anguish, he hacks it to death. He descends the pole, and the first image of the novel, M. C.'s open-armed greeting of the dawn, is now mirrored in his closed-arm attack on the spoil heap. We see him "with both hands clamped tightly around the knife handle, plunging the blade into the soil. Shaking, raging with ever more forceful jabs, he stabbed the earth" (268).

Paradoxically, this stabbing is an act of creation as M. C. builds a wall to protect his family and his home should the spoil heap come crashing down the side of Sarah's Mountain.

How, then, do we read these carefully structured events as something more than a "container" for the action? We must see them, as Brooks and Warren indicate, as they function in the totality of the artistic creation.

Plot Structure

In terms of its relationship to character and theme, plot designates "the string of events thought of as different from the persons involved in the events and different from the meaning of the events" (Brooks and Warren 77); the theorists' italicized words indicate that these elements cannot be separated in the act of reading. Brooks and Warren distinguish between plot and action, defining plot as "the structure of an action presented in a piece of fiction" (77) and action as a series of connected events

that move through the logical stages of beginning, middle, and end (78). These stages create a dynamic unity in which change occurs or, as they put it, "no change, no story" (80).

Brooks and Warren use the familiar terms of dramatic structure to explain how change occurs. An exposition opens up a story, often locating its characters in a setting characterized by stability. Complications develop through conflict which creates instability and moves the story toward its climax, the point of highest tension. From this point, the story's tensions resolve in the unraveling of the plot, the denouement, as a new stability is created in the world of the work. Proportion in these narrative movements, Brooks and Warren point out, is not mechanical but depends on the materials of the story (78-82).

This last idea is crucial to a reading of *M. C. Higgins, the Great*. Although the work is brilliantly complex, little action occurs outside the routine events of family life. Within the goings and comings of Jones and Banina, the strangers arrive and depart, and M. C., forever changed by his encounters with them, formulates the "perfect idea" on which he acts at the end of the story. The movement from exposition to climax covers most of the novel because M. C.'s final action, for its effectiveness, comes as a surprise, a mild shock to the reader. M. C.'s choice about staying or leaving is central to his story, and as Brooks and Warren point out in reference to the ending to Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery": "The shock is the point. If we were to spin out the denouement, we should lose the sense of shock" (83).

M. C.'s decision to stay on Sarah's Mountain rounds out the structure of the novel and brings stability, however short-lived we may imagine it to be.

Chapters 1-6 cover the first day of the novel. The exposition begins at dawn as M. C. rises and meets his friend Ben Killburn to check the rabbit traps that M. C. has set. Ben tells him about the man with the tape recorder, and M. C. stalks a mysterious young woman. As M. C. babysits his siblings, he meets James K. Lewis, and a complication emerges as M. C. dreams of Banina's musical stardom. At lunch he tells a disinterested Jones about "the Dude," and near sunset he stalks and wounds the young woman in a scuffle. In the evening when Lewis returns to record Banina's voice, conflict arises between Jones and Lewis. In his nightmares, M. C.'s unconscious reveals a similar conflict between him and Jones.

Chapters 7-13 chronicle the events of the second day, which opens with M. C.'s predawn swim with Banina, followed by his meeting with Lurhetta who complicates the conflicts in his life by boldly challenging his authority and his strength. At lunchtime she meets Jones and later experiences the Higgins' fear of the Killburns, which, in the afternoon, prompts her to challenge M. C. to accompany her to Killburn's Mound. Despite the peacefulness and the beauty of the world he sees there, M. C. flees in fear, leaving Lurhetta behind. At twilight Lewis returns with the tape of Banina's voice and then leaves, resolving one conflict as he dashes M. C.'s dreams of her stardom. As a storm brews, he dreams of himself finding Lurhetta and happiness.

Chapter 14 is devoted to the final day of the novel in which M. C. learns that Lurhetta has gone, another conflict resolved. The climax of the novel occurs as he forms the "perfect idea" of building the wall, resolving the conflict with his father, casting his lot with family and history. He begins building the wall with the help of his siblings as, late in the day, the novel ends.

Character

Brooks and Warren tell us that plot is "character in action" (80). This disarmingly simple statement about the interpenetration of character and plot provides an excellent point of entry into the study of character in *M. C. Higgins, the Great*. The simplicity of the novel's plot is complemented by the complexity of its characters' interactions in the intricate web of juxtapositions through which Hamilton presents M. C.'s internal conflict.

In the broadest sense, characters in fiction may be presented by what they do, say, and think. This is an oversimplification, of course, of the technicalities of narration and point of view through which the author creates the world of the work. Points of view are well-known to us in their range of possibilities, including the omniscient narrator, the first-person-participant narrator, the multiple voices of other characters, and the interior monologue. Hamilton reveals the conflicts in her novel by a combination of methods, including the omniscient narrator, but the most

powerful impact of the language of the novel results from her use of dialogue as other characters move through M. C.'s world.

The novel operates as a series of character juxtapositions, the total effect being an accumulation of perspectives, world views, from which M. C. makes the most important decision of his life. In the fourteen chapters of the novel, Hamilton weaves characters in and out of M. C.'s experience like this:

1. M. C. (and Ben Killburn)
2. James K. Lewis
3. Jones Higgins
4. Jones and Banina
5. Lurhetta Outlaw
6. James K. Lewis
7. Banina and Lurhetta
8. Lurhetta
9. Lurhetta and Jones
10. Lurhetta, Jones, Killburns
11. Lurhetta, Killburns
12. Killburns
13. Lewis and Jones
14. M. C. (and his family)

The conflicts emerging through these encounters and the images associated with the major characters accumulate to create the themes of the novel. Fictional characters experience three basic kinds of conflict: (1) with external forces; (2) with other characters; (3) within themselves (Brooks and Warren 172). *M. C. Higgins, the Great* illustrates all three kinds of conflict.

Theme

In defining theme Brooks and Warren begin simply by observing that the theme is "what a piece of fiction stacks up to" (273). They elaborate on this definition by explaining how plot, character, and theme interpenetrate in the totality of the fictional world. As "the characters act and are acted upon, as one event leads to another, we become more and more aware of the significance of the whole. That is, we gradually sense a developing theme" (274). Theme need not be literally expressed in a work. Rather, events or situations may "act as metaphors for a state of mind" or a narrative theme might evolve as a "metaphorical image of a psychological process" (Robey, "Anglo-American" 85). This last case is true in *M. C. Higgins, the Great*, where Hamilton creates an increasingly complex web of images and balancing structures to define the theme of M. C.'s coming-of-age.

Close Reading

Formalists practiced their theory by reading short works through from start to finish, line by line, so that they could point out the unifying structures, images, and ideas of the work; a classic example of such an analysis is Cleanth Brooks' famous reading of Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" in *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*. Such a line by line reading is, of course, an impractical approach to a novel; an analogous method is to read chapter by chapter which is how I shall proceed in my analysis of the novel. This method best reveals the unity of the

novel, its "well-wrought" form, its "inextricable weaving" of plot, character, and theme.

Tracing the Weave

The First Day

Chapter 1: Exposition—In Eden with Ben

As I have already pointed out, in the first two chapters M. C. egocentrically locates himself in the natural and human worlds. Chapter 1 sets in motion all of the critical structures of the novel's unity.

It quickly introduces us to Ben Killburn, and although he reappears throughout the novel, he does not play a major role in the action. Instead, Hamilton seems to portray him as a function of M. C.'s personality, a spiritual dimension: M. C. "admired Ben because he was witchy" (9), and he assumes some of Ben's powers as his own: "He's my spirit, M. C. thought. He can see me and everything around me and the path, too. Good old spirit" (17). In the novel M. C. has extraordinary visions, dreams, and nightmares; ironically, we might consider him "witchy" in his imaginative powers, and Hamilton is careful to establish a metaphoric link between the two characters as she describes "Ben's voice light on the air, as if it had spoken within M. C.'s mind" (18). Later in the novel the voices of Jones and Lurhetta also speak inside M. C.'s mind. This initial spiritual connection is critical to the changes

which occur in M. C. because at first he identifies himself almost completely with the physical world, but through his interactions with other characters he learns about the role that abstractions and spiritual matters play in human life.

Ben is M. C.'s hunting companion, and the image of the hunt, firmly established in Chapter 1, is woven throughout the novel. M. C. considers himself a fine trapper, and his first action of the day is to check his rabbit traps. One of the central paradoxes of the novel is that as the days pass, M. C. comes to realize that he, the great hunter, is also the hunted.

Chapter 1 introduces the two strangers in the novel, preparing us for the relationships M. C. will develop with Lewis and Lurhetta. Although M. C. has heard several days before about the black man with the tape recorder and has begun his dream that "Dude going to make Mama a star singer" (3), he and Ben discuss the appearance of the stranger. Ben voices the central conflict between M. C. and Jones: "Is your daddy going to want to leave that mountain?" (15). He also shares M. C.'s first encounter with Lurhetta on Sarah's High Path. She appears only briefly, carrying a bundle; like hunters, they stalk her, but she disappears.

After Ben leaves, M. C. goes home where Hamilton introduces us to two of the most powerful symbols in the novel. The first is the spoil heap, the symbol of M. C.'s fear and the subject of his nightmares, "something like an enormous black boil of uprooted trees and earth plastered together by rain" that some "internal balance" keeps "hanging suspended on the mountainside" in a "half-congealed spoil heap bigger

than M. C.'s house" (22). The second is his greatest source of joy, "his shining beacon" (22), his prize pole.

The conflict between staying and leaving the mountain enters the novel in two images of "transportation." The pole represents M. C.'s freedom, "the best kind of ride" (23). M. C.'s ability to ride results from his father having planted the pole in the middle of a pile of junk in the front yard, but the pile is symbolic, a collection of "automobile tires, fenders, car bodies" that Jones has formerly dragged up the mountainside. In the image of the pole and its anchor, Hamilton juxtaposes two dreams. Jones, we discover, "had long since forgotten about putting together a working car" (23). Ironically the car heap allows M. C. to enjoy his carefree ride. A major surprise comes at the end of the novel as the remnants of Jones' neglected dream help construct M. C.'s "ride" toward adulthood.

Chapter 2: The Dream and the Dude

James K. Lewis comes from Cleveland to tape record and preserve the authentic songs of the Ohio mountain people. When he enters the novel in Chapter 2, he brings a perspective to Sarah's Mountain that begins to destroy M. C.'s confident sense of his location in the world and that also emphasizes the most important external conflict in the novel. As they stand atop the Mountain and M. C. proudly tells Lewis the origin of its name, Lewis counters that it should be renamed "the Awful Divide" (36), dichotomizing the world into land that strip mining has destroyed and land that remains untouched. M. C. does not understand the full import of the

newcomer's words. Gazing into the distance he sees hills that look "as if some gray brown snake had curled itself along their ridges." Mining cuts, these snake loops form a gigantic gash across the Mountain, but this does not frighten M. C.: It has "no plunge and roar of menace" (39). In an important balance of images, snakes will reenter the novel as M. C. visits the Killburns.

When Lewis predicts that the spoil heap at the top of the mountain may slide down, M. C.'s innocence is evident in his childlike responses: "But we'll just get out of its way" (40). Waves of fear wash over him, though, when Lewis continues, warning that the spoil heap is continuously sliding on its own seepage, that it could eventually come crashing down, destroying everything in its path. His prediction recalls an old fear that M. C. has forgotten; in his nightmares he has seen the heap tumbling: "Over and over again, it buried his family on the side of the mountain" (13). M. C.'s response to Lewis symbolizes his inability to act at this point in the novel: He climbs the pole and pedals wildly, an action that appears to be dynamic but that is paradoxically static.

Lewis further complicates M. C.'s vision of life beyond the mountains by telling him about the fate of hill people who have tried unsuccessfully to move to Cleveland but who, failing, have been left to "roam the interstates forever, growing their gardens on the shoulders of the road" (46-47). M. C. is not ready to accept this vision of urban nomads or even to consider the possibility that his family might fall victim to such a fate. This new knowledge locates M. C. in a different context; one

side of the world is being destroyed by strip mining, while, on the other side, cities and interstates have the power to destroy families, to make them rootless.

Chapter 3: Complication—Father and Son

Four scenes in Chapter 3 open up the father/son relationship and demonstrate the power of dialogue in the creation of character: (1) a conversation that M. C. recalls having with his father about strip mining and working at the steel mill; (2) a sparring match just after Jones arrives home for lunch; (3) M. C.'s apocalyptic vision; (4) a concluding conversation about Banina's singing and James K. Lewis. The balance of conversations in this chapter's structure represents in miniature the balance in the novels' total structure.

Scene 1. Waiting atop the pole for his father and the children to come home for lunch, M. C. recollects a conversation with Jones. In a delicate balancing of images in which both characters are riding, Jones pedals a bicycle home through the foothills of Sarah's Mountain and M. C. rides through the air on the wide arc of his gleaming pole. The images symbolize their relationship at this point in the novel: Jones the realist is firmly attached to the earth, and M. C. the dreamer rides a gentle arc across the sky.

Printed in italics to distinguish it from the present moment, the conversation focuses on Jones's position as a day laborer at the mill; his future is limited because he does not belong to the union. Were he to have union membership and a crane, he explains. "*I'll be the a best in the open hearth*" (55). M. C.'s solution to this

dilemma is ironically simple: "*So why don't you get a strip-mining machine? They don't care if you day labor or if you are union.*" When he informs Jones that strip mining machines are no different from cranes, his father replies: *They a heathen. A destroyer. They ain't machines*" (56). This is our first indication in the novel of Jones's attitude toward the destruction of the world his grandmother Sarah has founded and of the sharply conflicting world views of father and son.

Scene 2. The tension of language in this remembered conversation carries over into a sparring match when Jones gets home, a match which begins innocently as play but that develops into a contest of strength. M.C, trying to best his father, realizes that "Now their was tension between them and he hated to admit that his father was still the stronger." After the match, Jones reminds M. C. that he is still a child, telling him that "sometimes you do take too much on yourself" and "you get to thinking because you can swim and because of that pole, you are some M. C. Higgins, the Great" (63). This title, lightheartedly bestowed here, takes on additional meanings as the novel moves forward.

Scene 3. In the third event of this chapter Hamilton moves the conflict from the physical world back into the mental world, shifting the action into M. C.'s mind. He feels ambivalent about his father: "And yet he felt a sullen anger at his father and an abiding admiration at the same time, he didn't know why." "Knowing why" becomes necessary for M. C.'s transformation as the novel progresses. An imaginary dialogue completes this section and points to the coming-of-age theme: "What will I be, at his

age? M. C. wondered? Be on this mountain, his mind spoke for Jones. No, M. C. thought" (64).

Hamilton elaborates this theme in the next sequence of the chapter. M. C. goes into his room, a dark, cool, windowless cave dug out of the side of Sarah's Mountain. Ironically the mountain is not only in him through his historical connection to Sarah, but in the cave he is also literally in the mountain. He falls into a reverie in which he hears "deep in his mind, a wild creature's roar." The imagery of the physical hunt in the first chapter is transformed into a psychological hunt that symbolizes the most important conflict in the novel—M. C.'s internal conflict about leaving Sarah's Mountain and his father's desire to stay there. In the reverie he sees himself as a hunter, a man-child "not quite old enough for the silence and the darkness," and, although tracking, "not yet brave enough for the feel of the tall, black trees behind his back" (66). His imagination transforms him into both hunter and hunted:

Or was he the image, waiting for another part of himself to reach it? He tried to move toward it when a numbing cold rose around his ankles. It climbed to his knees and then his neck. His leg muscles jumped, but he could not run. He was rooted to the mountainside as the sour and bitter mud of the spoil oozed into his mouth and nostrils. As the last moment before he suffered and died, he knew he was not outside. He was still in his cave, his fingers on the buttons of his shirt. (66)

The imagery of paralysis suggests M. C.'s suspension between past and future, and the root image suggests his organic connection to the land. Perhaps the most important image is the balance of inside/outside, a figure of the competition in M.

C.'s mind between the secure world inside his family and the outside world that threatens it.

Scene 4. A final conversation concludes this important chapter, structurally balancing the recollected conversation which opened it. The topics of conversation are also balanced: Jones's subject in the remembered talk was his own future, and now he presents a realistic picture of Banina's future that counters M. C.'s childish dream of her instant stardom. His explanation continues the inside/outside imagery of M. C.'s apocalyptic vision. Jones explains that the family will not have to leave the mountain, that Banina can catch the bus to Nashville where records are made, and that her fame will probably not be instantaneous: "'She's a stone singer right now,' Jones said, 'but it'll take a little time for her star to rise'" (68). Stunned, and "unable to fathom his father or to think what to do" (69), M. C. frames the most important question in his life: "Makes no sense to stay. We have to leave. He can't say no—can he?" (70). The irony of his question is that leaving is not simply a matter of Jones's acquiescence nor of Lewis's recording. The yes/no quality of M. C.'s thinking dichotomizes and oversimplifies a complex state of affairs which in his innocence he cannot understand.

Chapter 4: Complication—The Problem of History

The narrative movement through conversation continues in Chapter 4 and increases the tension between father and son as they talk about the central issues of the novel—the importance of the mountain, the destruction resulting from strip

mining, and the preservation of family history. It forms the second half of a structural unit with Chapter 3, ending in memory and bringing the action of the two chapters full circle.

M. C.'s ambivalence towards Jones continues; he "could feel himself inside, reaching out for his father and taking him in," while at the same time wishing "his father wouldn't always have to teach him" (74). When M. C. expresses his fear of a landslide that will destroy them all, his father wonders if M. C. has second sight, a manifestation of M. C.'s magical powers which his father ironically does not associate with the witchiness of the Killburns whom he fears. He asks M. C. what he sees in his vision of Sarah's Mountain. In an epiphanous moment in which the mist preceding a coming rain veils the Mountain M. C. sees the spoil heap, "just hanging on up there. It'll rain again and it'll grow like its alive" (76). In contrast to M. C.'s ominous image, Jones speaks intimately of Sarah's Mountain: "It's a feeling, Jones said. "Like, to think a solid piece of something big belongs to you. To your father, and his, too. . . . And you to it, for a long kind of time" (77). Jones tells the proud story of Sarah's arrival, pregnant with his granddaddy and singing a song. In this image Banina's song connects to Sarah across history, links present and past.

In a critical moment that foreshadows the resolution of the father/son tensions, Jones circumscribes M. C. in history. He chants a fragment of an African song, "*O bola, Coo-pa-yani, Si na-ma-gamma, O deh-kah-no.*" The family tradition, he explains, is to "Sing it always to the sons. One son to another, down the line" (78).

History lives, he continues, describing how he can, in the heat of the day, "hear Sarah a-laboring up the mountain, the baby, whimpering." His vision is song-like in its rhythm: "She say, 'Shhh! Shhh!' like a breeze. But no breeze, no movement. It's only Sarah, as of old" (79). M. C. reveals that sometimes "up on my pole, all of a sudden, I know she is coming"; the image frightens him, but Jones offers comforts: "Don't you be afraid For she is not show you a vision of her. No ghost. She climbs eternal. Just to remind us that she hold claim to me and to you and each one of us on her mountain" (79). Repeating the African song, Jones casts the mantle of preservation on M. C.: "But you are the one responsible" (80). In an image that will recur later, M. C. can feel "the rope within that bound him to the mountain. It was always there, like a pressure on his mind" (80). Jones ends the conversation with a song of courting as he departs to meet Banina on her way home.

Three visions enter M. C.'s thoughts, represent his internal conflicts, and create structural balances. In the first, he unconsciously rewrites history, seeing Great-great-grandmother Sarah "running swiftly, carrying something. She tripped and fell. Something splattered bloody on the ground" (83). This vision suggests his wish to be free of the burden of history which his father has placed on him. It also links past, present, and future in the image of the bundle; like Sarah, Lurhetta is carrying a bundle when M. C. first sees her. The second vision balances his apocalyptic image in Chapter 3, but this time he sees Jones, not himself, trapped in the spoil "with mud oozing into his ears." Again, this may be an unconscious wish to remove the obstacles

which threaten his dream of freedom. Music weaves through these visions and suggests the novel's theme of maturation:

Woven through his thoughts was the sound of Jones singing of courting. M. C. tried humming to himself, but he couldn't get rid of the sound. Nothing, not even his pole, could keep away the sad feeling, the lonesome blues of being grown, the way either his mother or his father could with their singing (83-84).

Jones and Banina sing a song of intimacy, of adult experience beyond their son's comprehension.

In the third vision M. C.'s memory wipes out these tensions as he counters his parents' blues with a happy birthday song. He remembers another day when his mother returned home from work with a birthday present for him. In that memory he replaces Jones as head of the family and becomes "the strutting leader of the parade," leading his whole family home, "away from the darkness that had encircled them" (88). This is his unconscious dream, to lead the whole family out of the mountains and the dark future promised in the sliding spoil heap.

Chapter 5: Complication—Lurhetta Outlaw

The courting song serves as a structural link to Lurhetta Outlaw's second appearance in the novel. Chapter 5 introduces the theme of young romance through the development of the imagery of the hunt. Waiting for his family to come home, M. C. has an uncanny premonition about Lurhetta: "Although she was invisible, he could feel her slight form change and charge the space around him." This recalls his earlier intuitive links to Ben (Chapter 1) and to Jones (Chapter 3). He imagines

himself getting near to her "Like stalking on a hunt" (91). Spirit-like, Ben comes out of the woods, and together they pursue a glint of light in the distance.

Hamilton handles M. C.'s first encounter with romance subtly. The hunt imagery that pervades the novel now appears in language reminiscent of a Renaissance sonnet: "He had lured her, like a deer, caught by a delicious scent. Has to be her, he thought. And he had to meet her. Is it a hunt?" (98). M. C.'s language suggests a paradox: When is a hunt not a hunt? It also implies the difference between metaphor and reality. Suddenly M. C.'s visionary powers disappear as darkness blinds him, and the paradox continues as he becomes at once hunter and hunted; he senses "that darkness was itself a hunter and had turned on him" (98). The language suggests the gaming metaphor of Renaissance love sonnets: "I forget. Some of them know how to lure you, too. She not any kind of deer" (99). Hamilton complicates the scene with another layer of metaphor; in a play on the cliché "Love is blind," Lurhetta's powerful flashlight literally blinds M. C. This creates another paradox: He is blinded by both darkness and light. As he falls to the ground, he struggles with the girl. Quickly grasping the situation ("She was no deer" 102), he steps into the sonnet metaphor and kisses her innocently. She responds with a kick. Stepping out of the metaphor he becomes the hunter of prey. After he wounds her cleanly with his knife, she flees. These intricately crafted images of blindness and light prefigure the illumination that M. C. experiences in the novel.

Ironically, although she initially blinds him, Lurhetta is the character who ultimately helps him to see himself, his world, and his place in it.

In the sobering ending for this chapter, M. C. encounters the powerful metaphoric light of his mother's knowledge as she complicates his idea of Jones by illuminating more family history. Since M. C.'s dream is to help her achieve the brilliant lights of stardom away from the Mountain, her words are ironic as she tells M. C. to stop bothering his father about leaving: "You don't understand all of it" (105). When she came to the mountains to live, she explains, she insisted that they have a yard, and Jones cleared away the family tombstones to make one, but he soon filled the space with junk, car parts. Although he has known that the yard was a burial ground, M. C. has not comprehended the significance of his pole until now when Banina asks, "Do you think that pole is just for you?" "It's all he has" (105). She continues: "The pole is the marker for all the dead." The metaphor of darkness and light continues: "Brightness flowed into his brain, as if someone had lit up a screen hidden so long in the darkness" (106). When he learns that Jones has hidden all the tombstones and that the prize pole is a monument, he once again expresses the conflict that links them: "He knew that to make Jones leave, he would have to wrench him from the past. How? he wondered. How?" (107). In terms of the interweaving of plot and character it is significant that Banina's first real language in the novel supports her husband's historical world view and not M. C.'s romantic one.

Chapter 6: Complication—The Taping and the Dream

Hamilton continues to develop the theme of innocence and experience as Lewis returns to tape record Banina's singing. M. C. fails to perceive the larger picture of his life, to understand that his vision of Banina's stardom is not realistic. In an important moment which M. C. does not register, Lewis makes it clear that he has no plans for Banina beyond taping her voice: "Mrs. Higgins, I'm just a collector. . . . I don't want you to ever think I come here to take away" (114). In his innocence M. C. fails to understand the intimacy of his parents' relationship and the maturity of their love, and he fails to perceive that they are happy with their lives. M. C. is so fascinated with the potential power of his mother's singing that he fails to notice the interweaving of his parents' voices. Banina is not the only singer; Jones actually begins the call-response from which Banina's wine song emerges. She follows with a Juba song, ghostly in its melody. As she continues to sing, the image of Jones, "his face contented and closed. Impenetrable" (118) foreshadows the resolution of the conflict between going and staying.

Conflict arises after the recording when Lewis predicts that the spoil heap will come crashing down: "Tension grew and touched each one of them in the room except Jones" (122). M. C. cannot fathom his father's apparent lack of concern for the danger Lewis prophesies, but he understands that Lewis has been summarily dismissed when Jones stands and replies "We'll rope it and drag it on out of the way" (122). His mother's "oddly detached" farewell leaves M. C. ambivalent again: "The

dude and his father both pulled him one way and then the other until he no longer knew what was true and what wasn't" (123).

The final image of the chapter powerfully represents both M. C.'s external and internal conflicts by combining the imagery of the hunt and the symbol of the rope. M. C. is asleep, "dreaming darkness. I'm running. One step ahead of Jones trying to rope him" (124). Again, M. C. is the hunted, not the hunter. This rope image recalls M. C.'s feeling that he is bound by rope to the mountain (80) and echoes his father's recent solution to the problem of the spoil heap (122). All three ropes contribute to the development of theme: We learn as we grow up that dreams are not always easily realized, that we are sometimes bound inextricably to our past and to our present circumstances. Sometimes leaving is not easy. Dreaming it will not make it so.

The Second Day

Chapter 7: A Romantic Interlude

Chapter 7 locates M. C. symbolically between the two most important women in his life. It develops the theme of romance, of first love, by situating him between his childhood fascination with his mother and a confrontation with the difficulties of romantic infatuation.

Banina. The episode is colored with the magic of romance as Banina awakens M. C. to join her in a predawn swim. The whole section is cast as an idyll in which

M. C. and Banina represent fair youth and maiden in the magical world of a forest Eden. This may be the symbolic working out of M. C.'s desire to be his mother's saviour, her consort, to replace Jones in his responsibility for Banina's happiness and the family's safety. Ironically they leave the house in a "false dawn" when it is neither night nor day, and the entire episode has the unreality of mystical romance about it.

Their journey through the forest seems fantastical, set in an eerie fairy tale world where "trees and undergrowth appeared changed and ghostly." They flush out a doe who springs up "amidst the trees like a wind-up toy, swift and magical" (127). In the misty gray atmosphere of the woods, "Grey Mountain and Hall Mountain came into view like swollen, smoky giants" (128), and when they stop to rest, Banina and M. C. "sat as still as forms carved from mountain wind and icy rain" (129). In the mystery of this predawn world Banina warns M. C. to stay away from the Killburns and their magical powers. Ironically, this scene prefigures M. C.'s visit to the fairyland of Killburn Mound.

When the magical scene gives way to daylight, Banina offers wise advice that recalls her earlier words to M. C.: "Don't dream too hard." She juxtaposes his dreams with a harsh reality: "You live wide awake, or you quit living." When M. C. asks her to whom "you" refers, she replies with a vision of unity: "All. All together. All part. But all." He understands "that she had gone beyond him to know something he hadn't yet come to know" (133). This is a vision of family unity that

experience has not yet taught him to grasp, but it is a vision that his father understands.

Lurhetta. M. C.'s third encounter with Lurhetta sets the second half of the novel in motion. After their nighttime scuffle, she has pitched her tent on the shore of the lake where M. C. and Banina come to swim. When Banina leaves for work, M. C. feels a mysterious link to Lurhetta: "He could feel her waking most certainly in his mind as she did in her tent" (139). This awakening is symbolic, a structural balance in the novel. His mother has literally awakened him before dawn, and this metaphoric awakening of Lurhetta in his mind foreshadows the changes that she will bring in his thinking. He is, at this moment, suspended between mother and girl as he is also suspended between childhood and manhood.

In terms of the structural unity of the narrative, Lurhetta emerges from her tent at the very center of the novel's fourteen chapters, and in a continuation of the imagery of darkness and light, she emerges miraculously in sunlight shimmering off the lake: "(S)he looked like a figure living in darkness. Some premonition, dream, he hadn't even thought to have. Bright flashes cut into his eyes as he looked at her, distorting his vision. She seemed to be standing in a halo of shadow." (141) The language of this passage illustrates the intricacies of Hamilton's plotting and her use of unifying imagery. Lurhetta emerges from a darkness as M. C. emerges from his failure to comprehend the complexities of the world. So much of his world is made up of premonition, dream, and thought. Metaphorically he cannot see, and the

novel's bright flashes of experience distort his vision. Now, at the very center of the novel, he too stands metaphorically in the mysteries of shadow as created by Lurhetta's halo of illuminating light. M. C. introduces himself with the title his father has given him: "They call me M. C. Higgins, the Great" (141). Lurhetta at once challenges his concept of "greatness."

Chapters 8-9: Complications: Lurhetta

In these chapters Lurhetta introduces M. C. to other ways of looking at the world, and she challenges his self concept.

Feeling inferior because "she had come from somewhere by herself in a car" (153), he brags that he can swim through a water tunnel. When she challenges him to take her through the tunnel, he fails to ask if she can swim, and the episode nearly ends in tragedy (Chapter 9). When they are "back in the world together" (163), M. C. glosses over the potential danger to which he has exposed her with a romantic vision of their future happiness: "Day after day, they swam the lake. Hour upon hour, they sunned themselves on the shore" (164).

As the novel progresses, M. C. begins to define himself beyond his simple role as acrobat, hunter, swimmer, and baby-sitter. At the foot of Sarah's Mountain, Lurhetta asks who owns the land, to which M. C. ironically replies that his family owns it: "It's always handed down to the oldest son," M. C. told her. "My oldest son will take it from me" (178). Perhaps yet unaware of the symbolic nature of his

words, he is beginning to define himself as a crucial actor in the drama of his family's history.

Lurhetta's challenges overwhelm M. C., and Hamilton symbolically indicates the conflict between his romantic world view and his emerging sense of responsibility to history. A sudden headache functions as metaphor. She dichotomizes M. C.'s thinking as he is "overcome with the power of two separate thoughts," that create "the worst kind of mournful feeling":

It was as if his head contained two minds. The one knew they would never leave the mountain. The other knew they had to leave. At any time he could think of one and forget the other. Or think of both and be stopped, torn with not knowing what to believe. (179)

"Knowing what to believe" is one of the problems confronting M. C. Higgins, and Lurhetta's appearance and departure will move him toward a solution.

Chapters 10-12: Complications: The Killburns

Lurhetta forces M. C. into the Killburns' world. Although Ben is secretly M. C.'s best friend, the Higginases fear their alleged strangeness, their intermarriages, their light skin, and their red hair. Like Lurhetta, the Killburns are, in a sense, outlaws. With their supernatural powers, they are not subject, so their neighbors think, to the laws of nature. When three Killburn men come to bring ice to the Higgins (Chapter 10), Lurhetta's interest in them is piqued by Jones's inordinate fear, by his rudeness to them, and by M. C.'s fear that he has been contaminated by the touch of Mr. Killburn's six-fingered hand.

As the Killburns sing outside the house, "Ah'm hot an' ah'm a-co-old . . . Ah'm a snowbody, Ah'm a snowbody" (190), M. C. remembers the lesson that his father has taught him about what to do when he meets a Killburn on the mountain path.

Jones' language is a brilliant example of the power of the imagination:

'Listen and learn it. . . . You can be stalking. Hear a sound. You look to see but there's nothing. Turn back, and he's there on the path blocking you. Don't try to pass him by, for he knowing where you be before you know, and knowing what you will do. He, with skin so fair, he is near white. But hair is always thick and tight so you can tell, and almost always red. Them gray eyes, cold. And even if he do smile pleasant, they stay cold. Don't you turn away, but back down the path the way you came. For he is merino. Or witchy, as folks here always know him. . . '. (190-91)

M. C. feels ambivalent about the Killburns: "Part of him believed and part disbelieved" (195). When Lurhetta challenges him to take her to their compound, he feels change sweeping over him. She has, he thinks, "seen everything. She, the difference." Chapter 10 ends with his registration of his own change: "He knew he would never be the same" (199).

Chapters 11 and 12 detail their afternoon visit to the Killburn's Mound and set the Killburn world symbolically against the world that M. C. knows. The place seems to be located out of time; even the shiny, smooth footpath by which they approach the Mound "existed in neither the past or the present. So that walking on it now, they were neither here nor there, but perhaps heading somewhere toward some unknown future" (210). This language locates M. C. in the past-present-future frame of the novel as well as between the known world and the unknown world.

Everything about the place seems to be symbolic. At first they encounter a hoop snake which Ben swirls around in the air, later explaining that his father handles snakes affectionately. These literal snakes balance the metaphoric snake gashes that strip mining has cut into the top of Sarah's Mountain. These real snakes live in harmony in the magical pre-Fall Eden of the Killburn world in contrast to the disharmony of the hellish world of destruction on Sarah's Mountain.

M. C. and Lurhetta find a magical world in the Killburn compound, an "enclosure of chocolate and silver sheds and barns" that take on "the appearance of a fairyland." This is a world "carved out of dark soil and bold, blue sky" that looks "unearthly all of a sudden, and slightly sinister" (214). The enclosure is a cultivated garden, and as M. C. watches, he falls into a reverie. While he dreams, people continue to talk, and he translates that sound into figures: "Like an internal clock ticking off loneliness of his dreaming, or the staccato of a time bomb set to go off" (217). This pair of images symbolizes his internal turmoil, the clock ticking off the end of childhood dreams, the bomb a symbol of the festering boil perched precariously at the top of Sarah's Mountain.

The central image of the Killburn world is an image of unity, a giant web, that links all the houses and enables the Killburn children to swing from row to row to harvest the vegetables that cover the earth. In contrast to the Higgins children who seem to spend all their time at play, the Killburn children are productive members of their world. Ben's ninety-six-year-old grandmother sits at the center of the

compound, a point of structural balance. Like M. C.'s Sarah, she exists in the ever-present truth of mythology. When asked where she came from, Ben replies, "She say she don't know, she was always here" (221).

The climax of this brilliant journey comes when Mr. Killburn offers a philosophy of life that reveals the complexity of his thinking and provides a unified vision of the world. Mr. Killburn's philosophy is an organic philosophy of being. Even the smallest children, he explains, "understand that vegetables is part of the human form": "Piece of the body you pull up by the root, Or piece that you cut away when it get the blight. Or heal it, depending on how bad it is. . . . Or eat it, its still body.'" This root image contrasts to M. C.'s feeling that he is rooted inextricably in the mountain. Mr. Killburn extends his imagery to the larger world: "Just like soil is body. Stream. Mountain is body. . . . We don't own nothing of it. We just caretakers, here to be of service.'" Finally, in a brilliant image, he includes humans in his world view: "And the truth is, we are a body just wiggling and jiggling in and out of the light'" (229). Mr. Killburn describes the dance of life as well as M. C.'s predicament in the novel, his vacillating thinking, his frenetic movements in darkness and light.

Philosophizing over, Mr. Killburn takes M. C. and Lurhetta to see the storehouse; when Lurhetta refers to the rope design above them as a spider web, he tells her that it is "a eye" that is "Better than any old eye. Bigger. A eye of Gawd" (230). The woven ceiling is literally a form of basket weaving known as a God's eye

pattern, but Mr. Killburn's description suggests the metaphysical nature of his conception of humans as watched over benevolently by a higher being. This image negates the Higgins' fear of the malevolence of the Killburn's witchiness, and in an elegant balancing of images, the rope which threatens M. C. in his dreams becomes the unifying cord of the Killburns' world view.

Fear gradually overtakes M. C., and leaving Lurhetta behind, he flees in a panic of ambivalence: "What he had just seen and what he had known for so long about Killburns mixed in disorder in his mind" (238). In a symbolic concluding image to the chapter we see "M. C., alone" (239).

Chapter 13: Resolution—Lewis the Last Time

When Lewis returns for his final visit to the Higgins house, it is only to give them a copy of the tape; when he departs, M. C.'s dream dies as "everything seemed to sink and perish inside" of him. Lewis tells him honestly, "I can't sell your mother's voice," and "Son, she wouldn't fit on a stage" (247). In a stroke of bitter irony Lewis tells M. C. that he continues his father's work in making the recordings: "I don't really know why. Just that I must, like my father before me." M. C.'s fate, it seems, will be to preserve the history of Sarah's Mountain, like his father before him.

Father and son are further linked in parallel action. When Lewis accuses Jones of ignorance in his stubborn clinging to Sarah's Mountain, M. C. angrily defends his father: "He's been here for . . . for . . . generations! And you been here but two

days." In an act that balances Jones' first dismissal of Lewis from the house, M. C. sends the folklorist away for good: "We won't be looking for you to come back. Ever" (248).

The Third Day

Chapter 14: Resolutions—Lurhetta, Jones, M. C.

Once the dream of freedom on the wings of his mother's song is dead, M. C. hopes that Lurhetta will return and that he will escape to her world: "Go where she lives. Maybe get a job like she has" (249). His difficulty is that he looks to others for his vision of freedom, and he cannot yet act on his own thinking, cannot commit himself to an action for which he must assume responsibility and accept the consequences.

After supper M. C. realizes that Lurhetta will not come, and an approaching storm heightens his fear for her and for his family. It also serves dramatically to foreshadow his most important action in the novel. He senses his family in the danger: "They were suspended and made fearful on the side of the mountain" (254). As he falls into a fitful sleep, his imagination tries to work out resolutions to his conflicts.

In two romantic visions M. C. sees himself running to the lake after the storm and finding Lurhetta waiting there for him, but when he awakens and goes out into the early morning, fog obscures his vision, a contrast to the bright dawn of the

novel's first day. Walking to Lurhetta's camp, he fuses present, past, and future in images of the three most important women in his life:

How will she find her way to town? Thinking of his mother.
How will she find her way this far north? Thinking of Sarah.
She'd never find her way out of this without me. Lurhetta.
(263)

Arriving at the lake, he discovers that Lurhetta has disappeared, leaving him her hunting knife. In the darkest vision of the novel he balances life and death as he thinks about "the way he would hunt with it. How he could easily thrust it into his own heart" (264). The first image recalls his joy in the early morning trapping excursion with Ben three days ago. The second affirms the bitter awareness of the death of dreams and the potential for the hunter to become the ultimate hunted, to die at his own hand.

When M. C. returns home, he rides the pole for the last time in the novel, using the gleaming knife to slice open the world of Harenton, but he cannot stab to death the hills of his world: "He had no anger strong enough for murdering hills" as he realizes how this place is his very life's blood: "He could feel their rhythm like the pulse beat of his own blood rushing. If they faded never to return, would his pulse stop its beat as well?" (267). When he realizes this, he descends the pole and stabs the earth; he is bent on destruction. Then he gets "a perfect idea" (268). He begins to build a wall to protect his home should the spoil heap slide.

When Jones come home at noon, he realizes what M. C. is doing and contributes a broken-handled shovel to make the work easier. In their final confrontation he

offers advice on building the wall to which M. C. responds, "It's my idea," making his own declaration of independence, outlining his own future for the next summer: "I'll be working. And if Mr. Killburn can't pay me, I'll take his vegetables for pay" (272). Declaring "I play with anybody I want," he invites Ben to join him out of the shadows and poises ready to wound Jones should he try to stop Ben. Jones's final gesture in the novel is a tender one, symbolic, sacrificial. As if in affirmation of the greatness of M. C.'s idea, he gives his son Sarah's tombstone, long hidden under the porch. M. C. understands that the stone is a gift "to make the wall strong" (277). In the face of massing storm clouds, Jones goes off to find work, and M. C. bids farewell to his childhood: "Sarah, good-by" (277), then "Lurhetta, good-by," and finally, "Good-by, M. C., the Great." He starts to build his wall, supported by the past, to protect the future. He is not alone: "The children fed it. M. C. shoveled and Ben packed it" (278). Finally, M. C. is integrated into the world of the mountain as the wall rises. As he constructs it, he dismantles the junk heap of car parts that has kept the pole upright, that has allowed him to ride carefree on its wide arc. The wall's tombstones and car parts are M. C.'s new ticket to ride with his father into the future. It seals their bond in Sarah's legacy and in the African song that binds father to son.

On Balance

The Novel

In this richly complex novel, Hamilton, as I have demonstrated, achieves unity of plot, character, and theme through her multiple levels of balancing tensions in locations, events, characters, images, and symbols. At the largest level she suspends M. C. in the patterns of history, in past, present, and future, a tension he resolves, at least momentarily as he starts building the wall. She suspends him in geography as he catches glimpses of what life might be like beyond the mountains, in the urban landscape, as he dreams of following Lurhetta into another world; he resolves this tension, at least for the moment, by staying. She suspends him in the typography of the novel, Sarah's Mountain on the one side connected by a plateau to Killburn Mound on the other side. For a moment he steps inside the witchy world; his fears, if not resolved, are at least complicated by the experience.

M. C. also lives and acts in suspensions between characters who play a role in his transition from innocence to experience although he does not always have the power to resolve the tensions they represent. Jones and Lewis are the central figures, but he also sees the world from the viewpoints of Jones and Mr. Killburn as fathers and nurturers of life. Banina and Lurhetta represent motherhood and first love, and at the extremes Sarah and Lurhetta represent past and future.

The most important suspension in the novel occurs in M.C's mind as he struggles with the choices that experience seems to offer him, as his head aches in the confrontation of old knowledge and new knowledge. What he discovers is that independence exacts a great price, that identity forces us to make difficult choices. When we leave him building the wall, we realize that his "greatness" lies in his having forsaken the easy ride in order to help others survive in a dark and threatening world.

Formalism

Since its advent in the early decades of this century, what has been the effect of this way of reading on the study of literature? One effect is that the "habit of close reading" has become part of critical practice: "Few, if any contemporary approaches to literature can forego the careful reading of irony, paradox, ambiguity, and contradictions that New Critics offered as the sine qua non of literary study" (Childs 122). As other theories have emerged, they have shared some of the Formalists' perspectives. Both New Criticism and structuralism share an ahistoricity, locating meanings in the structures within a text, "denying, ignoring or de-emphasizing a poem's involvement in the ideological projects of its time and place" (Childs 122-23). New Criticism, poststructuralism, and deconstruction all share "a determination to expose the falseness of the calm often represented by the surface of the text," all are "alert to the play of literary language," and all are "happy to acknowledge the death

of the author." A fundamental difference exists however in the attitude that New Criticism and deconstruction take toward the centrality of language. New Critics' believe that we can rely on the meaning of words to support our one, correct reading; they believe that meaning is centered in words. In contrast, deconstructionists base their theory on the crucial idea that words are not centered, that meaning does not hold, that there is no correct reading (Childs 123). Part of New Criticism's legacy is that it has made possible the kinds of speculation and textual study that have become part of structuralism, reader-response, and deconstruction (Willingham 38).

Finally, Jonathan Culler contends that New Critical strategies have become such a part of different ways of reading that the kind of criticism generally practiced in universities could be called "normal criticism." Such criticism results from a kind of eclectic reading practice, one that produces interpretations which link imagery, authors, and literary history (*Framing* 13).

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CHAPTER FOUR

Paulsen as Poet: Music and Myth in *Dogsong*

When I read Gary Paulsen's *Dogsong* for the first time one brilliant, sunny June morning, I heard Homer singing. And Vergil. In Paulsen's pages I heard echoes of battles on the plains of Homer's Troy and of Vergil's sun-blanching Italy, but I was traveling in Russel Suskit's world, camping on the icy expanses of the arctic. As I read, reverberations of mighty Achilles destroying Hector and of destiny-driven Aeneas' defeat of Turnus gave way to a fourteen-year-old Eskimo boy's epic battle with the dark forces of nature and of self. Finally, I saw Russel, like Odysseus the wanderer, complete his journey, return home, and claim his identity as a man, triumphant over tests and trials.

Why was I reading this way? Why did Paulsen's novel recall those ancient stories which have always fascinated me? The answer is that I have been mythologically conditioned to hear those echoes, to trace the weave of ancient story and song in all literatures. This way of reading, known as archetypal criticism, is a consequence of our cultural inheritance of a "mythological universe":

Man lives, not directly or nakedly in nature like animals, but within a mythological universe, a body of assumptions and beliefs developed from his existential concerns. Most of it is held unconsciously, which means that our imaginations may recognize elements of it, when presented in art or literature, without consciously understanding what it is that we recognize. (Frye, *Code* xviii)

Below the level at which our cultural inheritance socially conditions us to hear these reverberations, a deeper psychological inheritance exists through which "forms of culture and imagination outside our own traditions" are also intelligible to us. One of the practical uses of archetypal criticism is that it enables a "conscious organizing of cultural tradition" that makes us "more aware of our mythological conditioning" (Frye, *Code* xviii). I shall read Paulsen's *Dogsong* within this archetypal framework, tracing through it the pattern of the ancient and enduring myth of the hero's journey.

I might easily read *Dogsong* from a formalistic perspective: Its structure traces a circular pattern (home-journey-home), and it is unified by both images and recurring rhetorical patterns. However, a formalistic reading with its movement inward would limit my analysis only to the structures inside the novel. An archetypal reading moves outward, locating the novel's structure within a larger cultural context. A metaphor helps clarify the relationship between Formalism and archetypal criticism as ways of reading. While Formalism "presents us with a close-up or portrait" of the text, archetypal criticism "lets us see the text in its family portrait or its genealogical tree" (Hardin 45-46). This metaphor explains why I heard Homer and Vergil singing in Paulsen's poetry: *Dogsong* reverberates with ancient stories about becoming a man, about life and death battles, about how a hero is transformed on a perilous journey from his home out into the world of the unknown.

Understanding the Archetypal Perspective

The two keywords for this way of reading are myth and archetype, and understanding the relationship between them is crucial to working with the theory. We are all familiar with the idea that myths are folktales or oral traditions through which prediscursive cultures express their world views, or, as we are told in elementary school, "Myths are primitive peoples' attempts to explain why things happen in nature." In this meaning of the word, the exaggerated and fantastic in myths leads to the conclusion that myths, as pre-scientific stories, are, therefore, not "true."

Another meaning of the word, however, sees myths as stories that are always true, stories that have specialized social functions in a culture, "stories that tell a society what is important for it to know, whether about its gods, its history, its laws, or its class structure." As a culture advances, certain myths become interconnected; taken together they create a mythology which then becomes a component in the creation of a cultural history (Frye, Code 33-34). In this second meaning of the term, then, myths are not simply direct responses to the natural environment. They also encircle a culture, drawing "a circumference around a human community," looking "inward toward that community" in such a way that the mythology becomes part of the "imaginative insulation" (37), a "social skin that marks the boundary between ourselves and the natural environment" (Frye 51).

What, then, is the relationship between the terms myth and archetype as we use them in this critical perspective? At the simplest level, we can say that certain images, characters, story patterns, and themes appear in the mythologies of all cultures and that these common elements allow us to think about the interconnectedness of these mythologies. While the details differ from culture to culture, these recurrences have similar significances the world over. The stories themselves, then, we call myths, and we refer to the universal significance these stories share as archetypes. In a familiar example, the fall from innocence is an archetype represented in Christian mythology as the Genesis story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. From this myth, the forbidden fruit has become an archetype of a precious—and denied—possession; the garden is the archetypal setting in which man and woman fall from their paradisiacal state and are consequently cast out into a troubled world, and the serpent, an agent of the fall, is the archetype of evil, dramatized in subsequent literatures as the dragon who is the keeper of the treasure. While other cultures tell different stories of the emergence of evil and of man's woeful state in the world, the concept of archetypes allows us to connect such stories through their common elements.

This interconnectedness is the basic principle of archetypal criticism. In hearing Homer sing in *Dogsong*, I was responding to this interconnectedness by recognizing the archetypal pattern of the quest-myth for the hero's fulfillment which is the central myth of all literature (Frye, "Archetypes" 18-19). Archetypal critics refer to this

quest myth as the monomyth, and this is the framework through which I will read *Dogsong*.

It is not my purpose here to delve deeply into the differences among various archetypal critics, but I need to clarify several points before I proceed. Perhaps the best known critics working within this framework are Northrop Frye and Joseph Campbell, who both agree that the quest myth is the monomyth of all literature but who focus their attentions on very different matters.

Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), attempted what had not been attempted before in literary criticism: a classification and categorization of the "body" of all literature. He found the unifying principle he needed in the recurring images and patterns of archetypes (Denham 159), but he defined archetypes as historical recurrences, so that the *Anatomy* classifies the body of criticism from this historical perspective. Frye disengaged his use of the term archetype from others working with the concept in other fields, most notably Claude Levi-Strauss in anthropology and Carl Jung in psychoanalysis (Makaryk 4). The Jungian archetype, Frye thought, was a private myth of individuation from ego to individual in relation to which literature was an allegory of the individuation process. Frye defined the archetype in the Platonic sense as an instrument of continuous creation, a "unit which repeats itself from one work of literature to another and helps to establish the continuity we bring to the process" ("Literary Theory in Classroom" 203-04). Frye's

primary work was categorization and classification rather than the analysis of specific texts, although some of his work does contain such analyses (Hardin 53-54).

Of particular interest to me in reading *Dogsong* is what Frye has to say about the relationship between myth criticism and fiction. When we read fiction, he says, we recognize two things: (1) the fidelity of the text to experience, not so much in the sense of lifelikeness as life-liveliness, and (2) the "recognition of the identity of the total design, into which we are initiated by the technical recognition in the plot" (Frye, "Myth" 29). Frye's first consideration is what critics refer to as verisimilitude. Having never explored the arctic or lived among Eskimos, I would be hard pressed to know if Paulsen has been true to the life he describes except that he has written that *Dogsong* was based on the fact that he had traveled 22,000 miles on sleds in the Arctic (Interview, Bartky 43). I know more about the "total design" because I have spent a good portion of my life enthralled by mythology and by the way things work, how they are put together. When we examine the total design of fiction in archetypal criticism, we isolate that part of the fiction which follows the conventions of other works of the same kind (Frye, "Myth" 34). In other words, we locate the fiction in a larger context which gives it "an immense reverberating dimension of significance," and in this reverberating significance "every literary work catches the echoes of all other works of its type in literature, and so ripples out into the rest of literature and thence into life" (Frye, "Myth" 37). Curious about the

location of *Dogsong* in larger mythic frameworks, I asked Gary Paulsen about this when I first met him in November 1994.

"Are you aware," I asked, "of the mythic undercurrent in *Dogsong*?"

After some reflection, Paulsen replied, "If it's there, it's in the people"

(Interview, November 1994). His reply, of course, suggested the power of the Jungian collective unconscious, and it also led me to pursue my reading of *Dogsong* using Joseph Campbell's ideas about the psychological significance of archetypes in literature.

The Hero's Journey as Archetype

Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (1949) explores the monomyth of the quest with particular emphasis on its psychological significance. Campbell explored archetypes as recurring story patterns as well as manifestations of psychological phenomenon, elaborating the monomyth through Carl Jung's psychoanalytic theories about the nature of dreams and what they reveal about the human psyche. Jung posited a "collective unconscious below the threshold of a personal unconscious." Within this concept he studied "universal collective images, themes, symbols, characters, and plots," which, he contended, "could be found in most ancient and the most modern human works, ranging from carvings and sacred rites to dreams and fantasies, from paintings and dances to myths and poems." Such materials were timeless; they came from the depths of the human psyche and recurred

"in all human cultures and aesthetic forms," being stored in "man's collective unconscious—the rich repository of ancient imaginings and wisdom." Jung's psychological perspective on myth was basically ahistorical: Myths were like daydreams, "perennial messages from the unconscious revealing perdurable human needs, desires, and problems within the broad context of phases of psychic growth and maturation." Jungian psychoanalysis allowed "spiritual interpretations of mythic creations" (Leitch 118).

The physical journey of the hero in myth, then, has its psychological correspondence: The hero locates his real difficulties in the "causal zones of the psyche," faces them, eradicates them, and breaks through them (Campbell, *Hero* 17-18). The work of dreams is crucial to the hero's fulfillment. The structure of *Dogsong* is built on an alternating pattern of movement in the physical world and the dream world, and so Campbell's approach to archetypal criticism serves me well in my analysis of the novel.

The monomyth, the mythological hero journey, takes place in three stages: (1) separation, (2) initiation, and (3) return. A brief description of the events and their significance goes something like this: The hero breaks away or departs from the local social order and its context where he has an identity; next follows a long retreat, both backward in time and inward, deep into the psyche. A series of darkly terrifying and chaotic encounters leads to a centering experience that brings harmony to his life and gives him courage. The return journey is a rebirth to life in which the hero

sometimes bestows favors or blessings on his people (Campbell, *Masks* 208-09).

Dogsong reflects Campbell's pattern, although an archetypal reading does more than simply match the novel to the components of the pattern; instead, it works to reveal the significance of the pattern in terms of the meaning of the work.

The Pattern of the Monomyth

In *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Campbell works through a complex cyclical schema for the monomyth. "The Adventure of the Hero," Part I of his book, elaborates the full heroic cycle:

- I. Departure
 1. The Call to Adventure
 2. Refusal of the Call
 3. Supernatural Aid
 4. The Crossing of the First Threshold
 5. The Belly of the Whale

- II. Initiation
 1. The Road of Trials
 2. The Meeting with the Goddess
 3. Woman as Temptress
 4. Atonement with the Father
 5. Apotheosis
 6. The Ultimate Boon

- III. Return
 1. Refusal of the Return
 2. The Magic Flight
 3. Rescue from Without
 4. The Crossing of the Return Threshold
 5. Master of the Two Worlds
 6. Freedom to Live (*Hero* 36-37)

Archetypal stories the world over fit within this pattern, but they adapt it in a variety of ways. Some isolate or enlarge one or two of the elements, or they string parts of the cycle together into a single series, as Homer has done in *The Odyssey*. They may shape their stories by fusing certain characters or episodes or by the repetition and change in a single element (*Hero*, 246). Paulsen's novel extends the departure phase of the myth in "The Trance," spends most of its narrative time in the initiation phase in "The Dreamrun," and only implies the impact of the return in the short final section, "Dogsong."

Whatever shape archetypes take, both Frye and Campbell agree on the pervasiveness and the power of this monomyth. According to Campbell, "The differentiations of sex, age, and occupation are not essential to our character, but mere costumes. . . . Such designations do not tell what it is to be a man, they denote only the accidents of geography, birth-date, and income" (*Hero*, 385). Frye agrees that "time, place, religious affiliation, moral state, economic condition . . . constituted the accidents, not the essentials, of human life" (Leitch 133).

The way in which the monomyth pervades our culture is attested to in Campbell's popularity, heightened as a result of Bill Moyers's PBS series "The Power of Myth," based on Campbell's thinking and writing. Moyers attests to the power of archetypal criticism in the world outside the schoolroom. Recalling his boyhood fondness for movies, he explains:

Not until I met Joseph Campbell did I understand that the Westerns I saw at the Saturday matinees had borrowed freely

from those ancient tales. And that the stories learned in Sunday School corresponded with those in other cultures that recognized the soul's high adventure, the quest of mortals to grasp the reality of God. He helped me to see the connections, to understand how the pieces fit. . . . (Moyers xviii)

Not only do myths pervade elements of the popular culture in the way Moyers describes, script consultant Linda Seger contends that many successful films are based on these universal stories. She explains the monomyth to aspiring screenwriters, encouraging them to read Joseph Campbell and Greek mythology as well as to explore archetypes in Jungian psychology ("Creating the Myth" 258). In language specific to the film world, she describes the "story beats that occur in hero stories," noting that their significance is to tell "who the hero is, what the hero needs, and how the story and character interact in order to create a transformation" in the "journey toward heroism," which she calls a "process" (252). Affirming the power of these myths, Seger places them in the context of the film culture, naming George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, Sylvester Stallone, and Clint Eastwood as filmmakers who dramatize this myth in unique ways. She encourages young scriptwriters to add mythic elements to their stories, concluding in language typical of the film economy that all of these great producers and directors have proven that "myths are marketable" (258).

Archetypal criticism helps us understand how a piece of literature fits into the larger schemes of the history of literature, and it helps us make the connections Moyers and Seger talk about. My interests in *Dogsong* reflect both the historical focus of Northrop Frye and the psychological focus of Joseph Campbell. Throughout

my demonstration of this way of reading, I shall recall the reverberations of earlier hero stories as I explore the transformations in the psyche of Paulsen's hero.

The Mythic Pattern in *Dogsong*

Outlining the mythic pattern in *Dogsong* serves as a practical introduction to the shape of the novel; subsequently, I shall work out the sophisticated ways in which Paulsen clothes these events in archetypal significance. He structures the novel into three parts which reflect the pattern of the monomyth: "The Trance" (Departure), "The Dreamrun" (Initiation), and "Dogsong" (Return).

Departure: "The Trance" (Chapters 1-5)

In a small Eskimo community, fourteen-year-old Russel Susskit lives with his father, but he is troubled: As he tells his father, "something is bothering me." His father's advice to "get help from some other place" (10) sets the myth in motion. Russel visits the old shaman Oogruk who provides him an historical context for their community life and tells him that in abandoning the old ways of hunting, the people have lost the songs of their identity. Russel answers the call to adventure when he realizes that he needs "to go back and become a song, " but he also feels unsure about this journey: "But I don't know what to do. I don't know how to do it" (29). Oogruk becomes his mentor, a surrogate father. As Oogruk instructs him, Russel

gains confidence as a hunter, killing small game on short adventures and surviving an arctic storm that threatens imminent death. The death of Oogruk sends Russel out alone to father himself as hero, to find his own song.

Initiation: "The Dreamrun" (Chapters 6-14)

Paulsen structures and titles Chapters 6-13 in an alternating pattern of "The Run" and "The Dream" which culminates in Chapter 14, "The Dreamrun." The working principle of these chapters is simple, but the content is complex and full of images which unify Russel's journey. These chapters continue the Tests and Obstacles portion of the monomyth. After each run, Russel has a dream which moves him back and forth in the cultural memory, the collective unconsciousness as Jung would call it, and which fuses his present journey with the archetypal journeys of his ancestors. Finally, Russel comes to realize how his life is connected to the lives of Eskimo hunters before him. The tests include finding meat for himself and the dogs (Chapter 6), surviving a devastating storm (Chapter 8) in which he rescues a nearly frozen young woman (Chapter 12), killing a polar bear, and a final race to safety in a northern village (Chapter 14).

Return: "Dogsong"

This final, short section of the novel, written in italics, represents Russel's fulfillment as hero. He initially set out "to become a song" (29), and the novel ends as he sings the song of that becoming.

Dogsong: An Archetypal Reading

Paulsen sets contrasting worlds against each other as one of the chief structural devices of the novel. In "The Trance" these worlds are the "modern" present with its village of government houses, snowmobiles, and television sets, and the old ways of living, represented by Oogruk's memories, the dog team, and the primitive weapons of lance and bow. The central figure in terms of Russel's consciousness is the old shaman Oogruk, who points to past and future. In "The Dreamrun" Russel journeys in two worlds, the icy landscape of the arctic and in the human dreamscape; these two worlds are linked in the character of Nancy who folds the hero's vision of the past into a vision of the communal future. "Dogsong" celebrates the union of the mystic world of myth and dream and the everyday world.

Part I: "The Trance"

The title of this opening section reflects several situations in Part I. First, it refers literally to the suspended state between waking and sleeping into which Russel falls as Oogruk instructs him. Second, it symbolically represents his suspension between the present and the past, between modern ways of living and the old ways. Each untitled chapter opens with an epigraph from the past which foreshadows the events of the present that take place in the narrative.

The Two Worlds

Paulsen signals the juxtaposition of the old and the new ways with the first words of his novel, an epigraph in which an old Eskimo man relates the memory of his birth "in a snowhouse on the sea ice":

*I came wet into the world.
On both sides there were cliffs,
white cliffs that were my mother's thighs.
And I didn't cry though it was cold
by the white cliffs and I was afraid.
I came wet into the world. (3)*

This epigraph introduces several ideas that are central to the novel. Although the first line refers to a literal birth, it also serves as a metaphor for Russel's birth as the hero of the novel, which begins epic-like *in medias res*, that is, in the middle of things. These lines also signal Paulsen's use of poetry and poetic prose in the novel, one of the reasons why I heard Homer singing when I first read the book. The "white cliffs" of the poem

are strongly sexual, and they point both to Russel's subsequent rebirth in the arctic tundra as well as to the stillbirth of Nancy's baby. The novel does not develop issues of sexuality in depth; Paulsen is aware, he says, of the "tacit censorship that exists in books for young people" (Bartky 44), but he subtly represents the sexual dimension of human life throughout the text. For example, in the frozen world of the epigraph the old man recalls his birth fear during the journey through the white cliffs of his mother's thighs. Russel will cope with similar fears as he is reborn in his journey through the white cliffs of arctic snow.

The details of the old world in the poem are transformed into the realities of Russel's world. The snowhouse of the epigraph becomes a small, sixteen-by-twenty foot government house in which Russel lives with his father, his mother having run off years earlier with a white trapper. His father is a Christian, converted by missionaries, and the relationship between the world inside the village and the outsiders who have come in to "improve" the Eskimos' lives flows throughout "The Trance." When Russel tells his father that something is bothering him, his father advises that, "When I have trouble that I do not understand I sometimes get help from Jesus Christ." The Christian myth, of course, is one of the versions of the monomyth, but Russel quickly rejects this Christian mythology ("He was sure Jesus wouldn't help") and his father sends him to Oogruk, who is old and wise and who "also tells good stories" (10). In this way Paulsen mirrors the power of myth and storytelling in human life as Russel's father explains the difference between words and songs: "Sometimes words lie—but the song is always

true. If you listen to Oogruk's words, sometimes they don't make sense. But if you listen to his song, there is much to learn from Oogruk" (11). The final lines of the chapter introduce another powerful metaphor in the novel as his father tells Russel to take Oogruk the gift of two deer heads; Oogruk, he says, "loves the eyes" (11). The image points to Oogruk's powers of sight; although the eyeballs are literal, they will become metaphor as Oogruk helps Russel see into the old ways. Another significant detail for me is that Russel's father is nameless; he is the biological father, but his vision of the world in his Christian mythology is insufficient to guide his son. The end of this chapter sets up what Campbell calls "the irresistible fascination" of the hero for a figure that appears suddenly as a guide, marking a new period, a new stage, in the biography" (*Hero* 55).

The Call to Adventure

The epigraph of Chapter 2 returns us to the old world and also sets up the next events in Russel's story. This time the form is prose as an old Eskimo tells a story of "a time when I was young," a time when there was no meat, and, in desperation, they had eaten their dogs to survive. Again, a woman figures prominently in the story, connecting it to the epigraph of Chapter 1. The story focuses ironically on the mother as nurturer: "We asked our mother if we could kill her and eat of her until the deer came back," and the old man assures us that "we would have done that thing," but a deer comes, and they kill it for food. They do not have to sacrifice their own mother to

survive. The epigraph emphasizes that we are in a man's world; women bring men into the world, and they serve men in whatever way circumstances demand. The story may shock our modern ears, but its focus for the novel is clear as Chapter 2 progresses. Chapter 2 is about survival, and eating is its primary image.

Russel hears the call to adventure as he moves into the world that Oogruk inhabits; it reflects the outside/inside contrast of Chapter 1. Oogruk's dwelling is "like any government box" on the outside, but inside "you had to change" because Oogruk lives in the old way, without electricity. A seal-oil lamp provides light, and caribou skins protect against the cold. Most importantly for the hero's transformative journey, Oogruk's ways "took a different thinking" (13). Oogruk appears almost mystically, clad only in a breechcloth, his hair so white that it "seemed to have flown into the smoke and become part of the smoke from the lamp" (14). Against a backdrop of harpoons, lances, bows, arrow bags, and clothes made of the skins of squirrels and caribou, Oogruk gives Russel a history lesson in a voice that "moved like strong music" (14).

Oogruk's world is the world of the hunter, and he explains the power of songs when once a man could "sing a song for whales and make them come to his harpoon" (17). They heat up the caribou eyes, and Oogruk eats them. When Russel refuses the delicacy, Oogruk announces the youth's future journey and implies the metaphor of sight: "Later, when you are gone for along time, you will wish you had eaten of them" (19). As the conversation progresses, Russel realizes that Oogruk is literally blind; almost simultaneously he understands that what he wants is to learn to see, both backwards and

forwards: "There was something wrong with the way things were now, something wrong with him. He wanted to be more, somehow, but when he looked ahead he didn't see more, he saw only less" (22).

Russel's acknowledgment of his metaphorical hunger for knowledge is followed almost immediately by a literal meal which he and Oogruk prepare and eat together. As Oogruk talks, Russel asks, "You made this village?" The question underscores the importance of the end of the hero's journey when he returns to contribute to the life of his community. Oogruk has lived the monomyth, and he explains how the outside world invaded and destroyed the world he helped to create. When the missionaries came, his people quit singing and dancing because the missionaries told them these pleasures were wrong and because "they feared hell" (28). Oogruk's words juxtapose the Eskimo mythology of the joys of song with the Christian mythology of the rewards and punishments of heaven and hell. Now Russel hears the call to adventure: "He needed to go back and become a song" (29). He and Oogruk share a ritualistic meal of deer meat and water-blood soup that symbolically binds them as father and son.

As Oogruk begins to talk after the meal, Russel falls into a trance and lets go of the world. We are at the point in the myth where, after answering the call to adventure, "the first encounter of the hero-journey is with a protective figure (often a little old crone or old man) who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass" (*Hero* 69). Oogruk's words take on these mystical powers and move Russel into an unknown, new world. The trance signifies that "destiny has summoned

the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of society to a zone unknown" (*Hero* 58). Oogruk becomes "the protecting power of destiny" (*Hero* 71), an "initiatory priest" (73) not unlike the figure of the mythological guide, "the teacher, the ferryman, the conductor of souls to the afterworld" (72). As the journey proceeds, Oogruk assumes variations of this protective role until it is time for Russel to go out alone.

The trance functions symbolically as the half distance between waking and sleeping. It allows Russel to live in two worlds: the world inside Oogruk's hunt and the world of the hunter that Oogruk's words create. The dreams, which are central to Part II of the novel, will allow Russel to move backward into the Eskimo collective unconsciousness.

The Education of the Hero Hunter

The epigraph to Chapter 3 slides us backward in time again and balances the epigraph of Chapter 2; an Eskimo woman tells a story of her youth, an echo of Oogruk's personal history from Chapter 2 where he told Russel about the women in his life. He lost two good wives in childbirth and a third who, somewhat like Russel's mother, "went up to the mining town to a party and didn't come back." Telling Russel that "One misses women," he talks about the beauty of Eskimo women: "They always shined in the snow houses, shined with fat and oil" (18), concluding that there were no songs for women because "the women were the songs" (19).

As the speaker in the third epigraph introduces herself, she recalls Oogruk's concept of feminine beauty: "I was round and had great beauty"; she tells about the deaths of her three husbands before she "has twenty summers," the third killed by a great bear. She concludes that, despite her grief, "I got a new one and he lasted" (31). Her story foreshadows Russel's meeting with Nancy, round and beautiful, and his battle with the great polar bear, but on a larger level it illustrates cycles of loss and renewal in human life, the kind of movement Russel is experiencing as he loses the new ways and moves backward into the old ways. It also symbolizes Russel's movement outward toward fulfillment in the hero cycle: He, too, will replace what has been lost with something that lasts.

In an important structural move, Paulsen omits the details of the trance and Oogruk's actual words; instead, we move forward in time to see Russel in action in Chapter 3, practicing what he is learning. The chapter focuses on how he learns to work with Oogruk's dog team and sled. The dogs and sled, the last in the village, are powerful symbols in the novel. By giving them to Russel, Oogruk provides him with the vehicle for the quest and connects him to Eskimo history. Such animals occur in many traditional quest stories as the "Helpers who with their knowledge and magical powers assist the hero and but for whom he would never succeed" (Auden 44). Chapter 3 initiates a series of short runs to hunt ptarmigan and deer; these serve as tests of Russel's new knowledge. The language and ritual of this chapter recall the traditions of the epic poem as the hero dresses for battle before he faces his adversaries.

As Russel dresses himself literally for life in the unfamiliar world, he also dresses himself psychologically, following Oogruk's "thoughts as if they had been his own" (33). Standing stark naked, he puts on bearskin pants, sealskin mukluks, a squirrelskin inner parka and an outerparka of thick deerhide with a wolverine ruff; deerhide mittens protect his hands.

The dogsled is a work of art much like the hero's weapons in ancient poetry; it is "like a carving of a sled, with birch rails down the side and elegant curved stanchions" (35). Russel's commandeering of the dogs opens with the kind of ritualistic formula common in epic poetry: "Then a thing happened" (36). As his journey continues, these formulas remind me again of the worlds of Homer and Vergil. Before the first run, Russel asserts his superiority over the lead dog by biting down "hard, across the bridge of the dog's nose" (37). Although Russel handles the team awkwardly on the first run, the dogs and sled become agents of his birth into the history of his people: He feels that "the sled is alive; that I am alive and the sled is alive and the snow is alive and the ice is alive and we are all part of the same life" (39). Here Paulsen's simple use of repetition makes his poetry sing.

Oogruk sends Russel on the second run to hunt meat. When he fails to kill ptarmigan (grouse) with his bow, he remembers one of the powerful messages of the trance: "Look to the center of the center of where the point will go. Look inside the center" (42). This advice functions as a metaphor for the whole experience of the

monomyth: The journey centers the hero spiritually as well as centering him in the experience of his culture.

Russel enacts another ancient ritual as he kills ptarmigan with the bow. As Oogruk has instructed him, he leaves the bird's head behind, placing food in its mouth, thanking it for the meat of its body. Continuing the hunt, Russel settles into the sled and begins to feel a oneness with the old ways: "It was almost an extension of his body just as he was becoming an extension of the dogs" (45). This sense of oneness foreshadows his fulfillment later on in the story.

After successfully killing a caribou and observing the ritualistic feeding of the head, Russel starts home. Paulsen's description of the journey is another piece of music:

Russel's fingers took pain for a time from his friend the cold and he smiled with it, smiled with the deer on the sled and the cold and the dogs: the dogs out in front, coming around in a large curve, heading for the village with the deer and the ptarmigan, the dogs moving in the dark silently with hot lungs in their bellies and the joy from the kill, the dogs with their shoulders curving over and down with the weight of the deer and Russel pulling back against them as they fought up the hill, fought up with lunges and heaves to pull the sled over, over at last onto the crown of the ridge. (49)

The song of this description leads to the key moment with which the chapter ends. For the first time Russel hears a dogsong in his mind:

*Out before me they go
taking me home.
Out before me they go
I am the dogs. (50)*

The transformation of the hero begins with Russel's awareness of the power of this song. First, it fuses his identity and his journey with his animal companions; and second, it links his identity with the other world of Oogruk's memory. Finally, it foreshadows the last part of the novel: "He realized that it was part of a song, moving through the dark toward the village lights" (50). At the end of the novel, the dark of the near-death experience with the polar bear will precede his return to the lights of a community.

More Preparation for the Departure

The difference between cultures, between inside and outside worlds, emerges as the focus for the epigraph which opens Chapter 4. Its story contrasts to the imagery of Russel's successful hunt and his respect for nature in Chapter 3. An Eskimo tells the story of early Russian fur hunters; he remembers their unusual speech, these "white men who came a long time ago" and who "talked with rocks in their mouths." And he has not forgotten their abuse: "They used our men as beasts and they took our women for their own and left us with no meat. Left us starving" (51). This emphasis on hunting and eating remain the focus of Russel's narrative as he endures several tests of his ability to apply his new knowledge. The two tests, which are the central events of the chapter, illustrate the role of the dogs in Russel's success. The first test comes in a snowstorm in which Russel gets lost. Trying at first to guide the dogs, he fails, and he must trust them to find the way back. The second test demands his creativity if he is to escape death. A break in the ice threatens to carry him and the team out into the sea, but he

engineers a floating ice bridge by swinging a chunk of ice around and forcing the dogs to go over it. These two tests are symbolic of the transformation of the hero. First, they signify the necessity of a powerful bond between man and animal, and second, they illustrate Russel's emerging understanding that the way to combat fear is through action: "The fear had come from the unknown, from not acting, and now that he had made a decision to act the fear had gone" (62).

Leaving Home

The final chapter in "The Trance" opens with an epigraph that juxtaposes the old ways and the modern world. An old woman speaks from memory: "Shamans had great power in the times before the church came" (67). The church with its theology has replaced the philosophy of life represented by Oogruk. The story of the epigraph tells how one shaman had two heads; they couldn't resolve their differences, and when one head told the body to kill the other head, the whole body died. The final line of this epigraph is problematic in terms of Oogruk's paternal role in Russel's life: "Shamans had great power but they weren't always smart" (67). Oogruk is not the shaman of the old woman's memory, but the story serves to indicate that no one person has all the knowledge we need to face the world, not even a person with two heads. Perhaps the two heads in the story signal two conflicting ways of knowing; perhaps the death of the two-headed body foreshadows Oogruk's death, suggesting that the hero cannot listen at once to two heads, that he must learn to keep his own counsel.

In this chapter Russel hunts for seal, accompanied by Oogruk who now prophesies his own death: "There are certain things that must be done at this time and it is for an old man to do them when the time is right" (69). Once they are out on the ice, Oogruk instructs Russel to leave him, and the shaman's final advice sets up the rest of the journey: "But there is a thing you must not do now to become a man. You must not go home. . . . Run long and find yourself Run with the dogs and become what the dogs will help you become" (72). This request creates an eerie moment in the novel when Russel leaves Oogruk, but, overcome with guilt at abandoning his mentor, circles back to find Oogruk sitting upright, frozen in death. The old shaman is staring "out to sea, out past the edge of ice where his spirit had flown, out and out" (74). In this moment I hear echoes of classical epics when the hero must visit the underworld for the knowledge that he needs to continue toward his destiny, as Aeneas does in Book VI of Vergil's poem.

In a parting ritual reminiscent of ancient burial practices, Russel places a harpoon across Oogruk's lap because, he tells his old mentor, "You will want to hunt seals" (74). Russel understands the significance of this departure: "He had weapons and dogs and a good sled. The rest would come from the land. Everything would come from the land" (75). Russel's aloneness in the frozen world sets up the long journey that is the most difficult test of the novel.

In one sense "The Trance" takes the form of a *bildungsroman*, an apprenticeship story that deals with the development—the education and the spiritual growth—of a

young person. This genre is perhaps the archetype of the young adult novel, represented by familiar examples such as *Great Expectations*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and *A Separate Peace*. Campbell's monomyth of the quest hero, however, most often applies to adults, and the first part of Paulsen's *Dogsong* prepares young Russel to move out into a world in which he must make adult decisions and face life and death struggles.

Part Two: "The Dreamrun" and Initiation

"The Dreamrun" in *Dogsong* illustrates the initiation phase of the monomyth. The journey is outward toward the north, away from the village; it is backward in time into the collective unconsciousness of the Eskimos, and it is inward, psychological and spiritual. In this complex, multi-layered texture we can trace the weave as Russel travels physically on land and psychically in the landscape of dreams. Structurally Paulsen creates a series of alternating chapters that represent the two worlds of the monomyth—the mystic, mythic world accessed through dreams and the cold, challenging world of the arctic tundra where the events of Russel's dreams come to life. Campbell has explained the relationship between dreams and myth:

Dream is the personalized myth, myth is the depersonalized dream; both myth and dream are symbolic in the same general way of the dynamics of the psyche. But in the dream the forms are quirked by the peculiar troubles of the dreamer, whereas in myth the problems and solutions shown are directly valid for all mankind. (*Hero* 19)

In other words, dream is character specific and myth is culture specific. What Russel "sees" in his dreams are quirks, or curls and twists, of his particular fears, but these dreams, occurring within the larger context of myth, also represent the fears of his race—the fear of extinction, death, annihilation by nature.

Russel's initiation is framed by threshold crossings; with the death of Oogruk, he crosses the first threshold into "darkness, the unknown, and danger" (*Hero 77*) because the hero's "adventure is always and everywhere a passage beyond the veil of the known into the unknown" (*Hero 82*). At the end of this adventure, the hero crosses the return threshold as he moves "from the mystic realm into the land of common day" (*Hero 216*). The difficulty he faces at the second threshold is to negotiate the return to life in the known world after he has been transformed by his experiences in the unknown.

Crossing the first threshold by leaving Oogruk and the known world behind him, Russel "moves into a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a test of trials," often referred to as the "difficult tasks" motif of myth (*Hero 97*). During these ordeals he is "covertly aided by the advice, amulets, and secret agents of the supernatural helper whom he met before his entrance into this region" (97). Oogruk as helper has provided Russel advice as well as his own hunting clothes, his treasured weapons, and, most importantly, the sled and the dog team. In a supernatural way, Oogruk's words come to Russel as the journey challenges his heroism.

Landscape: The Journey Outward

In the first run that begins the series of alternating landscapes, Russel thinks that "the landscape looked like something from another planet" (80), a land that he "did not know" (83). The purpose of this run is to hunt for meat. In his first conquest he kills a caribou with his arrows, and as if foreshadowing his fulfillment in the achievement of his own song, he sings a "poem song" about his arrows: "They brought the deer down / They helped the dogs to bring us meat. / My arrows are true" (87). Russel makes camp and eats; initiating his mental journey back in time, he thinks, "It was a home," redefining the concept of home now in an historical sense: "It was as much of a home as his people had had for thousands of years and he was content." In his solitariness he identifies with the community, and in his contentment, "he let his mind circle and go down" (89), a psychical image which iterates the circular nature of the mythic hero's journey on land.

Dreamscape: The Journey Inward

The chapters which Paulsen titles "The Dream" are complex weavings of imagery and narrative. As Russel's mind circles down into the first of these dreams, he enacts the archetypal descent into the psyche, a symbol of all our journeys inward:

And so it happens that if anyone—in whatever society—undertakes for himself the perilous journey into the darkness by descending, either intentionally or unintentionally, into the crooked lanes of his own spiritual labyrinth, he soon finds himself in a landscape of symbolical figures. . . . (*Hero* 101)

In this spiritual labyrinth the hero will experience "moments of illumination" which are also part of the "long and really perilous path of initiatory conquests" (*Hero* 109).

The dream is encircled in fog, a metaphor for Russel's inability to understand all that is happening to him. "Swirls of fog" (91) open the dream, clearing so that Russel can see the symbolic actors of the dreamscape; at the end of the dream the fog is transformed as Russel is transformed: "He was the man and he was the dream. He was the fog" (98).

The dream is composed of three symbolic scenes that Paulsen presents almost cinemagraphically: (1) a family inside its warm home in the village; (2) a man leaving on a hunt [crossing a threshold], and (3) the man out on the sweeps, killing a mammoth. This dream sequence reenacts the departure and tests of the monomyth.

In the first scene Russel identifies with the man, feeling "more than close somehow" (93) to this man who lives with his woman, "young, round and shining beautiful" and two children "small and round and wonderfully fat" (92). When the man leaves the warmth of the tent, he harnesses dogs of mythic stature, "more than dogs" that "stood like shadows" (93-94). The sled, "all of bone and ivory" (93) is a work of art, reminiscent of Oogruk's sled. The figures in the dream assume mythic proportions.

A swirl of fog ends this first scene and clears to show the man as if in a silent film "working the dogs without making a sound" (94). He encounters a huge shape, phantasmagoric as in nightmare; a woolly mammoth with great tusks emerges, angrily whipping back and forth, its red eyes tearing through the fog "like a demon's from the

Below World" (96). This Below World is a manifestation of the Underworld of classical mythology, and the dream of the mammoth represents a symbolic visit to that Underworld, providing Russel knowledge that he will need at the most crucial moment in his journey.

The image of the mammoth prefigures Russel's crucial test in the confrontation with the polar bear, and it also situates him in prehistory. Mammoths were gigantic Pleistocene elephants distinguished by very long tusks that curved upward and by well-developed body hair (*Webster's* 722). Russel recognizes the pre-historic man in the dream:

The man was him: Russel, with more hair, longer hair, and a small beard and mustache, but he was Russel and Russel knew fear, because with the knowledge that he was the man in the dream he knew he would have to fight the mammoth. He would have to fight it and kill it. (96)

The dream man kills the beast and bursts into a song of exultation; Russel does "not know the words" but they sound "familiar to him" (97). As he listens to the mythic hero sing of "the mountain of meat" (98), his luck, the food for his family, and the wind, he feels "all those songs inside his soul," a prefiguring of his fulfillment at journey's end when he will sing his own song. When Russel kills the polar bear at the climax of the narrative, he will think of it, too, as "a mountain of meat" (161), an image that draws together dream, myth, and reality.

Landscape: Storm on the Sweeps

In the second run out onto the sweeps, Russel stays connected to the dream, smelling the inside of the "dreamigloo-tent, the stink of the mammoth voiding itself in death, the heat of its blood down the shaft of the lance" (101). When he builds "a perfect camp" (103) under an overhanging stone ledge, he discovers an old stone lamp that recalls Oogruk's seal oil lamp, a lamp that connects Russel simultaneously with Oogruk and with the history of his race. Linguistically something important happens here. Russel steps out of thinking of himself as "I" and moves backward into a third person reference, displacing himself in history: "See what a man has been given," dropping "into third person usage without thinking He had heard the old people talk that way sometimes out of politeness" (105-06). This kind of writing is one of the ways in which Paulsen locates us as readers in both the present world and the past world, in reality and in myth. An approaching storm is the device Paulsen uses to send us into the second dreamscape as Russel realizes his power to create a world and to create himself: "Where there had been nothing he now had shelter and food and heat and comfort. Where there had been nothing he had become something" (108). Through simple parallel structures such as these Paulsen as poet sings in the elegant and balanced landscapes of the novel.

Dreamscape

Feasting and Storytelling

Paulsen presents the second dream in the envelope of fog, and his language connects it to the end of the first dream in which Russel has become the fog: The dream man drives his dogs "out of the fog, the great gray dogs out of the gray fog, as if the dogs were not animals but fog that had come alive" (109). This monochromatic dreamscape opens into a dream more complicated than the first as Russel travels more deeply into the collective unconscious of the human race. Russel has extraordinary vision now. As the dream hero finds a village in the first scene of this dream, Russel is at once himself and the dream hunter: He "could see over the man, could see his mind working" (110). Like Odysseus, Russel and the dream hunter travel in "a new land" where "the people were known to him as all people are known to all other people" (110). This passage points to the archetypal critic's belief that the hero's story is one story for all the world.

At the center of this chapter is the art of storytelling, especially important in the development of the epic poem, as the hero wanders and must establish his credibility in strange lands. Often he defines himself through storytelling, as Odysseus does at the palace of Alcinous and Arete in *Odyssey VII* when he recalls his experience on Calypso's Island. Or as Aeneas does as he recalls the fall of Troy at Dido's banquet in *Aeneid II*. Just as each of those epic heroes narrates his journey, so does the dream hero of *Dogsong*. Ritualistic feasting provides the stage for such storytelling in Homer and Vergil and in the familiar *Beowulf*, and this is also the case in *Dogsong*. Following this

epic tradition, the stranger to the arctic village "would have stories to tell, wonderful stories of taking the large beast and traveling through strange lands." The epic tradition of high hospitality to strangers echoes in Paulsen's language: "They would show the stranger their hospitality by feeding him much fat meat and feeding his dogs until they threw the meat up to eat it again." Expectant, the people think that "perhaps the stranger would sing his song" (111). Here again we are reminded that the song is Russel's goal, the achievement of a man, his fulfillment after conquest and travel.

Foldings

The second scene of this dream fulfills this epic promise and introduces a new metaphor for connecting the mythic world, the dream world, and the waking world: "A new folding" (112). At the dream feast the male celebrants are seated in a circle, the women behind them on a ledge. The dream hero, clad only in a breechclout, recalls the image of Oogrük when Russel first saw him. His larger-than-life quality and the unity of this hero with the landscape is underlined in majestic description:

He is not a man standing on the ground, Russel thought—he is growing up from the ground. His legs are the earth and they take strength from it, up through his ankles and into his muscles so that he grows with what he takes from it. More than strength, more than substance—all that the man would be is growing up from the earth through his legs and into his body. (112)

This is the perfect metaphor for the transformation that is occurring as Russel journeys toward manhood, acquiring the knowledge necessary to live when he returns: "He knew that he was the man, knew it and let that knowledge carry him into the man" (113). Here, then, Russel folds into the symbolic figure in the dream. The imagery of the

dream also recalls the final words of "The Trance": "Everything would come from the land" (75). The connection between Russel's crossing of the first threshold and this mythic dream image underscores the power of the archetype and its interconnectedness in the literatures of the world.

Transformation

Now an extraordinary transformation occurs in Russel's dream, complicating the levels of the hero's experience. The hunter is transformed into the beast, the mammoth, in a ritualistic choreography: "It was more than a dance, more than a story, he became the mammoth, down to the smell, the foul smell that came from the beast" (113). The dance is sad, however, because the mammoth knows that he must die to furnish meat for the man. This literal death serves symbolically to suggest the death of Russel's childhood and adolescence in order to release him into adulthood. This transformation of the hunter into the beast also seems to be a variation of the familiar story in which the hunter becomes the hunted, familiar to us in Richard O'Connell's "The Most Dangerous Game" and, on a more complex level, in the alter-egos of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Sharer*.

As the dream continues, Paulsen increases the rhythmic intensity of his poetry in a series of concentric circles, catching us up into the swirling dance that is occurring inside the dream tent that is inside Russel's mind. In the miraculous transformative dance the mammoth grows in strength and rage and attacks the man and the dogs. Time falls out

of focus as the dream appears to be history, to include other men and other dogs, to represent symbolically the Eskimo experience, to climax in the death of the beast:

Now he changed again and now he was himself, the man,
dancing and moving to kill the mammoth.
And now the beast charged.
And now he ran on the lance.
And now he died. (115)

Paulsen wraps up the totality of this circular dance story in a pronouncement of epic proportions, a pronouncement of the shared experience of the human hunter: "And it was all in the man and all in the people who watched and all in the small space in the council tent, all of it" (115). I read the "all" of this story capsule as metaphoric of the human struggle against the dark forces that have the power to destroy human life.

This dance initiates a narrative circle as the hero hunter falls to the floor and others rise to sing and dance songs that "soared on and on through day and night" (115). This circle of stories within the diurnal cycle of nature underscores the power of myth for generations who have defined themselves through storytelling.

The dream sequence ends in a fusion of the two principle landscape metaphors of Russel's experience as "the dream folded back into the fog" (115). The fog as a transformative element linking the physical and the psychic worlds must clear before we make the journey backward and inward.

Landscape: Riding the Storm

When the storm hits (Chapter 10), Russel follows Oogruk's advice to ride it out, so he sleeps for two days. Then he sets out to new country, unsure of where he is, again trusting Oogruk's advice: "It isn't the destination that counts. It's the journey. That is what life is. A journey. . . . Pay attention to the journey" (119). As he lets the dogs run as they will, he discovers snowmachine tracks "as if by magic" (121); the world of the common day attempts to intrude on his mythic journey, and he senses its inappropriateness: "The idea of a snowmachine was out of place, opposite wrong" (122). As the dogs run on for two days and nights, "his mind circled and slipped down," and he begins to hallucinate in a series of three images that point backwards and forwards. In the first, he thinks he sees someone riding in his sled; this foreshadows the appearance of Nancy. In the second image he sees small lights on the dogs' feet, symbolic of their power to guide, to "see." The final image, the most complex, symbolizes his location in both present world and past world and transports him into the next dream: ". . . he felt somehow that the opening of his parka hood was a mirror and everything he saw in front of him was somehow in back of him, and then, driving on into the night, the mirror vanished and he had the dream" (124). This image displaces him in the time sequence, and he falls into the dream, but this time he does not camp; the dream occurs as the dogs run into the darkness, as landscape and dreamscape become one.

Landscape/Dreamscape

Now Paulsen circles back to the hero hunter of the first dream, but much is changed. The gentle fog is now a "slashing gray storm that took everything"; the whole dream has "an air of madness to it" (125). This fall into madness represents the darkest moment of the psychic journey as the dream hunter, having stayed too long to enjoy the hospitality of the strange village, returns to his family.

This dream is composed of two scenes. Admitting defeat by the wind, the hunter almost dies in the storm. The fog of earlier dreams is replaced by snow as the device for moving from dream scene to dream scene. The scene of the hunter's near defeat shifts to another scene of defeat as the dream woman and her children await death in their tent. In her darkest moment she considers killing her children in mercy as she sits by the lamp, "fingering the strangulation cord" (127). While these two dream scenes perhaps represent his fear of failure, they also foreshadow Russel's future. The pervasive theme of hunger and eating in *Dogsong* is now reduced to a single image of the battle against natural forces; the last words of Chapter 11 describe the "hungry wind" (128), the wind that threatens to devour the people of the dreamscape and the landscape.

Landscape: The Meeting with the Goddess

"The Run" (Chapter 12) picks up the narrative in the icy world; Russel discovers the snowmachine that made the tracks he saw earlier. Another storm threatens, but

finding small human tracks in the snow, he continues the run, anxious to find the former occupant of the snowmachine. What he finds is the frozen shell of a girl-woman who is pregnant. She is the figure of the mother in the dream, realized. About to give birth literally, her appearance also foreshadows Russel's symbolic birth into manhood. She, too, must be reborn, literally: "When somebody has gotten close to death by freezing and he comes back, Russel knew, there is terrible pain. . . . The pain had to be. It was considered by some—by Oogruk—to be the same pain as birth" (137). I cannot resist the formalistic urge to point out that this image of Nancy near the end of the journey balances the frozen figure of Oogruk at the beginning of the quest. Both figures represent the protective aspect of the guardians of the threshold in the monomyth. Only by advancing beyond the bounds represented by such figures and "provoking the destructive aspect of the same power" can the individual pass "either alive or in death, into a new zone of experience" (*Hero* 82). Just as Oogruk's frozen death has moved Russel out into the dangerous and solitary struggles of the hero's adventure, Nancy's rebirth from her frozen shell will move him toward the safety of community.

After finding the girl, Russel makes camp; he positions the dog team to create "a living screen across the face of the wind" (134) and constructs a lean-to by turning the sled on its side and covering it with animal skins. Considering the girl's pregnant state and the hero's transformation, this lean-to suggests a form of what Campbell calls "The Belly of the Whale," a "world-wide womb image" out of which the hero is

reborn (*Hero* 90). In Campbell's schema, this womb image occurs at the first threshold, but in Paulsen's novel it occurs before the second threshold. In some myths, the hero undergoes a symbolic death by going "inward, in order to born again" (*Hero* 91). The lean-to in the storm suggests a series of concentric circles as Russel constructs a womb-like protection to save the baby that Nancy carries in her womb as well as to save himself from the raging storm.

Dreamscape: Two Worlds in One

In the insulated world he has created, Russel falls into the final dream. It fuses his earlier dreams with his rescue of Nancy. By dream's end he knows "in his center" that "the dream had become his life and his life and the run had become the dream and the woman . . . was the same woman as the woman in the dream" (144). Inside the dream, the storm clears, leaving one of the precious dogs frozen; the hunter kills it mercifully and packs it on the sled for the other dogs to eat later as he heads home. As the "dreamdogs ran in the dreamworld across the white light" toward the tent, Russel senses an "end to things," senses that he is "out of the dream but still in it in some way he did not understand" (141). As Campbell suggests, this is part of the process in which the two worlds of the journey become one world.

A second tragic scene emerges in the dreamscape as Russel sees the hunter's tent and contemplates the "end that came in the north, the end that came to all things, the same end that came to Oogruk" (142-43). Only two bones remain in the tent as

visible evidence of the former existence of mother and children, two bones left by the wolves and white foxes. In the scene, though, he sees a signal of hope, the shallow stone lamp, a dreamlamp. It is an imaginary form of other real lamps—Oogruk's lamp and the lamp Russel found earlier in the snow. From the image of the dreamlamp, the dream moves sideways as Russel sees the hunter also near death and imagines the loss of the dogs and the sled. Then he awakens from this nightmare to discover the flickering light of his own lamp, to realize that the girl "was the same woman as the woman in the dream: illuminated for him by "The dreamflame. From the dreamlamp" (144).

The Meeting with the Goddess

The meeting with the woman-girl is a variation on one of the events of the monomyth—the meeting with the goddess, which Campbell says, is "the ultimate adventure . . . the crisis at the nadir, the zenith, or at the uttermost edge of the earth, at the central point of the cosmos . . . or within the darkness of the deepest chamber of the heart" (*Hero* 109). I cannot claim the equivalent power for this event in *Dogsong* with the similar event in Campbell's symbology, but I believe that Nancy represents the woman principle as Campbell describes it in the monomyth:

Woman, in the picture language of mythology, represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know. As he progresses in the slow initiation which is life, the form of the goddess undergoes for him a series of transfigurations: she can never be greater than himself, though she can always promise more than he is yet capable of

comprehending. . . . If he can match her import, the two, the knower and the known, will be released from every limitation. (*Hero* 116)

Paulsen signals this kind transfiguration in Russel when the dream ends:

At the other end of the dreamrun nothing was the same as when he started. At the other end, Russel was no longer young, but he wasn't old, either. He wasn't afraid, but he wasn't brave. He wasn't smart, but he wasn't a fool. He wasn't as strong as he would be, but he wasn't ever going to be as weak as he was. (*Dogsong* 145)

These seem to be perfectly realistic claims for an adolescent on the cusp of manhood.

Russel will emerge from the womb of the lean-to to act as both substitute husband and father.

Landscape: The Final Test

Chapter 14, "The Dreamrun," brings the cycle of stories in Part II full circle, its title identical to the section title in its fusion of the alternating dream/run sequence. It is also the most complex chapter in the way in which Paulsen weaves the central images of the novel into the text. Two phrases fuse the strands of the landscape and dreamscape narratives: the imagery of "a great folding" and the repetition of the phrase "These things happened" (146). Paulsen's language supports my archetypal reading as the narrator tells us: "These things happened. Either in the dream or the run, either in one fold or another fold, these things happened" (146). This sentence itself is a microcosmic narrative of *Dogsong*: What happened is folded inside both dream and reality.

Inside this final folding we learn the rest of the story. Nancy tells Russel the story of her disgrace in her unmarried pregnancy and of her subsequent homelessness; we see her folding out of Russel's dream and into his life. When they set out, running north, they make the mistake of running past food. When their food runs out, Russel leaves Nancy at camp although "pictures from the dream haunted him and he did not want to leave her without heat" (153). What follows is the final and biggest of the tests; he is alone now because "there was nothing from the ghost of Oogruk," and he realizes that "whatever decision he made, when the light came back, it was his decision, just as going back to live the old way must have been his decision" (154-55). Paulsen stresses the move toward manhood in Russel's acceptance of responsibility for his action.

The Polar Bear

Of this most challenging test, how to kill a bear, "Oogruk had said nothing" (157); this confrontation with the polar bear has been prefigured in his dream of the mammoth. Russel succeeds because his lance "slid through the hair and the fat and into the center of the bear, into the center of the center of the bear" (160). Even near death the bear strikes his adversary, and Russel senses death; he "knew he had killed the bear, but felt the pain and saw the flash as his own life seemed to fly from him." This is the near-death experience from which he is reborn "when he came back into his life from where the bear had knocked him away" (160- 61).

When Russel returns, he finds Nancy and a new cycle begins: "Where there had been an end there was once more a beginning" (163). In a folding of life into death, she gives birth "from the center of her center" to a stillborn child; in this act she too is transformed by the journey as the "woman-girl became a woman in the night" (165). Russel has nearly lost his life in the fight with the polar bear, but he has regained it; she loses the life inside her, but she does not lose herself. Russel takes the dead child out into the snow, and at this moment the most problematic sentence of the novel occurs: "And he wished that he had stayed in his village" (166). What does this imply about the nature of our hero? I believe that, despite his manly acts, this thought reveals to us the delicacy of the moment of balance between adolescence and manhood, a moment in which a young man, in travail, might wish never to have begun.

Crossing the Return Threshold

Paulsen ends Part Two of the novel with a race to safety. The poetic incantation "So began the race" punctuates the final journey to an unfamiliar village on the northern coast, a village symbolically on the edge of the land. Heroism is imperative now, and Russel thinks "I must win this race. . . . I must win" (169). The action of the novel ends in a suspension not unlike the one with which it began. Paulsen indicates that we are in a half-way world with the "man-boy" and the "woman-girl" on the edge of adulthood, and he signifies their return with the final word "Back" (171). In the interpretation of the archetype it is an ambiguous term, because in the

monomyth the hero returns to his own community with a boon, an elixir with the power to restore the world (*Hero* 246). This reference to "Back" implies here the return to civilization, to the salutary effects of a human community. Paulsen does not develop Russel's return in the novel. He leaves us, instead, with the hero's achievement, his song of identity.

What, then, do we make of the landscapes of this novel and their significance in the monomyth? The hero has adventured out of the familiar land into darkness, accomplished his adventure and returned from what Campbell calls "yonder zone." Campbell tells us that the "great key to the understanding of myth and symbol" is that "the two kingdoms are one. The realm of the gods is a forgotten dimension of the world we know" (*Hero* 217). In the case of *Dogsong*, Russel learns that the old ways are not to be forgotten, that their continuity enriches the culture. "Dogsong," the final section of the novel, is Russel's singing of the song that he became in his hero journey through the geography of the arctic, the geography of the imagination, and the geography of the soul.

Part III: "Dogsong"

Although the novel's action ends in the northern village, time obviously passes between Parts II and III; "Dogsong" locates us back in Russel's home village to complete the cycle of the myth, the 360 degrees signifying totality (*Hero* 223). The

song is also evidence that Russel has survived the impact of the world (*Hero* 226), the final event of the monomyth cycle. He has learned how to be a man, and the words of the song allude to his wife, his children, his dogs, and his village where he has achieved fulfillment: "I stand by the sea and I sing. / I sing of my hunts / and of Oogruk (177). From a journey backward in time, outward to the edge of the world, and inward to his soul and to the collective unconscious of his race, Russel sings of the future, the perpetual hunt with the magical companions: " Out before me they go / . . . / in the long line out." The final image of unity wraps the journey up in one image: "They go, I go, we go. They are me." This is a moment of the greatest pride when he sings himself into the grand hunting tradition of his race.

The Significance of Archetypes

I have set out here to demonstrate the general principles of myth criticism which I now summarize briefly. First, most myth critics agree that creating myths answers a basic human need and that creating myths is inherent in our thinking process. Second, myth creates a matrix from which literature emerges historically and psychologically. Consequently, plots, characters, themes, and images in literature are essentially complications and displacements of elements in myths and folktales. Third, in addition to stimulating the creative artist, myth provides the critic concepts and patterns to use in the interpretation of literary works. Fourth, the mythic quality

of literature is part of what moves us deeply as we respond to what we read. Arching above these principles is the idea that the "real function of literature in human affairs is to continue myth's ancient and basic endeavor to create a meaningful place for man in a world oblivious to his presence" (Vickery 119-120 qtd. in Leitch ix).

Given these principles of interpretation, of what value is the monomyth to us? Campbell suggests that the monomyth is at the very heart of our knowledge and our experience of becoming. In making human life a metaphor, a journey of obstacles, myth helps us achieve a higher level of consciousness. Myth helps us cope with life situations by opening up our consciousness, and myth criticism helps us see through literature in more powerful ways than the restrictions of formalism:

The whole sense of the ubiquitous myth of the hero's passage is that it shall serve as a general pattern for men and women, wherever they may stand along the scale. Therefore it is formulated in the broadest terms. The individual has only to discover his own position with reference to this general formula, and let it then assist him past his restricting walls. Who and where are his ogres? Those are the reflections of the unsolved enigmas of his own humanity. What are his ideals? Those are the symptoms of his grasp of life. (*Hero* 121)

My analysis of *Dogsong* is both about Russel Susskit's grasp of life and simultaneously about our life journey from childhood through adolescence to adulthood. At the very center of the novel are issues about the conflict between the worlds into which we are born and the worlds to which we aspire. As we read, the mythic journey moves us out of the "land of common day" into a "mystic realm" of

transformation which helps us see a new world of possibilities beyond the restrictions of youth, a world—and a future—to which we can aspire.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Fabricating Reality: Writing and Truth in *The Moves Make the Man*

Every work, every novel, tells through its fabric of events the story of its own creation, its own history . . . the meaning of the work lies in its telling itself, its speaking of its own existence.

Tzvetan Todorov

In the first sentence of Bruce Brooks' *The Moves Make the Man*, a nameless narrator announces a writing project: "Now Bix Rivers has disappeared, and who you think is going to tell his story but me?" (3). Although we do not learn until the end of Chapter 2 that this is thirteen-year-old Jerome Foxworthy speaking/writing, we discover in this first chapter that the story will be about his friend Bix Rivers, also thirteen, about why he ran away, how he has been misrepresented, and why Jerome is the only person who can write his story. The most important element for me in this first chapter centers on the act of writing, both physical and metaphysical. Jerome has the tools to write: "I have plenty of pencils, number threes all sharp and dark green enamel on the outside, and I have four black and white marble composition books" (3). He has the time and the place: "I got all summer ahead of me, and room to myself, cool up under the eaves" (5). He also has knowledge—"I can tell you some things" (3) and "a lot more besides" (4)—and he has an audience: "You just listen to me and you'll be getting the story, all you want" (4). Perhaps more importantly than all of this—materials, time, space, knowledge—Jerome has a

motivation to tell this story: He is "angry at the lies being told" (5) about Bix, and he encourages us not to "pay any mind to all this creepy jive that is going around town and school" (4). At the very heart of his story is the relationship between this creepy jive and its opposite: "It's me gets to tell the truth" (5). This is a story, then, not just about the friendship between Bix and Jerome; it is also a story about language, about how language constructs us in the world—either as "creepy jive" or "the truth"—and about how we construct a world in narrative, how we weave the texture of people's lives into the fabric of story, about how we fabricate reality. These linguistic elements of Jerome's text invite me to read it from the perspective of structuralist literary theory.

An Introduction to Structuralism

A Perspective on the Word *Structure*

The meaning of structure in structuralist thought differs from its use as we have seen it in both formalism and archetypal theory. The Formalists, of course, preferred the word form to structure because they wanted to define a work of art as a formal unity achieved through the repetition of imagistic patterns and through the resolution of tensions and paradoxes. Archetypal theorists wanted to move beyond the notion of form as an internal governing principle and to locate a work as a structure within the larger framework of literary history. Terry Eagleton refers (tongue-in-cheek) to

archetypal criticism as "an enclosed ecological recycling of texts" (92) that tends towards "literary waffle, dropping each work into its appointed mythological slot with computerized efficiency" (93). In terms of my major metaphor of tracing the weave, we trace the weave inside the Formalist text, and we trace the archetypal text as woven into the fabric of world literatures. These theories share with structuralism an intense interest in system, but structuralism parts company with the other two because its system is based on linguistic structures. Tracing the weave as a structuralist means analyzing the way in which meaning is produced rather than the meaning itself. Structural analysis aims to reveal the linguistic systems at work in literature (Jefferson 95).

Linguistics and Literature

What does "revealing these linguistic systems at work in literature" mean for the practical reader and interpreter, the critic? It means, first, that we must reorient ourselves to the nature of the units of thought with which we communicate. The pioneer of modern linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure, postulated a basic "grammar" for language. This new grammar, unlike the traditional grammar that dictates the rules of proper usage in a language, described instead "the elementary processes by which language functions to make meaning and achieve communication" (Rowe 27). Structuralism becomes an "'attempt to rethink everything through once again in terms of linguistics'" (Jameson in Eagleton); consequently, "language, with its problems,

mysteries and implications, has become both paradigm and obsession for twentieth-century intellectual life." Linguistic theory becomes a paradigm or model for thinking about language and about texts; in its subsequent development, structuralism was applied to "objects and activities other than language itself" (Eagleton 97) to explore cultural codes such as fashion, media, and social systems.

It is not my purpose to trace the history of the development of structural theories, but it is necessary to establish the basic principles out of which the theory operates as I use it here for literary analysis. First, definitions. Saussure (Rowe 29) redefined a word as a basic unit of thought and communication. In its traditional usage a word meant something fixed, a solid entity. Saussure replaced word with sign and defined a sign as a unit composed of two functions. The first was its acoustic function which he called the signifier. The second was the conceptual image into which this sound was translated in the mind of the receiver; this he called the signified. Saussure explained that the number of languages in the world excluded the possibility of an accepted universal meaning for a sign. Instead, signs were based on usage and consensus inside the culture using a language. This theory of signs came to be called semiotics, and making meaning occurred as a consequence of reading the signs of a culture. Since meaning was dependent on social relations, the sign, Saussure concluded, was arbitrary: its meaning was subject to change in time and place. Saussure's second doctrine was that language precedes thought, that language is more than a tool for expressing ourselves. Language, then, could itself represent an

organizing system for making meaning. Its structures could serve as the paradigm for constructing our thinking about the world. To reveal the signifying systems at work in literature, a structural analysis concentrates more on the signifiers than the signifieds: "Structuralist theory is not a source of methodological tools capable of generating new interpretations of texts, but an exploration of the conventions that make interpretations possible" (Jefferson 95). In other words, in keeping with the origin of the word theory in the Greek word *theorein*, meaning "to look at" (*Webster's* 1223), structuralist theory gives us another angle of vision, another lens through which to examine a text.

Binary Oppositions and Truth

Saussure also held that meaning was produced in a social context of relationships between signs: every term had an opposite term which was necessary to establish meaning within a sign system. He referred to this concept as difference. Later theorists elaborated this difference, renaming it "binary opposition," a concept critical to my reading of *Moves*.

Cultural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss clarified binarism using the terms raw and cooked. "Cooked," he explained, can only be understood in terms of its opposite, "raw." The "human act of making either food or meaning has a double significance: it makes its world (culture) by designating an 'other' domain: nature, primitive, nonhuman" (Rowe 30-31). Now to the important question: What are the

implications for this idea in our reading and interpretation of fiction? In the opening pages of *Moves*, Jerome designates a binary opposition out of which he will tell his story: the "creepy jive" of lies and "the truth." Truth is a problematic term in structuralist theory because meaning is not *a priori*, that is "not formed or conceived beforehand" (*Webster's* 98). Rather, meaning is a human conception, a social construction, and language is the only way in which we construct meaning. The words truth, lies, and fake are the essential threads out of which Jerome constructs his text, and my purpose is to trace his weaving of these terms into his construction of the world. My reading will illustrate Todorov's idea in the epigraph to this chapter: Every work of literature is about language, and whatever meaning is constructed in and from that work is generated as the work speaks itself into being.

As I have said, structuralist/semiotic approaches (the words have become interchangeable) focus on how language and literature convey meaning rather than on what a text means. The reader examines a piece of literature in a process which French theorist Roland Barthes describes as "the structuralist activity," a way of working which provides me with a way to "see" *The Moves Make the Man*.

The Structuralist Activity: Creating a World

Barthes declares that linguistics (along with economics) is the "true science of structure," and he describes a "structural man" who is "defined not by his ideas or his

languages, but by his imagination—in other words, by the way in which he mentally experiences structure" (Barthes 1196). A structural reading is systematic, "a controlled succession of mental operations with a specific goal." This goal is the reconstruction of an object so that its rules of functioning are revealed. Here Barthes uses a word that helps us see ourselves as readers performing these mental operations on texts. What we work with, he says, is not the object itself, but a simulacrum, an image, a representation of the object but not an imitation. The work that structural man does, he says, is to take the real, to decompose it, and then to recompose it. What we achieve as a result of our activity is something new, a "veritable fabrication of a world which resembles the first one, not in order to copy it, but to render it intelligible" (1196-97). In other words, one way to understand a text is to construct/reconstruct it from its sign system. Another way of saying this is that structural analysis is an act of creation in contrast to the Formalistic act of discovery and the archetypal act of classification and elaboration. We will not locate the meaning of the text in our version of it, the simulacrum we create. Because the rules of discourse change, the verbal interchange of ideas changes; there is no absolute truth. The concept of truth changes as language changes, emerging not from some pre-existence but from the sign system of a culture. In this respect, we have to remember that Jerome gives us, then, only one version of "the truth" of Bix Rivers—his version; and our reading of *Moves* is the process, Barthes contends, through which we render Jerome's version intelligible.

Constructing Texts, Constructing Ourselves

From a structuralist perspective, "our language creates the world and the people who populate it. We create ourselves by the language we use, and we create others in the language that we use to characterize them" (Lefkowitz 70). In a complex way, reading *Moves* involves us in a double structuralist activity: Jerome Foxworthy constructs the world of his story out of his memory and out of the words he finds in Bix Rivers' notebook. In reading the novel we construct the world of Wilmington, North Carolina, out of Jerome's language—that is all we have to work with. Because he is always talking about the act of writing, Jerome's text illustrates "one of the most productive of structuralist ideas—"that literary works are ultimately about language, that their medium is their message." Todorov argues, for example, that the ultimate subject of *The Thousand and One Nights* is "narration itself, the act of storytelling" (Hawkes 100). Here I am making this same argument for *The Moves Make the Man*, adding that, in the spirit of Todorov's idea, the act of storytelling also makes the storyteller.

Ways of Working: Dissection and Articulation

What work do we do in "the structuralist activity"? We perform two operations: dissection and articulation. Barthes explains that we dissect the text to find "certain mobile fragments" or units, each of which has no meaning in itself but acquires meaning from its relationship to other units in the text. These fragments taken

together create a group, an "intelligent organism" which we can know because it is different from all other groups in the text. Once these units are dissected, discovered, we articulate the rules which associate them, thereby reconstructing the text. Barthes points out that this is the simulacrum, not the world as we found it, but a new object created by our operations upon that original object (Barthes 1197-98).

New Ways of Reading

So, we ask, why does all of this structuralist activity matter to us? Structuralism is important, Barthes explains, because it produces something new: "a new mode of thought (or 'poetics') which seeks less to assign completed meanings to the objects it discovers than to know how meaning is possible, at what cost and by what means." Formalism involves a kind of structuralist activity, too, but Formalists assure themselves that "one correct meaning" is possible. Barthes reminds us that "the world has never stopped looking for the meaning of what is given it and of what it produces." As a consequence of the structuralist activity, the reader does not become "man endowed with meanings" (a Formalist perspective). Instead, he becomes a new kind of reader, "man fabricating meanings" (1198). In reference to my major metaphor, this fabrication becomes another way of tracing the weave of texts. Fabrication in this sense does not mean deception; it means creation and invention.

Structuralism and Teaching

Structuralism is particularly productive for me as a teacher of language and literature, a provocative alternative to my earlier training as a Formalist. I agree with Terry Eagleton about the possibilities of structuralism:

It provides a new answer to the question: What is it that we are teaching/studying? The old answer-Literature-is not . . . wholly satisfactory: But if what we are teaching and studying is not so much 'literary works' but the 'literary system'—the whole system of codes, genres and conventions by which we identify and interpret literary works in the first place—then we seem to have unearthed a rather more solid object of investigation. Literary criticism can become a kind of metacriticism: its role is not primarily to make interpretative or evaluative statements but to step back and examine the logic of such statements, to analyze what we are up to, what codes and models we are applying, when we make them. (123-24)

My reading of *Moves* provides just such an analysis of "what I am up to" as I trace the weave of the words truth and lies in Jerome's text.

Reading Jerome's World as Literature

My reading depends on the binary opposition of these two terms, and I want to frame it in Barthes' comments on the oppositional nature of literature itself:

Literature is both intelligible and interrogating, speaking and silent, engaged in the world by the course of meaning which it remakes with the world, but disengaged from the contingent meanings which the world elaborates: an answer to the man who consumes it yet always a question to nature, an answer which questions and a question which answers. (1198)

These oppositions accurately describe the structures of *Moves*. Jerome writes to make the world he has experienced intelligible, but in the end he is still interrogating the world and the way he has perceived it. He lives in uncertainty about his friend and even about the meaning of the experience. Jerome speaks throughout the text, but Bix remains silent, his writing in the notebook constructed for us through Jerome's selection and perception. Jerome is engaged with the world as he lives it in his imagination, but he leads us to believe that during this summer of writing he is isolated, disengaged from the world, the figure of the romantic writer aloft in his garret, exploring the mysteries of thought and being. Jerome is also making a world, a fictional world that we read, but he is remaking the world of experience out of the repository of memory, and the world he makes for us is subject to and limited by his powers of perception and discrimination as well as the language he owns. And finally, in that unending questioning and answering of human life, Jerome finds some answers. Although he sets out to tell us "the truth," truth becomes problematic in the novel. We realize through the story that there are so many ways of seeing that no one, not even Jerome, can know the truth.

Keywords: A Basic Structuralist/Semiotic Vocabulary

In my dissection and articulation of *Moves*, I will be using the following basic terminology of semiotic analysis:

Semiotics. The study of signs; the practice of interpreting different kinds of sign systems—linguistic, behavioral, cultural.

Sign. Anything that bears a meaning, including words, images, behaviors. Meaning is determined by the code or system in which the sign appears.

Code/System. A network within which signs function.

Decode. To figure out the meaning of signs in a system.

Text. A complex of signs (linguistic, imagistic, behavioral, musical) that can be interpreted. (Maasik and Solomon 711-14)

Reading *The Moves Make the Man*

An Overview

In its broadest outline, the story that Jerome narrates covers one calendar year, beginning chronologically at the point in his life when he first meets Bix Rivers in the largest white high school in Wilmington, North Carolina. Smart and ambitious, as signalled by his nickname "Jayfox," Jerome is the first black student chosen (in a token integration) to attend this school. The binary opposition of black/white is constant in the texture of his story.

Chronologically the narrative traces the developing relationship between the two boys whose families exist almost as binary oppositions. Jerome's fatherless home nurtures him and gives him security and identity in the guidance of his powerful mother while Bix lives with the uncertainty of his brooding stepfather and the trauma of his mother's hospitalization for mental illness at Duke Hospital. Thus another set

of oppositions governs the structure of the story: present mother/absent mother, present stepfather/absent father. As I shall discuss later, this opposition of presence/absence provides the overarching structure of the novel.

The "moves" of the novel's title refer specifically to the game of basketball which draws Bix and Jayfox together in the novel's central action. Bix's stepfather has not allowed Bix to see his mother since her hospitalization. To earn the right to visit her, Bix challenges his stepfather to a game of basketball. If he wins, his stepfather agrees to take him to Duke to visit his mother. Jayfox teaches Bix the moves; he wins the challenge and goes to Duke, taking Jerome along. There Bix makes his most complex and difficult move, disappearing from Durham at the end of the novel.

Presence/Absence as Structure

In an application of semiotic analytical processes to the story, the moves that Jerome makes with language are as important for us as readers as the moves he teaches Bix Rivers. These moves begin in the first words he writes. Beginnings and endings assume special status in structural analyses: "Silence or a blank page is rich in potential, but how we break the silence establishes expectations of what will follow" (Lefkowitz 71). When Jerome breaks the silence in his first sentence, he constructs several binary oppositions that govern the story's structure: "Now, Bix Rivers has disappeared, and who do you think is going to tell his story but me?" (3).

Bix's absence/presence creates the tension that moves the novel forward. The you/me binarism implicates us in the story: We have been absent from the action as it occurred, but now, in Jerome's story, we become present. Out of silence Jerome speaks us into being, constructs us as the readers of his text.

Jerome structures the novel in four parts which reflect absence/presence as an organizational device. Throughout the novel Bix is literally absent, present only in language. To clarify the importance of the opposition in the structure, I will map out the novel here by chapters, providing more details of the narrative structure in which Bix appears, suffers a trauma, disappears, and reappears, only to disappear again.

First Part

- Absence 1. Jerome sets up the story.
2. Jerome gets Bix's notebook.
- Presence 3. Jerome first sees Bix play baseball.
4. Details of the game; Bix's excellence on the field.
5. Bix's mother appears.
6. A concession truck arrives.
- Absence 7. Bix and his mother disappear.

Second Part

- Absence 8-14 Summer. Introduction to Jerome's world; going to school: classes, basketball tryouts (Racism: inside/outside binarism)
- Presence 15-19 Introduction of "Braxton Rivers, the Third"; Jerome's mother's accident; home economics class where Jayfox and Bix team up; mock-apple pie.
- Absence Bix breaks down in class, disappears.

Third Part

- Absence 20-21 Jerome's mother gets well; Jerome plays basketball with stranger and wins a lantern.
- Presence 22 Bix reappears as a voice in the darkness and disappears.

Last Part

- Presence 23 Jerome teaches Bix hoops; Bix refuses to fake and disappears.
Time: six weeks
- Absence 24 Two months pass.
- Presence 24 Bix returns with a plan to beat his stepfather in basketball.
25 The game: Bix finally fakes and wins.
26 Bix at Jerome's for dinner; the mock-apple pie fake
27 Trip to Duke; the ultimate fake as Bix denies his mother's identity and disappears; Jerome injured.
- Absence 28 After the fake: Bix never returns. Summer: Jerome recovers and writes the story. Bix sends a postcard without a message. Fall and school approach.

The final image of the postcard from Bix—without a message—ends the novel in another shape of the absent/present opposition: silent/speaking. This binarism constitutes an appropriate structural balance to the first sentence of the novel.

Fakes: Truth and Lies

This mapping of the novel also illustrates how the word fake is manifest in the truth/lie binarism. Throughout Jerome's experiences with Bix, he narrates encounters with language in which someone attempts to shape "truth" out of their sign system;

what Jerome sometimes perceives is that these attempts are little more than linguistic fakes, "lies."

Language Codes in the Novel

Several language systems are at work in Jerome's story, and tracing the weave of truth/lies in the novel means that we must pay attention to how these language systems represent and construct reality. Among the codes which I shall explore are the black/white cultural code and its language, the sports code (basketball, and, to a smaller degree, baseball), and the educational code at Chestnut Junior High School. Jerome's brother Maurice, studying to be a psychologist, also constructs people in his clinical, scientific code, but space prohibits me from discussing that code here. Dissecting and articulating these language codes is the way that I will systematize the world of the novel.

Language as Cultural Code

We determine meaning in language on the basis of where we perceive difference, and another important consideration of semiotic analysis is that where there is difference, there is also hierarchy. One of the binary oppositions is superior, the other inferior (Lefkowitz 73). Jerome illustrates this idea in Chapter 1 of his story. He tells us that language differences distinguish black people and white people in their

attitude toward church and life. Experience has taught him this. Following Bix's disappearance from Durham, Jerome has gone to the white church to talk to the minister about Bix. He has been turned off by "their high service mumbo" and their "organ with the fake pipes." Mostly though he has been turned off by the language of sin, and he distinguishes the opposition of two ways of thinking about life in the world through the terms "moaning" and "singing." He decodes "moaning" as a sign of white religious values while he decodes "singing" as a sign of the power of spirituality in the black community:

Listen, that is just about all white people go to church for, to hear some soft old duck moan at them about all the sins ever been committed and all going to keep right on being committed so we might just as well give up on getting good, and settle for getting a nasty thrill watching the sins go on. You don't hear that kind of giving up at the colored churches around here, I can tell you. People mostly go there to sing, which is different from moaning any day. (4-5)

In a world where he hears white people "moaning about children full of sin" (4) and lying about Bix Rivers, he determines to tell the truth.

Language as Sports Code

A crucial language source for Jerome's story is a notebook that Bix Rivers has kept. Knowing that the notebook exists, Jerome sneaks into Bix's house the night before this story begins and takes it. Through the notebook Bix speaks in the coded language of baseball, his favorite sport. The key phrase in the notebook is "SPIN LIGHT," baseball code for the pivot that a shortstop makes on double plays. Jerome

decodes this "pretty phrase" as an indication of how Bix has constructed himself in the language of baseball: "it went straight to Bix's head and spun HIM, because the next page . . . is covered with nothing but repetitions of the words SPIN LIGHT SPIN LIGHT SPIN LIGHT SPIN LIGHT SPIN LIGHT." At the bottom of the page Bix has written one sentence: "I WILL PLAY MY GAME BENEATH THE SPIN LIGHT" (7).

Bix's sentence sets up a number of oppositions in the novel. First, the word play suggests an activity that is fun; game is synonymous with fun in the traditional sense, but in the novel the word game takes on multiple meanings in different contexts. For example, the game that Bix plays with his stepfather is deadly serious. The word light suggests its opposite, dark, and as the novel unfolds this pair also takes on multiple meanings in their contexts. At one level they mean the simple situation in which Bix and Jerome play basketball in the dark, a lantern their only light. In another context, they assume the connotations of tragedy and comedy in the boys' experiences. Although Jerome sets out to construct Bix's story, the notebook teaches us that Bix has constructed himself in language, too. As a final manifestation of the truth/lie relationship, Jerome assures us that he has done nothing wrong in taking the notebook: "I am not a trespasser. I am not a thief. I am Jerome Foxworthy, and that's it, Jack" (10). Here he constructs himself inside his own sign system; and this is the first time he names himself in his story.

Black/White Coding

The chronological narration of the story proper begins in Chapter 3 where Jerome holds forth on his preference for basketball over baseball, underscoring the truth/fake opposition with "Hoops is for tricksters" (12) and introducing us to Bix in a black/white opposition. After he first sees Bix at a basketball game, he describes him as a "flashy white dude with a face like one of those Vienna choir boy singers that I saw in Raleigh" (14). At this game, Jerome also sees Bix's mother for the first time, coding her white beauty in traditional language, setting her in opposition to his own mother:

She was about the most beautiful woman I ever saw. I think my momma is pretty and stronger-looking than any other person, but this white woman just knocked you in the eye like looking at a painting of a tree hanging over a lake in the state museum
(23)

Bix's mother is a vision of light with her skin "this golden color" that "gave off light right off her face" and with her hair "all flashing too." Her clothes remind him of his mother's difference: "She wore this black dress with all kinds of style. It looked as natural as an apron on my momma" (23). Nonetheless, he detects something missing, a foreshadowing of her absence in Bix's life. He constructs a simile for this absence: it's "like when somebody without an arm takes off his shirt for gym class and you get a look at his stump and it's red and splotchy but of course you can't mind because it's not his fault" (24). His language functions metonymically, suggesting a broken/unbroken binarism with which he later relates Bix's mother to his own

mother. At the close of this section Bix disappears before Jerome can speak to him; Jerome expresses an inexplicable anger, a form of love/hate growing out of his fascination for Bix's playing and his inability to talk to him after the game.

Moves: Coding the Self

Thinking about the summer which follows his first sight of Bix, Jerome tells us what the title of his novel means and how moves define him, construct him. His moves, he says, were "like a little definitions of Jerome," definitions he creates in the basketball code: "Reverse spin, triple pump, reverse dribble, stutter step with twist to the left, stutter into jumper, blind pass. These are me. The moves make the man, the moves make me" (44). He is a virtuoso player, but Maurice admonishes him not "to get unrounded and all off balance" (45) by spending too much time on only one side of himself. His mother reads Jerome's behavior as a sign, and when she hears him talking to himself, she remarks that it sounds to her "like a code" (46), her use of the term implying something secretive. However, in Jerome's explanation of what was happening, we read the code as semiotic, a systematizing of self and life. What is actually happening is that he is constructing himself in this self talk: "What I was saying was, what my imaginary opponent in one on one was seeing—all my moves like a catalogue. I was naming them off and telling him what they were doing to him" (46). In constructing this opponent, Jerome realizes that he is being remade through his obsession with moves: "I never needed anything but myself making my

own game. . . . So how come all of a sudden I am dreaming up some bad dude to beat" (47). This bad dude is an alter ego, a second self, suggesting the opposition self/other. Jerome describes his talk as "weird jive" (47) and as "whispered jive" (48), these words reinforcing the truth/lies opposition. He is able to decode his own language as he realizes that this jive has been part of his construction of Bix Rivers as the imagined opponent, born of his anger: "Here I am playing for the hate of somebody I don't know and saw once and when I saw him he was all beautiful"; he explains further that "I don't even notice when I have built him up for something and tear him down every day instead of playing sharp and simple" (48). The oppositions love/hate and built up/tear down suggest the opposition game/life where the first term codes fun and the second codes no fun. Jerome acknowledges this opposition, concluding, "But you know what? I had no fun" (48).

School Languages as Codes

The Language of Race

Chapters 8-14 explain Jerome's life before Bix Rivers enters it again, and they reveal many sign systems through which the world is constructed for him and the way he decodes signs in those systems. First, the matter of integration, governed by the oppositions white/black and inside/outside. Jerome discusses the "crackers" as "the ones doing the keeping out" and the ones "to start letting jigaboo boys and girls into

their school. Nobody ever thought to make the jigaboos let little crackers into their schools. Always it was them that did the keeping out and letting in" (49). Here Jerome mixes two sign systems, the black one in which whites are "crackers" and the white one in which blacks are "jigaboos." "Cracker" decodes as a disparaging term for poor Southern whites (*Webster's* 302), and "jigaboo" designates a white racist term for blacks.

Jerome is chosen to attend Chestnut Street Junior High School, and when he gets there, the principal, Mr. Terence, codes him into the white system as "a new racial item and a new intellect item too." Mr. Terence's language is not lost on Jerome who tells us, "He used words like that, which is fine with me, I know lots of words" (55). In other words, Jerome can decode the principal's speech. He is not bothered by this, and he doesn't mind it when some of his black friends later call him "Crackerjack, which means somebody who likes white people better and moons around them" (53). Three classes at Chestnut enable Jerome to notice the ways in which language constructs identity: English, French, and Communications.

English and Narrative Truth

He objects to the "crap" that Miss Burno the English teacher picks for them to read aloud in class; he sees it as a manifestation of the unreal/real nature of education: "It was this magic-kingdom kiddie jive, with a hero the same age as us, supposed to suck us in and make us feel like, Hey, that could be little old me in that

magic kingdom, whoopee-doo!" The real situation, he explains, is "knowing that we were listening to an old spinster read a book in North Carolina on an afternoon in a room with the heat turned up too blame high." This situation reveals another form of the truth/lies opposition: "It's dishonest when people try that on kids" (58), and it also suggests the opposition adult/child in the world, adult functioning as the superior term.

From our semiotic perspective, once again we see Jerome able to decode the sign system in these narratives as real/unreal and honest/dishonest:

And did you ever notice how these writers think up a weird problem that just gets you interested, some magician against a mad king with a dragon all balanced off in this *system of things* (emphasis mine) that might happen at the same time, or something. . . . (58)

When you might be believing the world in that narrative, he says, "instead of working it out, just when you get interested to see how the guy is going to pull it off, well, there is some big sudden catastrophe or invention that bails the good guy out" (58). What disturbs him here is that the writer doesn't have to "think up anything clever": "And Suddenly There Was a Flood, or some crap like that, and all the baddies washed out to Bad Person Island out to sea. Bye-bye, baddies, see you in the next book, baby, only you be wearing a new hat" (58). The world, Jerome, tells us, is not as simple as good/bad and cannot be constructed in this way. This, he implies, is no way to tell a story. This whole passage becomes an illustration of the structuralist position on the reflexivity of narrative such as Todorov describes it.

French and the Social Construction of Reality

The inside/outside opposition in Jerome's world takes on a different meaning in French class where language allows him to see for the first time "how something from school might work outside in the world" (59). His experience illustrates the structuralist concept of the social construction of reality, how we create ourselves and our world in language. The French class itself is a microcosmic sign of this construction, "a little world all by itself":

When I walked in I felt completely new. I never realized before then how much my way of talking was what made me who I thought and other people thought I was. Take away your habits with words, and check out who is left, and you see that a lot of things can be fixed if you let them go with the lingo. . . . (60)

What he most likes, he says, is "the idea of being able to start from scratch and build myself a personality step by step through the words I talked, knowing every step what I was doing" (60). In the white/black world, he acknowledges that French "gave me some hints of what some of the best things about white people were" (61).

Communication and Body Language

Communications class, on the other hand, is "full of nothing but useless trash" (61), and Jerome is not interested in getting "hip to body language" (62). This class, he says, "was the worst case of white man's genius I saw. Make something out of nothing and turn everybody very nervous" (63). He is happy when he gets to drop

the class, but Mr. Egglestobbs, "this flashy dude" (61) figures prominently in presenting Jerome a new perspective on basketball.

When Jerome attempts to go out for basketball, several binarisms intersect. The coded languages of sports intersects with racism (white ball/nigger ball) and with truth/lies. The Communications teacher, seeing Jerome cut off his trousers for the tryouts, exclaims, "Deceit! Bald deceit," explaining that "Basketball, of all games, is the one most dedicated to physical lying" (67). He admonishes Jerome against this physical untruth: "What a tangled web we weave when we practice to deceive" and "You'll see boy—the body will be avenged for its servitude to untruth!" (67).

Egglestobb's comments remind us that behavior is one of the languages out of which we speak ourselves. His use of the word practice encourages a contextual analysis. In basketball, of course, the word means play, but he suggests practice as the act of deception. In this context he also implies a mind/body opposition, a situation in which the mind deceives the body, enslaves it. In a historical context we might extend this into a black/white binarism of slavery/freedom. What Jerome discovers when he tries out for basketball is that he is not free to play.

Sports Language

Playing White

At the tryouts, the coach informs Jerome that participants have been "invited"; this is another manifestation of the inside/outside world that Jerome has described earlier in his thinking on integration. Nonetheless, he moves onto the court and makes a brilliant play which the coach calls a "typical jig trick shot," adding that Jerome can "jigaboo around in the air and shoot with your flat little nose" (71). Undeterred, Jerome challenges the white athletes to a game of one on two. "Nigger ball?" they respond, by which Jerome understands that they mean "make it-take it" (72). During the game the coach calls the plays, always against Jerome, signals the turnovers with "White ball," and finally declares, "Five-nothing, white takes it . . . Take a hike, boy" (76). The racial epithet "boy" reiterates the slave/free and black/white binarisms. Boy is a word culturally coded to emasculate black men, to deny them the power to construct themselves as Jerome is doing in the story. Jerome decodes the tryouts, contextualizing them in the game/life binarism. Watching one of the white players hit two foul shots, he thinks, "Guys like him turn into beautiful robots when you give them the chance to shoot. I wonder what they do with the rest of their life. They sure don't play defense" (75). His comments suggest the kind of behavioral analysis that anthropologists make when they study cultural systems, the ways in which people live.

Playing Black

Anthropologist Dan Rose's analysis of the cultural code represented by the black game of "make it-take it" illuminates the game that Jerome plays with the white students at Chestnut. In "Knowing Ourselves," the first chapter in his ethnographic study *Black American Street Life: South Philadelphia, 1969-71*, Rose writes about an experience he had just after he moved to Philadelphia.

Coming upon a group of black youths playing basketball in an abandoned school yard, he is attracted to the moves they make. As he joins the game, he immediately becomes aware that "some of the moves they were trying were so exaggerated and risky that none of us had any hope they would work"; these moves alerted him to "differences between the way I had grown up playing in the white middle class of small midwestern towns and the way the game was played in urban, black Philadelphia" (1-2). As the game proceeds, he realizes that the black youths are "playing at playing" and that he cannot push himself "into the style of what they were saying and doing." In other words, he can decode neither their language nor their behavior. He explains that the white boys he learned to play basketball with had broken the game into its components—jump shots, free throws, two-handed and one-handed shots, dribbling, driving: "Each fake, each type of shot—whether jump shot, set shot, or layup—was a single Cartesian piece. We only assembled the pieces when we started the game" (2).

Later, Rose came to understand that the play of the black youths resulted from the way they constructed the game. Their game was conceptually different from the white construction of play in basketball: "There were no discrete moves, no special, bracketed shots. It was as if the game was a continuous flow from the beginning to the end." He sees that the "entire repertoire of adventurous tactics—dribbling, driving, shooting, passing, faking, running a play—formed an unbroken performance" in which "the emphasis was on performing when one received the ball, not as an isolated star, but within an organic flow of self and other, ball and basket" (2).

Jerome reads the differences in the way people play basketball similarly:

Most kids do not practice passing when they play by themselves, only shoot, shoot, shoot. Most people do not have any idea what you are doing when you cut loose of the ball while driving with the obvious intention of gunning it up—though that is just the point, looking like you are going to pop but instead you dish it and it's a snowbird for the dude under. A pass is a sharp gift to a shooter. (130)

Just as Jerome sees two sharply differentiated attitudes toward practice, Rose, as an anthropologist whose goal is to understand the sign system, decodes the game he witnesses. He sees it as a black/white binarism: "I was in a zone of American life that revealed cultural differences separating us. Our dialects were different, our styles of playing the game were different, the rules were different, and the kind of humor on the court was different" (3). This difference structures Jerome's life at Chestnut, where whites play inside and blacks remain outside. Later, Bix must come

inside Jerome's conceptualization of the game before he can win the match against his stepfather.

Teaming for Truth and Lies

Faking It

Bix Rivers is present in Chapters 15-19 which conclude Part Two of the novel; he and Jerome meet in home economics class where they are enrolled because both of their mothers are absent from home and school officials feel that the class will help them learn how to take better care of themselves. Members of the class team up to make a mock-apple pie, a fake made from Ritz crackers. This whole section reinforces the truth/deceit opposition in the novel as Bix and Jerome win the contest for best "apple" pie, a win that leads to Bix's breakdown in front of the class. He cannot accept the idea of winning through a lie, a fake. As the class proceeds, he grows hysterical, calling the class a "Bunch of liars" and yelling "SHUT UP! . . . NOBODY IS TELLING THE TRUTH!" He yells "APPLE PIE MY ASS!" and scratches his hand until it bleeds. The episode ends when he falls asleep in the nurse's office, both he and Jerome covered with cinnamon and blood so that Jerome names them "Cinnamon blood brothers" (117). After this experience Bix disappears for two months, but he and Jerome remained linked in the story by the absence of their mothers. Jerome's mother is seriously injured, broken, when an elevator in

which she is riding falls four floors. Unlike Bix's mother, however, she recovers from her brokenness. Her recovery reestablishes the broken/unbroken, insane/sane, absent/present oppositions that define the relationship between the two mothers.

Jiving and Truth

When Bix reenters the novel in the last chapter of the short Third Part, language re-establishes his relationship with Jerome. He comes to the darkened and abandoned forest court where Jerome practices, and Jerome sets up a bantering dialogue in which they construct themselves in the dark as Earthman (Bix) and Boo, an alien from Saturn (Jerome). This humorous dialogue is short-lived, Jerome realizing that Bix "was not doing the right thing with my jiving" (153). The scene explodes in Bix's angry accusation: "You lied to me. You told me lies" (154). He declares the "truth" that motivates his anger; he has never told a lie: "NO! NEVER!" (155). We later learn that this affirmation is itself a lie.

Learning Hoops

After Bix's return, Jerome teaches him hoops, likening the investment in time to the act of writing a book: "The thing is, you can't do it all at once, no more than you can sit down and write a book like this all at once either. You have to go day by day in pieces. So with hoops, what piece do you pick first?" (167). This reflexivity about the act of creation underscores the social construction of reality. The writer

picks the pieces and constructs the world of the text. The structuralist critic picks out pieces and reconstructs the text.

The work of learning hoops is accomplished mostly in silence, but when Jerome asks Bix to break the silence by answering the question "Bix, do you like me enough to be best friends?" Bix explodes in a tirade against language: "What is this huge big deal about words?" (172). He rejects words as signs of friendship, pointing out to Jerome that all the hours he has spent with him and the way in which he has listened to him ought to be proof enough of friendship. Bix trusts behavior more than words. Language, he explains, is unnecessary and even dangerous: "All this talking crap is stupid, stupid, stupid, it's for shrinks and females . . . it can drive people CRAZY" (172). We read his fear that he, like his mother, could go insane, and we understand that his obsession with truth helps him maintain his sanity.

After Bix has learned all the fundamentals of basketball, he is ready, Jerome says, to learn the moves. Bix's refusal to learn the moves creates the greatest tension between the boys. Bix will not fake because a fake is a lie. Jerome responds by referring to some of the truth/lie binarisms that have structured the story so far: "Fakes are lies, cracker pies are lies, jokes are lies, everything is a lie to you that is just a move to everybody else" (179). Bix replies that he will not participate in "your fancy jigaboo stutter crud," and Jerome tells him to "stick with your truth" and "play your straight game" (181). Bix disappears now for two months as the absence/presence opposition continues to structure the story.

Faking in the Games for Truth

Three games structure the remainder of the novel. In the first, Bix finally must make a move, a fake, in order to win the game against his stepfather and be allowed to visit his mother in Duke Hospital. In the second, before he goes, he fakes out Jerome's family in a social game that he constructs by himself. In the third, he plays the most serious game at Duke, makes the biggest fake of his life, and disappears from the world of Jerome's text.

Jerome and the (Re)Construction of Self

Bix disappears for two months, and his absence gives Jerome time to remake himself through practicing moves; he has lost part of his identity in the stressful relationship with Bix. "Hungry for some good old swift deceit," he tells us, for two weeks he never once moves straight, and as a consequence he feels the changes in him: "It was like meeting this new dude, invisible, who was made by the moves, and what they made was me" (185). Structurally this is a re-weaving of the earlier episode in which he constructs his imaginary opponent, but now he constructs the text of himself: "Move and move and move, making me up after every twist and spin. . . . The moves piled up and combined into each other and every night I was a new set added to the old, complicated but smooth as air" (186).

The Challenge Game

Bix returns with a plan: He wants to see his mother, so he challenges his stepfather to a basketball game, asking Jerome to referee. He explains that he will not fake to win: "If there ever was a game that must be won straight, then this is it. This is the game for the truth. This is where truth comes up the winner" (199). His language underscores the win/lose binary opposition implicit in gaming. The relationship between the boys reaches its turning point here as Jerome lashes out at Bix: "If I am such a badass sinner, save my poor self from the nasties of the lying life!" He challenges Bix to stop his "mystery jive," and when Bix asks him to go along to Duke, he asks why: "What for Braxton? To keep you on the truth, to make sure you don't tell no lies to your momma?" He realizes that he has gone too far, that he won't "be able to help that kid anymore" (201). This is the point in the novel where Bix begins to (re)construct himself as a combination of truth and lies.

Before the game, however, we learn why Bix is so obsessed with the truth. Bix's stepfather tells the bitter story of Bix's lie to his mother, one lie that pushed her over the edge of her mental fragility into insanity. As her illness worsened, he says, she came one night to Bix's room. Naked, she held a knife in her hand. When she awakened Bix to ask "Do you love me?" he answered, "No, mother." She did not understand the meaning of that "No." In the context and pain of that night, Bix meant "No" only as "not now." She read his response in a larger context of "not ever." Distraught, his mother ran into the hall, stabbed herself in the wrist and elbow, and

then thrust her arm through the window, jerking it back and forth on the broken glass. This violent story of Bix's lie sets the stage for "the game for truth." Bix cannot win the game until he makes "the first fake of his life" (223), but it is a move that isolates him, pushes him inside himself and outside the world of Jerome and the stepfather who are, Jerome says, both "out of the picture" (224). Bix constructs himself in this inside/outside world for the rest of the story.

The Dinner Game

Binarisms structure the second "game" as the novel moves to its conclusion. The absent/present relationship between the two mothers undergirds the events which occur when Jerome invites Bix to have dinner with his family the night before they are to leave for Duke. Jerome refers to "my together momma [sane] next to his electric shock momma crazy [insane] in the hospital" (231). The world of the dinner game reflects the black/white binarism from the moment Bix arrives and greets Jerome's brother Henri with "Dig it" and slaps "Henri the five too hard" (233). Bix is speaking in an unfamiliar code, and he does not understand its language as Jerome points out to us: "Now, dig it is a very stupid thing to say when being introduced." This fake is only the beginning, however, as Bix greets Maurice: "What be happening, Maurice, my man?" a question that Jerome labels as "jive talking junk" (233). What follows is a show that is "one hundred percent total pure jive" as Bix speaks in a more cosmopolitan code, slipping into that language "like flipping the

switch" (236). What Bix attempts to construct is a social game of body language and talk that incorporates the skillful fakes of Dan Rose's Philadelphia game. Jerome describes how Bix appears to win as he creates a "whole flow" (238) of moves that culminate in "the big move of the night" (239).

Bix has brought along the dessert which appears to be a "good old American white-boy apple pie," a form of cultural identity, a "truth," but which turns out to be the mock-apple pie of home economics class, a fake, a lie. Although the brothers do not discover the lie, Jerome and his momma do, just as Bix falls apart and "the whole big show" runs out of steam. Bix's constructed self ("a balloon toy") deflates into a "slinky pale scared kid" (241) in a matter of seconds, a form of the sign other/self.

From a structuralist perspective this is a critical moment which is defined in the word/wordless binarism that is woven throughout the text. In his anger at Bix's disrespect for his family, Jerome tells him: "You are too screwed up for words, man" to which Bix replies "Which is why I'm such a good buddy for you, isn't it?" Here the answer/question and question/answer binarism that Barthes locates at the heart of literature expresses itself. Bix's question leads Jerome to more questions and to a sense that Bix has moved outside his sign system: "There really were no words for Bix when he went off my map" (243), the map here being language and language being the structuralist way to map the world. The encounter leaves Jerome with a new sense of perception about the way we think, about what happens when the sign system fails, "when your thinking itself does not come in words anymore like

packages of meaning. Instead the thoughts pass into you and out and you are left feeling something without ever having seen the printing" (244). This represents the word/wordless relationship in which ambiguity obscures clarity, in which meaning may appear meaningless.

Bix's question provides Jerome an answer: "True, I had decided, he was right about the beyond-the-words business being the big thing pulling me through our friendship," but it also leaves him with the attendant question: "But whether or not that made him good for me I was not sure" (244). This ambiguity about the value of their relationship remains a problem throughout the novel, and it is not resolved at the end. Such ambiguities always exist in human life and are always part of the relationships that people share.

The Duke Hospital Game

When Jerome sees Bix's mother in the hospital, he expresses his response in terms of absence/presence. She is emaciated, her beauty gone, and he thinks of her in opposition to his mother: "I would never have said that person on the bed was anybody's momma." Her eyes signify her absence; they "looked at you and you saw they were deep, but there was nothing behind them, only an empty room far away waiting to be filled with whatever fell in front of the gaze" (264-65). The most compelling opposition here, I think, is the image suggested by the empty room, waiting to be filled, an absent/present binarism that pinpoints exactly this moment in

the structure of the novel. When Bix moves to give her flowers, her absence speaks: "Whose little boy are you?" Her question constitutes the ultimate erasure of Bix as her son, and it precipitates the rest of the scene.

In response, Bix fills the empty room with a mother, a fake, in what Jerome describes as "the greatest single move in history," the "fastest and completest fake possible" (267). He moves to Hazel, the woman in the next bed, embracing her and sobbing loudly, "MOTHER, MOTHER, MOTHER." His own mother comments, "Look—he loves his mommy" (268), and a question seems to arise in her: She begins to realize who Bix is, begins to become present as his mother, but Bix, sensing this, begins to construct his absence.

Jerome tells this part of the story in the game language: "It was a race, after all. He had the moves, but she was thinking as fast as she could" (270). As Bix leaves, he has to snap "a quick head fake" to get by an old man in his way, but he does it, walking out of the room and into his final and lasting absence. Jerome realizes that this presence/absence condition has defined his story: "Watching Bix until he vanished—that is just what I always did, wasn't it? I stood outside Bix's door where it was a little crazy inside and I watched." The whole friendship has been an inside/outside one, and he finally acknowledges that "I could not get into Bix" (272). In the final move of the scene, Bix's mother literally knocks Jerome out of his world. She connects to Bix too late, tragically shrieking "BIIIIXXXX BIIIIXXXX BIIIIXXXX," twisting wildly about, her elbow striking Jerome "right between the

eyes" so that "everything just went white on me" (274). Structurally this literal knockout also knocks him out of his black/white sign system. The book he writes becomes his effort to make sense of that color-coded world.

Semiotics as Construction

In the final images of the novel Jerome reminds us of the binarism which has structured the story he has written. These binary oppositions are the ones with which the story began: absence/presence, silence/speaking, truth/lies.

After he returns from Durham, x-rays reveal that Jerome has a concussion and so he is absent from school for the rest of the year. In addition he has remained silent about what happened in the hospital—"I STILL haven't talked" (278); this novel is how he breaks the silence. Bix communicates his absence with a postcard from Washington, D.C., a sign of his silence: "On the back the message spot is blank," but Jerome can decode the blankness as presence/absence: "He could find his way in that city and lose his way for everyone else" (279). He reads the postcard as the truth/lies binarism: "It might be the tender Bix reaching out to let me know; but it also might be the next in a long line of great fakes" (280). The question/answer nature of literature is reflected in Jerome's sense of ambiguity about what the story he has told. The story, he tells us, has helped him see "how things you start and stop so neatly by yourself do not always end on the spot." The game/reality binarism ends the

novel in two pairings: "The fact is—if you are faking, someone is taking," and "This is true for me, juking through the woods with my ball, and for Bix, cutting through the streets of DC with his life" (280). Jerome's word juking, a relatively new addition to our language (1967), means to fake out of a position (*Webster's* 654). Its modernity opposes its counterpart cutting, which sports an etymological history dating back to the thirteenth century and suggests multiple meanings for Bix's actions, from sharply penetrating the city, to moving swiftly, dissolving, intersecting, and absenting oneself—as from a class (*Webster's* 318). Or, we might add, from a story, from a world.

The last sentence of the novel, "There are no moves you truly make alone" (280), stands in binary opposition to the first sentence: "Now, Bix Rivers has disappeared, and who do you think is going to tell his story but me?" (3). The first sentence asks a question, and the last sentence offers an answer: Bix's story becomes in Jerome's words a series of moves. The you of the first sentence, the individual reader of the story, becomes the implied us in the last sentence's "no moves you truly make alone." Likewise, the lonely but me in the first sentence becomes the implied we in the last.

Both sentences taken together reflect a structuralist model of communication constructed by Roman Jakobson, which I introduced in Chapter 2. I repeat it here because it illustrates the way in which Jerome Foxworthy has narrated his story:

about language, take the process of speech as their essential subject matter" (*Prison-House* qtd. in Hawkes 99). Reading *The Moves Make the Man* within this theoretical context, we can conclude that it is a novel about writing a novel, it is language about the ways in which we use language, and it is a story about its storyteller.

Beyond Structuralism

Jacques Derrida challenged and critiqued structuralism in the early 1970s, subsequently displacing it with post-structuralism, but structuralism and semiotics continue today to have many adherents. The general premises of the structuralist theories have not been so much superseded in subsequent theoretical developments as "taken for granted as a starting point" (Marshall 51) as I shall point out in my work with Jane Tompkins' "A Short Course in Post-Structuralism" in the following chapter. Later theories which developed out of or in response to some structuralist principles include deconstruction, reader-response, and feminism. Deconstruction finds that texts contain not one but several competing signifying systems, often contradictory so that they undercut their own meanings. Some reader-response theories focus on the subjectivity of the receiver of the message, thus making it possible to construct an infinite number of meanings in transaction and interaction with the text. Feminist criticism uses the concept of coding to explain the process by which the female body

has been negatively inscribed into a patriarchally dominated culture where binary oppositions consistently oppress women both in texts and in life (Lefkowitz 71). In subsequent chapters I shall work out these implications of structuralist thought in the independent but related critical theories which followed it.

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CHAPTER SIX

The Text Playing/Playing the Text: Unraveling *The Giver*

The deconstructive critic seeks to find, by this process of retracing, the element in the system studied which is allogical, the thread in the text in question which will unravel it all. . . .

J. Hillis Miller, "Stevens' Rock"

While I was writing this book, perhaps the greatest number of comments I received about my enterprise were related to the way of reading that I am demonstrating in this chapter—deconstruction. I encountered attitudes about this critical approach which ranged from open hostility to frustration and professed ignorance. Some people asked me, "What in the world is it?" Others said, "What do you do with it?" A few wondered about the possibility of a comfort zone within the complexities of the theory: "When you have some free time, would you sit down and tell me what it is in plain English so I can understand it?" One well-known young adult critic, knowing that I had read her writing, told me, "I think I'm a deconstructionist, don't you?" Those who were openly hostile maligned deconstruction as a way to declare the meaninglessness of meaning. This is not so, as I shall demonstrate.

I confess that it is difficult to talk about deconstruction in "plain English," but that is one of the exciting challenges I face. I know that some will criticize me for reductionism, for grossly oversimplifying an anti-metaphysical and critical stance that

cannot be simplified, but I declare again that my purpose is to provide a point of entry, an opening into this fascinating way of reading, not to offer any expansive overview or any prescription of the definitive way "to do" a deconstructive reading. As in the previous chapters, I contextualize the theory and offer descriptions and definitions of key terms. Most importantly, though, I depend on my reading of young adult fiction to demonstrate the theory at work. In this chapter Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, the 1994 Newbery Award winner, is the vehicle in which I will travel the deconstructive terrain.

Deconstruction/Destruction: The Anatomy of Anxiety

Perhaps part of the anxiety about deconstruction results from a misconception about the meaning of the term. It does not mean, as it is sometimes popularly construed, to "dismantle" or to "destroy" as though it were "a fancier form of 'destruction.'" As a way of reading, it does not aim to obliterate the meaning of a text but to open up a text so that meaning multiplies indefinitely through a process in which we resist complacency in our readings. In this resistance we rigorously question our positions and our statements, "even reading texts against themselves" (Lynn 90).

Reacting to the misunderstanding of deconstruction as destruction, critic Barbara Johnson offers a clear statement of what deconstruction aims to do and the methods in which we employ this exciting way of reading:

Deconstruction is not synonymous with destruction. . . . The de-construction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or arbitrary subversion, but by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself. (*The Critical Difference* 5)

Deconstruction, then, does not lead to chaos or to meaninglessness. Johnson's word careful suggests the nature of the approach. Deconstruction is careful about the language of the text, about the differences in meaning, the significations, of words. When Johnson uses "teasing out," she implies the spirit in which we approach a deconstructive reading. Perhaps one of the reasons for hostility toward deconstruction is that some critics of the theory do not understand this "teasing" spirit. It is important "to approach deconstruction with anything but a scholar's sober and almost worshipful respect for knowledge and truth. Deconstruction offers a playful alternative to traditional scholarship" (Murfin 420). This spirit of play, then, is directed toward what Johnson calls "the warring forces of signification within the text itself." As we learned in dealing with structuralism, Saussure posited meaning as a function of binary opposites; we understand cooked because we understand raw. Deconstructive thinking explodes this simple binarism. Deconstructionists believe that the arbitrary relationships among words create infinite possibilities of signification. Therefore, the unified system of meaning which the structuralists hoped to construct

is impossible. Johnson reflects this deconstructionist stance when she concludes that "If anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not the text, but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signification over another" (*The Critical Difference* 5).

Locating Deconstruction in the Theoretical Landscape

What does Johnson's conclusion mean in relation to the theories I have previously demonstrated? In opposition to what the New Critics assert, deconstructionists declare that no "one correct reading" is possible. Similarly, they find the archetypal critics' claim that one schema can organize all literature to be erroneous. And, despite what structuralists contend, deconstructionists say that we cannot define the unity of a work by articulating one meaning among many possibilities. Instead, they believe, we must learn to live in the uncertainty of multiple interpretations, to accept what they call the undecidability of the text. This is a powerful notion that can liberate our thinking about our ways of reading and about the ways in which we look at our world as it appears to be constructed in language. The undecidability of meaning in *The Giver* will be the focus of my interpretation(s) of that novel.

Deconstructionists, however, do not reject all the notions of the theories that preceded theirs. On the contrary, deconstruction builds on some of these notions. A good way to locate deconstruction in the landscape of theory is to examine the ways

in which it shares and modifies ideas from the theories which preceded it. Especially important in this respect are New Criticism and structuralism, both of which orient interpretation toward structures in the text.

New Criticism

Deconstruction shares the method of close reading with New Criticism; in one sense a deconstructive reading is "like an extension of a New Critical reading." Deconstruction "requires a norm or a convention to work against." Beginning with an assumption that a text is logical and coherent, this way of reading exposes incoherence in the text by identifying the unity that appears to be in the text and then dividing and dispelling it (Lynn 94). In specific terms related to New Critical thinking this means that deconstruction challenges the notion that a text has a stable meaning. Recall that New Critical readings acknowledge textual ambiguities and then demonstrate how they are resolved to create a harmonious, unified work of art. Demonstrating the resolution of textual tensions, therefore, is one of the key tasks of New Criticism. Deconstructionists also recognize these ambiguities, but they show how it is impossible to resolve them, how the inability to resolve them opens up the possibilities of multiple interpretations (Vesterman 177).

Structuralism

Deconstruction emerged in response to structuralism and is one of the theories which are called post-structuralist; many critics use the two terms interchangeably (Bressler 71). In "A Short Course in Post-Structuralism," Jane Tompkins notes that

"Saussure is where post-structuralism starts; everything follows from his *Course in General Linguistics*" (20). Deconstruction, however, refutes the structuralist claim that semiotics, the study of human signification, would create a science, a unifying system, "a holistic way of studying the world and its inhabitants" that could provide "the key to understanding the form and meaning of everything from an African village to a Greek myth to Rousseau's *Confessions*" (Murfin 423). Saussure contended that meaning is possible because of the differences that exist between words as signs. These differences emerge as a function of the arbitrary relationship of signs to other signs in the linguistic system. Jacques Derrida, the French philosopher whose name is synonymous with deconstruction, contended that signifieds were also arbitrary, known only by their relationships to and differences from other signifieds. In other words, the meaning associated with a word as a sign cannot be counted on as anything permanent; that meaning is always shifting, being transformed by the relation of one sign to another (Bressler 75). Therefore, nothing like a unified text is possible; all readers produce different readings in the ways in which they interpret the language relationships in a text, in which they explore what deconstructionists call the "play" of language.

Deconstruction is, of course, more complex than these comparisons illustrate, but having established to some degree the ways in which deconstruction is both similar to and different from other theories, I want to offer several readings of Lois Lowry's *The Giver* as preparation for my deconstructive reading of the novel.

Introduction to *The Giver*

General Overview

The Giver takes place in a futuristic world governed by the principle of Sameness, by the apparent absence of pain, war, and human suffering. Life is controlled by The Book of Rules, and the inhabitants understand themselves and are valued in terms of their work and their ability to contribute to communal life. We soon learn, however, that devotion to the principle of sameness does not obliterate difference; in fact, difference gives the ruling powers a standard by which they assign members of the community to their life's work. Age is the most significant determining factor of difference, and difference in the very young and very old results in what the inhabitants believe to be "release," a beautiful and peaceful departure from the life of the community. We learn as the novel weaves its complex tale that "release" is synonymous with death, and more exactly, murder. Those who cannot contribute to the productive life of the community are freed from it. For example, infants who do not conform to standards of behavior in their first year of life are "released." Similarly, the elderly, when they can no longer care for themselves, are also "released."

The central characters in the novel are the nameless Giver of the title and Jonas, chosen at age twelve to be the Receiver of cultural memory, both its pleasures and its pains. What the Giver gives and the Receiver receives, however, is privileged

knowledge unknown to all other members of the community. Theirs are honored positions, and they share the knowledge of a past society full of opposites such as war/peace and hot/cold, of life differentiated by colors, emotions, feelings, and choices. Their knowledge is a well-kept secret, potentially destructive of the constructed life of the supposedly "ideal" world they inhabit. As Jonas accepts his position as the Receiver, we come to realize through his eyes that a perceived utopian vision is inverted into a dystopic nightmare. The turning point in the novel comes when he makes a choice between these two visions.

Chapter Overviews

The following overviews of chapters provide details which support the readings that follow.

Chapter 1: Language and Feelings

The first emphasis of the novel is on language as Jonas attempts to choose the right word to express a feeling. In the first section of the chapter, we follow him to school where his classmate Asher gets a lesson in language precision. In the second half of the chapter, we participate in the ritualistic life of the family unit: at day's end the members of Jonas's family tell their feelings during the day, the parents logically explaining each feeling away. Jonas' parents are named only by their functions as Father and Mother, and their occupations represent gender reversals, he a

Nurturer, she a Worker in the Department of Justice. Jonas has a younger sister, Lily.

Chapters 2-5: Education for Sameness

In Chapter 2, we learn about the community's highly standardized educational system. Each year in December school children attend a Ceremony in which their growth is acknowledged usually by a distinction in dress and by greater responsibility. An infant named Gabriel is introduced into the novel; he does not fit the behavior code, so Father has secured a one-year reprieve from release in the hopes of nurturing him to conformity. The chapter introduces the concept of differentiation in work assignments as both parents narrate their training experiences. In Chapter 3, Gabriel comes home to spend the evenings with the family, and we learn that Jonas has had an unusual experience in tossing an apple: The apple has seemed to change in mid-air, but he cannot explain how.

As part of the ritual of growing up, young people volunteer hours to the community. In Chapter 4, Jonas visits his friend Fiona who volunteers in the House of the Old. There he hears a release story in which the look on the released person's face is describes as "Pure happiness" (32). We come to understand that all the language of the community is functional: for example, fellow students are not classmates or friends but groupmates, an indication of a communal identity that erases individualism.

Balancing the evening ritual of telling feelings, Jonas participates in the family's morning dream-telling. When he reports a dream about sexuality and his attraction to Fiona, his mother explains that these are his "first Stirrings" (37) and that he must be treated with pills so that they do not recur. The Speaker of the community often reminds them that "STIRRINGS MUST BE REPORTED IN ORDER FOR TREATMENT TO TAKE PLACE" (37). Anything, it seems, that might indicate uniqueness is de-emphasized or destroyed.

Chapters 6-8: The Ceremonies of Maturation

These chapters describe the ceremonies of maturation and culminate in the Ceremony of Twelves where Jonas is named The Receiver of Memory. The Chief Elder tells the Twelves that the first eleven years of life have been spent "learning to fit in, to standardize your behavior, to curb any impulse that might set you apart from the group," announcing that "Today we honor your differences. They have determined your futures" (51-52). During these ceremonies we get a good idea of the standard procedures for constructing Sameness.

Newborns are assigned a birth number; they remain nameless until the Ceremony of Ones in which they receive a name and are placed with a family that has requested a child. Mothers do not give birth to their children; this work is assigned to Birthmothers. After the first year, subsequent years are marked by distinguishing characteristics, such as dream-telling, learning precision in language, and interdependence at age three. Threes also receive another distinction—back-buttoned

jackets. Sevens receive front buttoned jackets, the "first sign of independence, the first very visible sign of growing up" (41-42); Eights begin volunteer hours and wear a jacket with pockets. Nines get their first bicycle, the "proverbial emblem of moving gradually out of the community, away from the protective family unit" (41); Tens have their long hair cut. Elevens receive little distinction other than the receipt of a pocket calculator.

In Chapter 8, Jonas is named the Receiver of Memory, the most important of all the assignments, because he has been observed to possess the qualities of intelligence, integrity, courage and bravery, wisdom, and the Capacity to See Beyond" (62-63). This special vision, connected already to the tossed apple, is critical in his new role. Although to be selected Receiver is the highest honor, Jonas is full of fear.

Chapters 9-16: In Training

Jonas' new position results in alienation from Asher, and he learns that the last Receiver, who failed at the task, was assigned a name "designated Never to be Spoken," indicative of the highest degree of communal disgrace (67). When he is given the eight training rules for his new role, he is surprised to learn that he may question any citizen of the community and expect to get answers, and he is shocked to discover that he may lie.

Chapters 10-16 detail Jonas' daily training with The Giver, culminating in a forbidden act that will eventually change the course of Jonas' life. He learns that he will receive the burden of "memories of the whole world" (77), all that goes beyond

their time, "all that is Elsewhere—and all that goes back, and back, and back (78).

The Giver transmits memories of both pleasure (snow, hills, sleds, and sunshine) and pain (sunburn).

Jonas begins to change as he confronts ambiguities. He does not report dreams, feeling that he is "not ready to tell a lie, not willing to tell the truth." A major event occurs: In a dream of snow and sledding, he senses "a destination: a something—he could not grasp what—that lay beyond the pace where the thickness of the snow brought the sled to a stop" (88). When he has another seeing beyond experience in which Fiona's hair changes, The Giver tells him that he is beginning to see the color red, which also explains the apple's apparent transformation in midair. The Giver explains these transformations: although the life of Sameness appears to be colorless, the "genetic scientists are still trying to work the kinks out" so that they can master Sameness (95).

As Jonas' memory develops, he questions what lies beyond the community's boundaries where he has never travelled: "The land didn't end beyond those nearby communities. Were there hills Elsewhere?" (106). When he requests more complex feelings, he experiences suffering through the memory of a sledding accident in which his leg is broken. When he gains knowledge of hunger and warfare, his impulse is to change things, but he finds that he is locked in by his duty to the collective memory. He does, however, make an important and illegal decision about the use of memory.

Gabriel has continued to cry at night, and Jonas transmits a pleasant memory to him; the child settles into sleep.

In Chapter 15 when Jonas receives the memory of the suffering caused by warfare, he hears "the cries of wounded men, the cries begging for water and for Mother and for death" (119). He experiences memories of happiness in Chapter 16—a birthday party celebrating individuality, a scene celebrating the bonds between a man and a horse, and, best of all, a Christmas memory. He transmits these pleasant memories to Gabriel, and his success at quietening the child during sleeping hours makes Jonas a hero to his parents.

Chapter 17-20: The Desire for Change

Jonas' initial feelings that he is powerless to effect change in the community give way to a revolutionary idea as Jonas and The Giver contemplate the possibilities of a life in which the citizens of the community share the burdens of the collective memory of pleasure and pain. The turning point comes when Jonas watches his father "release" an inferior identical twin. As Chapter 20 ends, Jonas and The Giver plan to deceive the community into thinking that Jonas has been lost in the river while he actually escapes to Elsewhere, forcing the community to deal with its collective memories of both pleasure and pain.

Chapters 21-24: The Escape and Beyond

The carefully wrought plan falls apart when Jonas learns that Gabriel is to be released the next morning, having failed his year's reprieve. He flees into the night

with the child, and they journey away from the community into an isolated landscape. Although search planes comb the area, they are not found. They survive on memories of food and warmth as the landscape grows strange, the nights grow cold, and snow surrounds them. Jonas finds a sled, and they begin a rapid descent down a hill, but we do not see the sled arrive anywhere or Elsewhere as we slide out of the pages of *The Giver*.

Reading *The Giver* from Familiar Perspectives

My purpose here is to suggest possible ways of reading the story I have just mapped out. These mere skeletal readings suggest interpretive possibilities using the critical approaches in the preceding chapters.

A New Critical Reading

Tensions in the novel emerge out of the conflicting world views of Sameness and Difference, worlds which we might name Somewhere and Elsewhere. Sameness is represented by the community in which the story takes place, and difference is represented by the memory of the world, the repository of knowledge known only to one person, The Giver and then, when the time comes, to The Receiver. Patterns of imagery support this essential tension as the novel unfolds an emotionless, painless, colorless "perfect" world order governed by logic and The Book of Rules; but we

also become aware of a world where feelings, suffering, color, and imperfections exist. These tensions are resolved in Jonas' plan to escape to freedom from Sameness and in so doing to free his community from the stasis of Sameness. Although we are uncertain of his future at the end of the novel, we are confident that the larger community will benefit from his vision of a world where difference constitutes culture. A recurrent image in the novel, the river that winds through the landscape and under the bridge, suggests the theme of continuity over time and space; symbolically flowing rivers function "not statically but dynamically," becoming "the historical reckoning of time itself" (Biedermann 285). The major movement in the escape over the river is to travel from a static world into a dynamic one.

An Archetypal Reading

For all the children
To whom we entrust the future

This is one of the most productive ways to read *The Giver* and is supported by the implications of Lowry's dedication of the book, quoted above. From this perspective Jonas' story is a form of the archetypal monomyth, the quest of the hero. The journey outward from the community occurs as a consequence of the hero's vision of another world to which he travels, returning with the powerful knowledge that will save his first world from ruin.

Joseph Campbell has said that the monomyth can handle any one portion of the quest story while excluding others, and *The Giver* dwells almost exclusively on the

early stages of the myth. The call to adventure is clear: Although Jonas' developing knowledge at first frustrates him as to the possibility of effecting change, his relationship with The Giver continually opens up a vision of a world beyond. The Giver functions as the hero's helper, the aging mentor who prepares him for the quest, as Oogruk functions for Russel in Paulsen's *Dogsong*. The novel climaxes after the first threshold crossing, and we see only some of the tests and trials that confront the hero. Nevertheless, we are already convinced of the transformational power of this journey: Although Jonas will not return, his departure itself necessitates a new orientation toward community life since the citizenry will be forced to deal with the memories Jonas has received and will be led by The Giver to cope with the dynamic world these memories create.

Locating this monomyth more specifically in one literary tradition, we can interpret the novel as a form of the Christian myth in which Jesus saves his people by the ultimate sacrifice of his life. In this reading, Jonas becomes a Christ figure and the child Gabriel might suggest a watchful angel, a supernatural companion who accompanies Christ into the white world of heavenly purity (the final snowy landscape of the novel) after his metaphoric death and resurrection.

In this mythic interpretation, names take on powerful and symbolic meanings. Jonas, for example, is the Greek form of the name *Jonah* (Kolatch 153), the figure in the Old Testament "whom Jesus accepted as a prototype of himself" (Frye 190). Jonas' location in the community of Somewhere is not unlike Jonah's stay in the belly

of the big fish in the Biblical narrative. The community becomes a form of the fish as leviathan. Leviathan symbolizes "the whole fallen world of sin and death and tyranny" (Frye 190) from which the Messiah releases humankind by killing the monster. Seen in this way, life inside the community of Sameness, as opposed to the world of difference in memory, is a symbolic form of death from which the hero is reborn in his escape from the belly of the big fish.

Other names which support a Biblical interpretation are related to the Old Testament patriarchs. These include Asher, one of the sons of the patriarch Jacob and whose name in Hebrew means "blessed, fortunate, happy." It is Asher's happy nature, for example, that gets him the assignment of Director of Recreation. Other names of characters in the novel which reflect the Hebrew tribes in which Jesus located his ancestry include Caleb, who led the Israelites following the death of Moses (Kolatch 49), Isaac, the father of Jacob (Kolatch 145), and Benjamin, the youngest of Jacob's twelve sons (Kolatch 35). The number twelve in the novel reflects the organizing principle of patriarchy in the Old Testament as seen in these twelve tribes of Israel as well as in the number of Christ's disciples in the New Testament.

The name of The Giver's daughter—Rosemary—is particularly symbolic in such an archetypal reading. The word fuses Mary, the name of the mother of Christ, and Rose, the multifoliate image that Dante chooses to represent the community of believers in Paradise in *The Divine Comedy*. Rosemary is also appropriate for the

character in the novel because it comes from the Hebrew word *Miriam*, meaning "sea of bitterness, sorrow" (Kolatch 423). I don't want to push this reading too far, but Rosemary's release makes it possible for Jonas to become the Receiver. In this sense she becomes a symbolic mother who gives "birth" to the son that will save the world.

The apple in the novel recalls the Garden of Eden and the Fall from Innocence; that apple is an agent of transformation just as is the apple that Jonas tosses to Asher. The movement out of the community is a journey away from a constructed innocence into the world of experience.

Finally, The Giver may represent a God figure, willing to sacrifice this metaphoric son for the larger good and for a future with promise and hope. Both father and son share the god-like gift of the "Capacity to See Beyond."

A Structuralist Reading

The unity of the novel is achieved in the binarisms absence/presence, Giver/Receiver, knowledge/ignorance, pleasure/pain, and sameness/difference. The novel opens in linguistic instability and explores the process in which the unstable world achieves balance through the knowledge of language. As Jonas learns more about the past and is able to express difference in language, language becomes the system with the power to unify life in the community. It is the instrument with the power to transform Somewhere into Elsewhere. Binarisms expressed as war/peace

and love/ hate are essential for stability in the world view. Human life exists between the utopian vision and the dystopic nightmare.

These readings are only possibilities, each one limited by its attempt to declare structure as the unifying principle in the making of meaning. A deconstructive reading, on the contrary, defies such limitations, opening instead worlds of possibility.

Understanding Deconstructive Reading

Deconstruction is difficult to define, "impossible to freeze conceptually" because it is "above all an enacted strategy, an interpretive praxis that must be 'seen in action' . . . before it can be understood and adopted" (Atkins and Johnson 2). Understanding how to enact this reading strategy means understanding a change in attitude toward the reading process, a working knowledge of the terms logocentrism and différance, two key words in Derrida's philosophy, and a good sense of the concept of textuality—to see the text as a working space, a place of play.

The Reading Process

Mariolina Salvatori describes the contemporary attitude towards the reading process in this way:

The reading process . . . is an extremely complicated activity in which the mind is at one and the same time relaxed and alert, expanding meanings as it selects and modifies them, confronting the blanks and filling them with constantly modifiable projections produced by inter-textual and intra-textual connections. (Salvatori qtd. in Atkins and Johnson 4)

Salvatori's language situates us in a different world from the more traditional one in which we read for the main idea and support that idea with details from the text. She indicates the active and transformative nature of reading in the words related to how we make meaning: selecting, modifying, expanding. Confronting the blanks and filling them indicates both that the text is incomplete and that the reader works to make it more complete by making "inter-textual and intra-textual connections." Salvatori explains that as a result of this process both the text and the reading of it remain "indeterminate," that is, full of uncertainties in terms of meaning (Atkins and Johnson 4).

She contrasts this kind of reading process to most students' actual reading practices: "But it is precisely the kind of activity—demanding, challenging, constantly structuring them as they structure it—that our students are either reluctant or have not been trained to see as reading." She describes the traditional, accepted way of reading—synthesizing to identify one main idea in the text and settling "too soon, too quickly, for a kind of incomplete 'blocked' reading. Concluding that we should work with students to enable them to "tolerate and confront ambiguities and uncertainties in the reading process," she explores how this kind of reading can affect the way that students write and then read their own texts (Atkins and Johnson 4).

One way to understand post-structuralism is to see it as a challenge to the accepted way of reading, as a collapsing of the four traditional elements of the reading process—reader, method, text, and the reading—into "a simultaneity," that is "a single continuous act of interpretation . . . a single evolving field of discourse" (Tompkins 19-20). How and why does such a collapse occur? Post-structuralism asserts that we are constituted in language, that reader and text "are not freestanding autonomous entities but beings that are culturally constituted by interpretive frameworks or interpretive strategies that our culture makes available to us." In other words, we read both written texts and ourselves as texts through these strategies; such readings are "the only way that we have of conceiving who we are, of thinking, of having a 'self'" (20). This is powerful and provocative news for readers who perceive that they have a stable identity or that the words on the page mean exactly what they say. The key to understanding what Tompkins is saying here is this statement: "The things that we see, the things that are given to us, are already articulated according to some preexisting interpretive framework or system of differentiation" (20). At this point, Derrida's concepts of logocentrism and difference are useful to clarify the post-structuralist interpretive stance Tompkins describes.

Derrida, Deconstruction, and Différance

Logocentrism

As a philosopher of language, Derrida turned metaphysics and criticism upside down when he challenged the traditional western way of looking at the world. That world view, logocentrism, is based on the idea that everything operates out of a center which gives order and balance to the structures of the world. He explained this idea in "Structure, Sign, and Play":

Structure—or rather the structurality of structure . . . has always been neutralized or reduced . . . by a process of giving it a center or referring it to a point of presence, a fixed point. The function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure—one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure—but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the freeplay of the structure.

Realizing the radical nature of this concept, Derrida observed that "the notion of structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself" (Lodge 109). It was, however, this very "unthinkable itself" that Derrida challenged with his concept of différance.

Différance

To describe an alternative to logocentrism, Derrida coined the word différance, changing an *e* to an *a* to distinguish it from Saussure's term difference. In the playful spirit of deconstruction, the word is a pun derived from the French word *differe* which means both "different" and "to defer." In pronunciation it is impossible to hear the difference between difference and différance.

So, what does this all mean in terms of ways of reading? In a logocentric world we can affix a permanent meaning to a word, and, therefore, a meaning to a text since everything is centered and stable. In the world of différance, however, there is no center because meaning is "permanently deferred, always subject to and produced by its difference from other meanings and thus volatile and unstable" (Hawthorn 45). What Derrida wanted to do was explode language so that he could open up rather than limit the possibilities of meaning in human signification. As he explained it in *Positions*, différance is a "movement that consists in deferring by means of delay, delegation, reprieve, referral, detour, postponement, reserving" ("Implications" 8). In a second clarification, he again uses the term movement to define différance as "that which produces different things, that which differentiates, is the common root of all the oppositional concepts that mark our language, such as . . . sensible/intelligible, intuition/signification, nature/culture." Action continues to define the term in a third meaning where "différance is also the production . . . of these differences" as part of any signification process (9). Derrida defines a fourth metaphysical meaning (10) that goes far beyond the scope of my use of the term here. Différance, then, refers to a deferment of meaning, a difference created by oppositional concepts, and the act of producing differences. To understand how these meanings connect to the reading process, we must understand the modern concept of textuality.

Textuality: Unraveling the Weave

In "The Death of the Author," Roland Barthes describes textuality:

We know that a text consists not of a line of words . . . but of a multidimensional space in which are married and contested several writings, none of which is original: the text is a fabric of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture. . . .
(1132)

Barthes' "fabric of quotations" is perhaps woven in those culturally constituted interpretive frameworks which Jane Tompkins says identify us. Our process as readers using the deconstructive strategy is not to trace the weave of the text but to unravel it: "In multiple writing, in effect, everything is to be disentangled, but nothing deciphered." Decipher, of course, is a logocentric term in its meaning to "decode" and to make out the meaning "despite indistinctness and obscurity" (*Webster's* 330). "Structure can be followed," Barthes continues, "'threaded' (as we say of a run in a stocking) in all its reprises, all its stages, but there is no end to it, no bottom" ("Death" 1132). A key word here is reprises: One approach deconstructionists take is to follow the repetitions of form or language through a text to arrive at meanings based on these recurring structures. I shall trace such threads of repetition in my reading of *The Giver*.

Barthes' language about the nature of textuality reflects one of my metaphors for working with theory and the act of reading in this book—the figure of travelling in a landscape, locating ourselves in intellectual and imaginative geography. "The space of writing is to be traversed," he says, "not pierced" (1132). Unraveling the weave

of the text means that we travel in and out of the spaces as we travel over the fabric to see where all the threads take us.

Perhaps no single piece of writing has better helped me to understand these new ways of reading as has Barthes' essay "From Work to Text"; its title suggests the move from New Criticism's focus on the autonomous text as a finished work of art to the post-structuralist fascination with the shifting meanings of the woven fabric of human discourse. Barthes states six propositions about textuality, three of which are especially useful to me in my reading.

First, a text, he says, is a "methodological field," a place in which to work with language; most importantly, he stresses, "*the Text is experienced only in an activity, a production*" (*Textual Strategies* 74-75). This activity is the process of reading, and the production is the result of that reading, our interpretations.

Second, Barthes tells us that "The Text is plural," plural signifying more than multiple meanings; Barthes' plurality is "irreducible":

The Text's plurality does not depend on the ambiguity of its contents, but rather on what should be called the stereographic plurality of the signifiers that weave it (etymologically the text is a cloth; textus, from which text derives, means 'woven'). (76)

This stereographic image is a complex one that provides an unusual image for the theorizing of texts. A stereograph is a picture composed from a pair of stereoscopic images; when viewed through a stereoscope or "special spectacles," the image becomes three-dimensional (*Webster's* 1156). Later Barthes refers to the text as stereophonic, meaning that its fabric is also woven of the echoes of other texts. This

makes the text intertextual, a key term in post-structural thinking. This intertextuality means that the text is woven of what Barthes calls "quotations, given without quotation marks" (qtd. in Hawthorn 100); this idea does not refer to the simple and obvious allusions within a text.

Third, the notion of "play" determines how the text operates and how we read it. Barthes explains that "The text itself plays" in the same sense that a door hinge offers a door an element of "play," some leeway in its movement. The reader also "plays the Text in the musical sense of the term" (79). The Text in this concept is a musical score: "It asks the reader for an active collaboration" ("From Work" 80).

Collaboration suggests the transaction, the interplay, that goes on between text and reader, and, to extend the metaphor, a collaboration that necessarily results in a different musical interpretation for each performer (reader) based on the performance (interpretive) skills the player brings to and learns from the text.

The Giver:
The Text Playing/Playing the Text

To demonstrate the undecidability of meaning in *The Giver* as a function of how it "plays" and how I "play" it as a reader, I shall trace three of the principle threads that seem to hold the text together but which actually start unraveling it from the first pages. These three threads, each a function of the language systems in the book, allow me to proceed from a panoramic view of the world presented in the book to a

focus on one of its social institutions to a single word that is critical in the vocabulary of the citizens. These are the threads: (1) the pair of words sameness and difference, (2) the learning of language by the young, and (3) the word release as it is used by the inhabitants of the community. First, the concepts of sameness and difference represent the guiding philosophy, the metaphysics, the world view, of the community and the unraveling of these concepts in the book occurs in the repetition of eyes as a figure, as a metaphor for knowledge, for ways of reading the world. Second, the education in language occurs through lessons for the young, lessons designed to teach precision. Third, the word release, given its relationship to the two previous threads, is the single strand, that "element in the system studied which is alogical," as J. Hillis Miller says, "the thread in the text in question which will unravel it all" ("Stevens' Rock" 126).

Eyes as Figures: Mirror Images.

The figurative play of eyes in the novel occurs in relation to the characters who are selected to be the most different—The Giver, Rosemary, and Jonas—and also in relation to Gabriel, who insists on nonconformity in his infant years. We do not know the reason that Gabriel continues to cry at night despite his nurturing during the day; but from the descriptions of him in the novel, it is clear that he shares affinities with the other three characters who have the Capacity to See Beyond.

In Sameness, almost everyone has dark eyes, but when Father brings Gabriel home for his year of reprieve, Lily immediately points out that "he has funny eyes like yours, Jonas!" The observation makes Jonas uncomfortable because he and a Female Five are the only people he knows with "the different, lighter eyes" (20), and calling attention to such differences in citizens is considered rude. The metaphoric nature of the light eyes soon becomes clear. There are few mirrors in the community, mirrors being a way to recognize one's difference from others, but when he looks into Gabriel's eyes, Jonas remembers how distinctive the eyes are, that they provide a sense of "Depth . . . as if one were looking into the clear water of the river, down to the bottom, where things might lurk which hadn't been discovered yet" (21). This ability to see beyond the surface, to locate difference underneath the appearance of reality, signals an unraveling of the carefully controlled world view of the community of Sameness.

Even the possibility of such difference begins to undercut the carefully constructed world of the community, a world constructed by the ruling Elders, themselves distinguished by their different and powerful functions. Gabriel's eyes symbolize the emergence of a new element into the family's evening rituals:

The evening proceeded as all evenings did in the family unit, in the dwelling, in the community: quiet, reflective, a time for renewal and preparation for the day to come. It was different only in the addition to it of the newchild with his pale, solemn, knowing eyes. (25)

The term knowing signals a potential threat to the sameness of this world because access to certain knowledge seems to be consistently controlled, from the intimate knowledge of the human body's maturation (as in the pills to control Jonas' first Stirrings) to the knowledge of what the word release could mean.

When Jonas sees the Receiver for the first time at the Ceremony of Twelves, he sees "a bearded man with pale eyes" (61); and when he goes for his first training session, the mirror image of his first sight of Gabriel recurs as he looks "Self-consciously into the pale eyes that mirrored his own" (75). This kind of figurative language helps us establish links among these three characters and continues to undercut the sameness that the ruling elders are attempting to perpetuate. Near the end of the novel when we learn the story of Rosemary, a distinguishing detail which The Giver reports is that "Her eyes were very luminous" (141). By the time we trace this thread of eyes through the novel to the moment when we hear Rosemary's story, we are prepared for her reaction to the Capacity to See Beyond.

Visions: Eyes as Memory

As Jonas learns to "see" through his daily training during which *The Giver* transmits cultural memories, the metaphor of eyes continues to construct difference. At the first training session, when The Giver transmits the knowledge of snow through a sledding experience, Jonas' sight splits: "One part of his consciousness knew that he was still lying there, on the bed. . . . Yet another, separate part of his

being was upright now, in a sitting position" as he is seated on a sled of memory. The experience is a paradox: "And he could see, though his eyes were closed" (81). Such a paradox is, of course, incongruous with the sameness the community values, and as Jonas learns more through this new ability to see, his difference becomes greater.

One of the ways that the thread of sameness unravels is that the community maintains the jobs of Giver and Receiver. If sameness were the governing factor of life, then these positions should clearly be eliminated. Giver and Receiver are illogical occupations in the metaphysics of the community.

The thread of Sameness continues to unravel as the training proceeds and as Jonas experiences another form of seeing, that which occurs in dreams of both past and future. Logically, the future should not concern him, since he is the Receiver of knowledge of the past. Jonas begins to withhold the "truth" of his dreams from his parents in keeping with the fifth instruction on his training sheet: "From this moment you are prohibited from dream-telling" (68). At the morning ritual of dream telling, he does not report a dream to his parents because he is caught between his training in Sameness and his knowledge of Difference, "not ready to lie, not willing to tell the truth." He has dreamed of riding the sled down snow-covered hills where "it seemed as if there were a destination, a something—he could not grasp what—that lay beyond the place where the thickness of the snow brought the sled to stop" (88). Jonas is fascinated by the dream that recalls "the feathery, magical cold" (89) of a snowy

world; he has a "good" feeling about reaching the "something that waited in the distance," a something that is "welcoming" (88). This destination seen in the dream may appear to come to fruition in the final scene of the novel, but, as we shall see, the language and the snow imagery of that scene lead to the undecidability of its meaning. We question whether Jonas as hero has ridden the sled into the world of Difference or whether as the ultimate victim of Sameness he has plunged downward into the hell of Nothingness, into the belly of the leviathan.

His increasing ability to see beyond leads Jonas to suggest that he and The Giver should become the agents of cultural change so that in the elimination of Sameness all citizens could share both the pain and the pleasure of memory. The Giver, however, tells him that they have no choice because Receivers have always had to remember "back and back and back" (113), to acquire knowledge that begins to seem ominous to the young Receiver.

Eyeing Différance

Through a pair of opposite visions—the brutality of war (Chapter 15) and a Christmas memory (Chapter 16)—Jonas becomes convinced that he can change things. The grotesquesness of the war memory in which a young soldier is dying is captured in a moment: "The boy stared at him. 'Water,' he begged again. When he spoke, a new spurt of blood drenched the coarse cloth of his chest and sleeve" (119). Jonas, inside the memory, lies in the stench for hours as he listens to men and

animals die and learns what warfare means. He hears "the cries of wounded men, the cries begging for water and for Mother and for death." These scenes resemble Civil War battles as he witnesses the death of a young boy in a gray uniform, a vision in which the "colors of carnage were grotesquely bright: the crimson wetness on the rough and dusty fabric, the ripped shreds of grass, startlingly green, in the boy's yellow hair" (119). To balance the pain of this memory, The Giver transmits scenes of personal happiness, among them a birthday party, a visit to a museum, and an exciting horseback ride. Then he transmits his favorite memory of a warm room filled with bright colored lights and brightly wrapped packages. In what appears to be a Christmas scene, Jonas experiences "all the things he had learned to treasure" (123)—warmth, happiness and family; for the first time he learns the concept of grandparents—old people living inside a family unit long after their productive years are over.

The Giver explains grandparents in terms of the mirror images associated with knowing eyes: "It's a little like looking at yourself looking in a mirror looking at yourself looking in a mirror" (124). In the culture of Sameness, parents become obsolete once their children are grown; they go to live with other Childless Adults so long as they continue to work and contribute to the community. After that, they live in the House of the Old until they are released, the knowledge of their identity as parents only available in the Hall of Open Records. Now Jonas learns a word for the warmth he has felt in the memory—love—and he understands that the family with

grandparents is more "complete." These realizations come to him as feelings, distinguished from thoughts, another sign of his emerging difference. The community controls thoughts through education and feelings through medication.

The desire to change things stirs inside him, and in the evening he confides to Gabriel that "Things could change. . . . There could be colors. And grandparents. . . . There could be love" (129). For the first time he does not take the pill that treats the Stirrings. In this way he begins, as with the withholding of his dream of a destination, to construct himself outside the logocentricity of Sameness. We might say that he is beginning to ask the kinds of what-if questions that deconstructionists ask: What if there is no central defining element in the world? What if devotion to the ideal of absolute truth is not required for living? What if knowledge is not controlled here, within the world we experience, but exists out there in myriad forms too numerous for us to imagine? At this spot, then, Jonas is reading the world by engaging in the productive and transformative activity we call deconstruction. Because Jonas wants to defer certainty and to construct difference, he is, as Derrida would say, both recognizing and producing différance.

Nearly a year after his training begins, Jonas learns the story of the previous Receiver who, ten years ago, failed and was released. This story is the impetus for his decisive action that ends the novel. The Receiver was Rosemary, The Giver's daughter, whom he loved and who could not bear the memory of pain. Her request for release was granted, and she asked to give herself the lethal injection, a form of

suicide. Her release occasioned a change in the rules—no subsequent Receiver could request release. Jonas, beginning to envision how he can effect change without being released, asks a what-if question: What if I were lost? The Giver explains that the community would have to deal with all the memories that Jonas had received because memories do not dissipate; they remain forever. In this way Jonas could unravel Sameness. Although The Giver wants to help the community "to change and become whole" (162), such wholeness cannot be guaranteed. The plan of escape is a great risk in a world where risks have been minimalized or almost controlled out of existence.

The whole plan falls apart when two unexpected events occur: Jonas witnesses the release of an identical twin, and he learns that Gabriel, still not conforming to standard behavior after a year's reprieve, will be released on the following day. Because the meaning of the word release becomes clear to Jonas for the first time, he aborts the escape plan and flees into the night. Before handling the final scene of the novel, I want to demonstrate how the other two threads that I am unraveling lead up to that scene.

Precision of Language/Unraveling Release

The first words of *The Giver* introduce us to a world where language is critical and where the word release is a powerful term. The novel opens with Jonas on his way to school and in a linguistic dilemma: "It was December, and Jonas was

beginning to be frightened. No. Wrong word" (1). If he has chosen the wrong word, then there must be a right word, and we immediately perceive the either/or dimension of language use. Jonas rejects the word frightened because he can specifically define that word out of his experience; he remembers that "Frightened meant that deep, sickening feeling of something terrible about to happen" (1), recalling an experience a year ago in which a Pilot-in-Training misread his navigational instructions and flew so close that he "frightened" the entire community. This recollection ends with the punishment for such a misreading as the "rasping voice" of The Speaker announces "NEEDLESS TO SAY, HE WILL BE RELEASED" (2). Release is first defined in the novel in this specific context: "For a contributing citizen to be released from the community was a final decision, a terrible punishment, and overwhelming statement of failure" (2). In this definition the word release signifies the ultimate punishment for a wrongful action. We learn right away that the word is not to be used lightly; that children at play who use it are scolded. The word misread also signals the kind of world we are entering. A misuse of language, a misreading, is tantamount to disaster. In a deconstructive activity all readings are misreadings since language is not centered. A reader constantly plays the slippages in words in the production of différance.

The remainder of the first chapter of the novel describes the precision of language required of children in their education. Rejecting eager and excited, Jonas finally chooses apprehensive as the "right" word. During the process he recalls how

his friend Asher once received a language lesson when he used the wrong word to explain why he was late for school. He stopped, he reported, by the hatchery and "got distraught," but the Instructor points out that "'Distraught is too strong an adjective to describe salmon-viewing,'" instructing Asher that distracted would be the right word (4).

At the end of the first day of the novel, we learn of two occasions in which release does not mean punishment—release of the elderly, which calls for a "celebration for a life well and fully lived" and the release of a newchild, a period of questioning about what might have been done to better nurture the infant (7). When Jonas visits The House of the Old, he hears from Larissa, one of the elderly, about the release ceremony for Roberto:

"Well, there was the telling of his life. That is always fine. Then the toast. We all raised our glasses and cheered. We chanted the anthem. He made a lovely good-bye speech. And several of us made little speeches wishing him well." (32)

This all seems benign, but we do not learn exactly what happens to the released citizen after this little celebration.

About a week later we learn to distinguish the release ceremony of the elderly from two other ceremonies, the Ceremony of Loss and the Murmur-of-Replacement Ceremony. In these ceremonies language either erases or constitutes identity. A child named Caleb has fallen into the river and been lost despite the fact that the community is extremely safe, "each citizen watchful and protective of all children" (44). Here the thread of Sameness crosses over the language thread as the lost child

is spoken out of being in the Ceremony of Loss, his name murmured throughout the day in diminishing volume so that he "seemed to fade away gradually from everyone's consciousness." In a Murmur of Replacement Ceremony the reverse occurs, the child's name is repeated softly, then with greater volume and more speed until "It was as if the first Caleb were returning" (44). This is the ultimate use of language to achieve standardization and Sameness in the denial of a new name for a newchild. When another new child is named Roberto, however, there is no replacement ceremony because "Release was not the same as loss" (44). The meaning of the word release continues to open up as the novel progresses.

Language is also controlled in the use of standardized phrasing in the community. For example, there is a standard apology phrase which Asher uses when he is late for class: "I apologize for inconveniencing my learning community" (3). During the Ceremony of Twelves, the Chief Elder skips Jonas' name in order to save the honor of his selection as The Receiver until the end of the ceremony, and she says, "I have caused you anxiety. I apologize to my community" (59). Thank you's are also ritualistic. When Jonas hears Lily's dream one morning, he says "the standard phrase automatically": "Thank you for your dream, Lily" (34). And after the assignment of Asher as Director of Recreation, a job in which his language abuse will do little harm, the Chief Elder says, "Thank you for your childhood" (56). The purpose of this formality, of course, is to homogenize the responses of citizens to one another, to

contribute both to precision in communication as well as to diminish individuality in the achievement of Sameness.

The concept of Sameness is also associated with the word release in terms of the Ceremony of Twelves assignments. But the context makes the meaning of the word ambiguous. At first Asher jokes about a Twelve who didn't like his assignment as a Sanitation Laborer and fled by swimming across the river and joining "the next community he came to" (47). This story is problematic because we have no sense in the novel that there are other communities across the river. Asher points out that "if you don't fit in, you can apply for Elsewhere and be released" (48), and he recalls a story his mother told him about someone who applied about ten years ago: "Here today and gone tomorrow, Never seen again. Not even a Ceremony of Release" (48). Learning Rosemary's story later in the novel, we wonder if she was that person, and when we learn about her decision to inject herself, the word release takes on ominous overtones for us.

The Giver adds another dimension to the word release, which causes us to defer its meaning in the novel. He explains to Jonas that when the previous Receiver failed, "the memories that she had received were released," that they went "Someplace out there" and that the result was chaos in which the people suffered until the memories were assimilated (104).

The word release takes on a chilling meaning as it crosses over the threads of Sameness and language precision in a story of identical twins. This story pulls hard

at the fabric of the novel and ensures the unraveling at the end. The story also pushes Jonas to take his most dramatic action. Release becomes more precise than it has been in all its previous threadings through the novel.

Father explains that when identical twins are born, one is nurtured and the other is released, the choice based on the higher birth weight. At the next birth of twins, the choice will be his. Jonas considers the nature of such a release to Elsewhere: "Was there someone there, waiting, who would receive the tiny released twin? Would it grow up Elsewhere, not knowing, ever, that in this community lived a being who looked exactly the same?" (115). In a culture that celebrates Sameness, we ask, why wouldn't identical twins be highly desired? Here is another illogicality, a hole in the philosophy of the community, a run in the Barthesian metaphoric stocking of the novel.

At the next training session Jonas asks The Giver about release, hears the story of Rosemary's release, and learns that since all private release ceremonies are recorded, he can watch the release of the little twin. When he does, he is horrified to see his father very carefully "direct the needle into the top of the newchild's forehead," emptying the syringe while talking quietly to the infant who squirms and wails, jerks his arms and legs about, and finally falls silent. Memory serves him and he connects the behavior of the infant to "the face of the light-haired bloodied soldier as life left his eyes" in the battlefield memory. Now he realizes the truth: "*He killed it! My Father killed it!*" (150). In a final action his father places the infant in a

carton, says, "Bye-bye little guy" and pushes the carton down what seems to be "the same sort of chute into which trash was deposited at school" (151). This is the blackest moment of the novel. Jonas feels "ripped" and "clawed" inside. This is the ripping, the splitting that allows him to attempt escape, to flee a world where the language of Sameness actually masks the control of Difference. The release of the twin calls into question all the release ceremonies in the community but more importantly opens up a vast chasm about the meaning of life and death in the Sameness.

After this "release," Jonas and The Giver carefully plan Jonas' escape. He will be lost in the river; a Ceremony of Loss will follow as Jonas makes his journey Elsewhere. The Giver will remain to help the community bear the painful memories of the past. As a final gesture, he wants to transmit one more memory—music—through the Capacity to Hear Beyond. This moment figures into the final images of the novel, contributing another factor to the undecidability of this text. Jonas is emphatic in his refusal of music: "I want you to keep that, to have with you, when I'm gone" (157). In the last words of the novel, we shall consider the ramifications of this refusal.

The carefully wrought plan falls apart that evening as Jonas' father announces "in his sweet, sing-song voice" that Gabriel will be released: "It's bye-bye to you, Gabe, in the morning" (165), an echo of the cruel release of the identical twin. Gabriel's

release comes because he has cried all night in the Nurturing Center; a year's reprieve has not standardized his behavior.

Jonas' subsequent escape into the night is full of rule breaking: He steals his father's bicycle and some food, and he takes Gabriel without permission. Crossing the bridge, he rides through outlying communities (they do exist) and enters a desolate landscape. He and Gabriel establish a pattern of travel by night, sleep by day until they no longer hear search planes overhead. He moves for a while in a world without human inhabitants, but the landscape changes and unfolds with waterfalls, wildlife, birds, a squirrel, and wildflowers. Such beauties are, however, accompanied by desperation and fear of starvation as he struggles to find food, even resorting to recreating meals out of "the flagging power of his memory" (173). He begins to doubt the escape, still in either/or terms: "Once he had yearned for choice. Then when he had a choice, he had made the wrong one: the choice to leave. And now he was starving" (174). The rain he has known only in memories now materializes, but it makes them wet and cold, and Gabriel, weakened by hunger, begins to cry. The novel appears to be moving toward a hopeless ending.

Now another memory becomes reality as the bicycle stops in a mound of snow at the bottom of a hill; the bicycle will not go forward. All of his memories have "fallen behind him, escaping from his protection to return to the people of his community" (176), and he wonders if he still has "the strength to Give" and if Gabriel can "still Receive" (176). Now the connection hinted at in the pale eyes

becomes clear: Jonas has become the Giver and Gabriel is the new Receiver. But to what avail? Resolute in his love of the child, he determines to survive by remembering warmth as he starts to climb the hill.

Now the novel arrives at its ambiguous final scene in which the threads of Sameness, language, and release unravel the text. As he climbs the hill, Jonas' vision is blurred in the swirling, freezing snow. At the top of the hill, the sled of his first memory transmission materializes and, his heart surging with hope but his body freezing, he and Gabriel climb onto the sled and begin the descent.

[If I were content to give a New Critical reading of The Giver, at this moment I would discuss how the appearance of this sled brings the novel full circle and resolves the tension between Sameness (Death) and Difference (Life) to bring the story to a harmonious conclusion.]

Jonas begins to lose consciousness, the mental parallel to his blurred vision in my thread of eyes as figures of knowing. The scene begins to unfold in an unreality as the two boys speed "in a straight line through an incision that seemed to lead to the final destination, the place that he always felt was waiting, the Elsewhere that held their future and their past" (179). Jonas is too weak to guide the sled, so the straight line seems unrealistic in the context of the scene.

[A New Critical reader might take this line to represent the correctness of Jonas' decision to escape the community.]

The word incision in the description seems to be another figure of the text's unraveling because it denotes a surgical procedure, a wound. Will this ride downward be the ultimate wound? Is it the piercing of Christ's side?

The major word in this description, however, is seemed, a word that is not definitive, a word that means "to give an impression of," and a word that stands in diametric contrast to the two words final destination. Furthermore, this place is only a function of feeling, not knowledge, and he names it Elsewhere, a place in the novel that has been highly ambiguous, this ambiguity now heightened by his feeling that it holds both past and future.

Through his blurred vision Jonas now sees a scene very like the Christmas memory The Giver transmitted to him, but some details of his vision are ambiguous. First, the sled is hurling them downward, a word fraught with negative connotations of defeat and depression as well as its symbolic connections to various kinds of descent, for example into the maelstrom, which would clarify the straight line of their descent. Maelstroms often viciously suck into themselves objects within a given radius. Another reading might be that this is the descent into the underworld, the world of Death, accomplished here in the gradual losing of consciousness through freezing. Secondly, he sees colored lights twinkling, and even though he is losing consciousness, he knows that they are shining "in places where families created and kept memories, where they celebrated love" (179). What is such knowledge based upon? Memory? Certainly not on experience? Can he trust memory any more? Hasn't it faded earlier in the journey?

And what of the meaning of love? When he had received the memory of love, he had asked his parents if they loved him, and his father had replied "*Jonas*. You,

of all people. Precision of language, *please!*" to which his mother had offered this explanation: "You used a very generalized word, so meaningless that it's become almost obsolete" (127).

[A New Critical reader might interpret the word love in this final scene to represent the salvation of human feelings from obsolescence, the negation of the mother's explanation.]

The last two paragraphs of the story demand very close reading in opening up the power of multiple meanings in *The Giver*, and so I quote them here in their entirety:

Downward, downward, faster and faster. Suddenly he was aware with certainty and joy that below, ahead, they were waiting for him; and that they were waiting, too, for the baby. For the first time, he heard something that he knew to be music. He heard people singing.

Behind him, across vast distances of space and time, from the place he had left, he thought he heard music, too. But perhaps it was only an echo. (179-80)

[An archetypal critic would read this scene as the hero's return, not only himself as hero but with a figure of his rebirth, a son, another generation to carry on the heroic tradition. The two musics would become in such a reading the fusion of the world of the journey (that dream world) and the new world envisioned as a consequence of the hero's newly acquired knowledge. This reading is tempting in its efforts to situate the novel in the larger unified structure of mythic and heroic narratives.]

The problem with both a New Critical reading and an archetypal reading is that the language of the final paragraphs cancels them out. These paragraphs unravel the novel in such a way as to open it up to any number of interpretations. For example, if Jonas is "aware with certainty and joy" that someone awaits them, and that the something he hears is music, then why is he not equally sure that he hears the music

of another time and another place? What would explain such music? Has The Giver remembered music to ease the pain of all the memories Jonas has placed on the community? "But perhaps it was only an echo." Perhaps not. An echo is only a trace of something already heard, and Jonas has never heard music. Even this trace of music is another form of the unweaving of the novel. Perhaps this last scene is all a figment of Jonas's imagination, his last wish to hold onto something pleasant before he and the baby freeze to death. One possibility of the reading this ending is this: Jonas sleds into the frozen world of death, into Nowhere, since Elsewhere may not exist except as a construction of the language system of the community, an imprecision of language to perpetuate Sameness and to diminish the knowledge of what the word release means.

I hope to have demonstrated here in some measure what Barbara Johnson says about the implications of deconstructive reading. She contends that such a reading "implies that a text signifies in more than one way, that it can signify something more, something less, or something other than it claims to, or that it signifies in different degrees of explicitness, effectiveness, or coherence" ("Teaching Deconstructively" 141). In the context of her remarks if my reading seems to be inconclusive, then I have achieved my purpose. If it seems to have left some threads hanging, then I feel successful. If it has made you stop and think about the possibility of a reading without closure, then I am glad. I would be happiest to know that it had

sent you to play the text, to unravel your own threads, to produce your own différance.

I like what J. Hillis Miller says about the way he reads because I enjoy reading this way, too: "I try to attend to the threads of the tapestry of words . . . rather than simply the picture the novel makes when viewed from a distance" ("Two Forms" 3). Attending to the threads is one of the joys of reading the deconstructive way.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Reading as Entanglement: Weaving Ourselves into *Fallen Angels*

We can be precise about individuality by conceiving of the individual as living out variations on an identity theme such as a musician might play out an infinity of variations on a single melody.

Norman Holland
"UNITY IDENTITY TEXT SELF" (1975)

The reader plays the text in the musical sense of the term. . . .
The text is largely a score . . . it asks the reader for a
collaboration. This is a great innovation, because it compels us
to ask 'Who executes the work?'

Roland Barthes
Image—Music—Text (1977)

Perhaps an even better analogy for the reenactment of the text is
the musical performance. The text of a poem or a novel or a
drama is like a musical score. . . . In the literary reading, even
the keyboard on which the performer plays is—himself.

Louise Rosenblatt
The Reader, the Text, the Poem (1978)

An Introduction to Reader-Response Theories

My readings of *Fallen Angels* are guided by critical inquiries which may be collectively named reader-response theory, although the term does not signify a "conceptually unified critical position" but a broad-based critical inquiry in which the key words are reader, the reading process, and response (Tompkins "An

Introduction," ix). These terms take on an amazing range of meanings as they appear in the many contemporary theories that have developed from the basic concept of reader-response.

Characteristics of the Theory

Despite the wide range of differing approaches within this broad designation, most contemporary reader-response theories, which developed from the early 1960s to the late 1980s, share ten characteristics (Leitch 212) that I shall introduce and comment upon briefly. The basis of all these theories is that (1) they focus on the reader rather than on the autonomous text. Other characteristics emerge from this reader-orientation. As have other critical theories, (2) they cast New Criticism as a scapegoat for many of the problems in modern criticism, (3) advocating "the rights of the reader against the prescriptions and dogmas of doctrinaire methodologies." In other words, interpretation emerges as a consequence of the reader's response (transaction or interaction) with the text, not from a set of rules or presuppositions about the text (that its tensions resolve into a harmonious unity, for example). In opposition to this idea of textual unity, reader-response theorists pioneered (4) the idea that a text is anything but unified: on the contrary, a text is discontinuous, filled with gaps or moments which have been left unwritten and which the reader fills in while "making" the text. The text can be made because (5) the word text signifies an event unfolding in time, its meaning occurring during the process of reading. In

other words, the text is not a closed container already filled with meaning by the author but a possibility, a weaving which readers co-create in the process of living through a reading which weaves them into the text.

Reading (6) is not, however, a completely free activity; theorists inquire into the constraints on the work of reading. Epistemological constraints focus on the ways in which we gain knowledge—whether it is preexistent and received by us or whether we make it in an act of social construction, that is produce knowledge within a community of learners who share some of our basic concerns and experiences in human life. Linguistic constraints deal with the nature of language, as we observe in the work of the structuralists and their efforts to describe a system unified around the principles and grammars of language codes. Psychological and social constraints involve the impact of the individual psychology and the social membership of the reader on the meaning-making process. Reader-response theories (7) describe a "rich panoply of types of readers—informed readers, ideal readers, implied, readers, actual readers, virtual readers, superreaders, and 'literents.'" These distinctions illustrate the enormous range of the theories as they have attempted to define the kind of reader that comes to the text or that the text produces, or both. The list of readers also reflects another characteristic of reader-response: (8) Unlike other critical theories, it has not produced a "tightly knit cadre or circle of colleagues"; instead reader-response critics are diverse in their geographical locations in both the United States and in Europe and in their intellectual concerns.

Finally, reader-response theories (9) do not concern themselves greatly with the question of historical influences on the work or with the ideas of aesthetics. Their ahistorical nature is not surprising, since these theories have an immediacy about them, a sense of the work of reading as a happening in which the meaning is being made now. Their lack of interest in aesthetics is equally unsurprising. Aesthetics values a work of art as a completion, an object out there, something for our admiration and evaluation. Reader-response theories began as a way of investigating what is in here—inside the experience of the reader reading. As a consequence of this location of value in the individual's reading processes, more than any other critical theory, (10) reader-response has been concerned with pedagogy, "typically locating the text and reader in the classroom." From this pedagogical focus, reading becomes a process to be studied and observed in the actual labor of readers, not an idea to be theorized in an abstract, philosophical way. Reading is a phenomenon, an exciting event which every reader enacts, performs, in a unique way.

Getting Started

Describing the characteristics of the theory is not so difficult, but trying to provide a point of introduction from which to begin working with reader-response theory is another matter. The world seems full of essays and books on this engaging approach. Two outstanding anthologies, both published in 1980, represent "the high

point" in the "proliferation of helpful published material" (Leitch 212) and make an excellent starting point for those interested in exploring the reader-response terrain.

The title of Jane Tompkins' *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* is instructive to those who think that reader-response is a purely personal theory in which anyone's interpretation is as valid as anyone else's. This is clearly what reader-response is not. Tompkins only nods in the direction of the pioneering theorists Louise Rosenblatt and I. A. Richards who began their inquiries in the 1930s, but, as her title suggests, she traces reader-response from its origins in the unifications of formalism to the disunifications of post-structuralism. Readers of the previous chapters in this book will be intrigued by the ways in which Tompkins works out the relationship of reader-response theory to other theories in her first chapter, "An Introduction to Reader-Response Criticism." In her book, she collects eleven important essays, mostly by Americans; she concludes the volume with her own helpful essay, "The Reader in History: The Changing Shape of Literary Response." Here she provides an overview of attitudes toward reader-response from the Classical, Renaissance, Augustan, and Modern periods, offering the critique that the affective criticism practiced by contemporary theorists "owes nothing to the ancient rhetorical tradition it seems at first to resemble, and almost everything to the formalist doctrines it claims to have overturned" (202); reader-response critics "have not revolutionized literary theory but merely transposed formalist principles into a

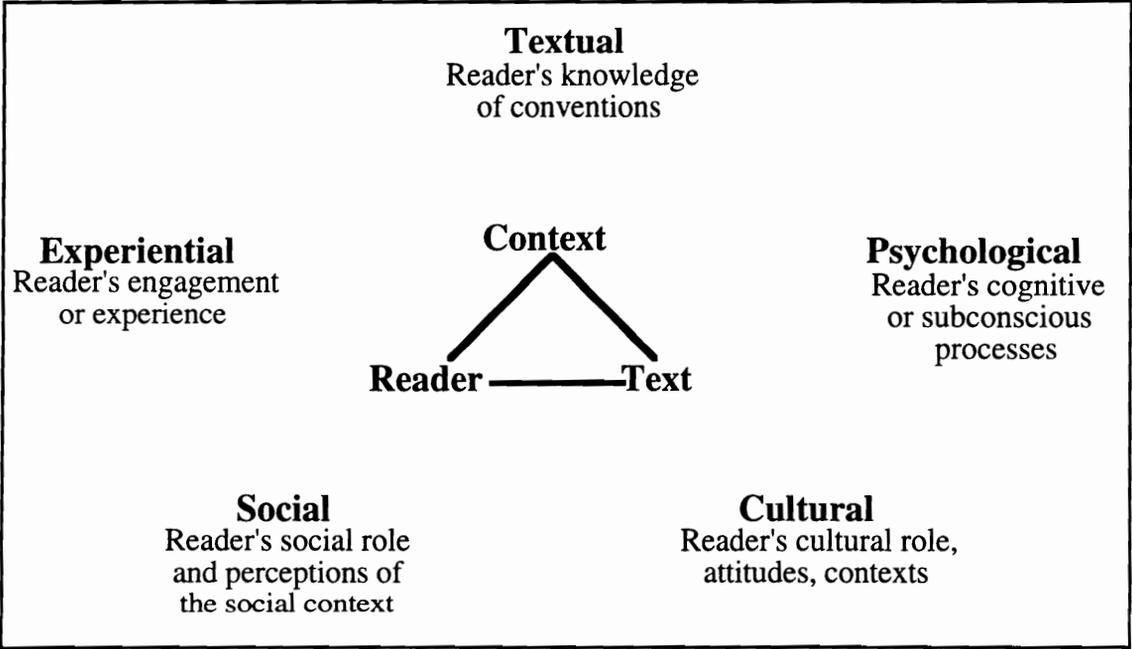
new key" (201). No new music, then, says Tompkins, just new harmonies—or disharmonies.

In the "Introduction" to Susan Suleiman and Inge Crossman's anthology *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, Suleiman characterizes "audience-oriented criticism" in a way that defines the problem I mentioned earlier about how to locate oneself to do practical work within the field; it is, she says, "not one field but many." Since I am travelling in the landscape of theory in this book, I enjoy her metaphor that reader-response is "not a single widely trodden path but a multiplicity of crisscrossing, often divergent tracks that cover a vast area of critical landscape in a pattern whose complexity dismays the brave and confounds the faint of heart" (6). Attempting to "map . . . the principal tracks in the landscape," she distinguishes six approaches to the field: (1) rhetorical; (2) semiotic and structuralist; (3) phenomenological; (4) subjective and psychoanalytic; (5) sociological and historical; and (6) hermeneutic (Suleiman 6-7). The vitality of these approaches, she maintains, "depends precisely on the realization that various dimensions of analysis or interpretation are possible." She acknowledges that theories overlap, suggesting that an eclectic combination of approaches is not "negative . . . but a positive necessity" (7). Her suggestion is not a license to eradicate differences, but it provides a way of working with these theories in the same sense, I believe, that Richard Beach intends when he suggests that his five response categories (textual, experiential, psychological, social, and cultural) "ultimately intersect and overlap" ("Introduction,"

A Teacher's Introduction 9). As he organizes reader-response theories, Beach sees "the local—the focus on readers' textual knowledge and experience" as "embedded within the global, larger social and cultural contexts" (Beach and Hynds qtd. in Beach 9). As a way of working within these theories, he invites the reader to consider his five approaches as heuristics and to explore how these perspectives inform and complement each other (9-10). Beach offers a helpful chart that briefly clarifies his five designations (Figure 6).

Suleiman asks a series of useful questions related to ways of reading which recall Figure 4 in my second chapter. In that figure, designed by R.S. Crane and Norman Friedman, a series of concentric circles schematizes critical tasks, moving outward from the work at the center, progressing from the New Critics' close reading of the text to larger sociological, historical, and ethical considerations in interpreting literature. Using a similar approach but focussing instead on the reader, Suleiman asks three interrelated questions which "form a series of concentric circles leading out from the text to its cultural and literary context":

1. How (by what codes) is the audience inscribed within the system of a work?
2. What other aspects of the work, whether formal or thematic, determine readability or intelligibility?
3. What are the codes and conventions—whether aesthetic or cultural—to which actual readers refer in making sense of texts and to which actual authors refer in facilitating or complicating, or perhaps even frustrating, the reader's sense-making activity? (12)



Beach's Categories of Reader-Response

Figure 6

Suleiman's first and third questions suggest the ways of reading I shall employ in responding to *Fallen Angels*. They represent the broadest spectrum of possible reader-responses, from the highly individual to the communal.

In response to Suleiman's first question, I want to explore how I am inscribed in Myers' text. By inscription I mean how I as an individual with a personal history am woven into the text as I read it. This interweaving occurs as I trace the character of Richie Perry, the central character of the novel and its most important thread. I shall explore his psychology, and mine, in this subjective way of reading.

In response to Suleiman's third question, I shall trace the way in which I interweave myself into the text in terms of my membership in a social group, an interpretive community that shapes my reading of all texts, the community of teachers of English. As opposed to the uniqueness of the subjective approach, this second reading is based on the idea that "an interpretive strategy is never the result of a purely individual decision . . .; it can only be understood as a collective phenomenon, a set of shared conventions within a community of readers" (Suleiman 20). The convention around which I shall organize my response is the notion of intertextuality.

Theories and Theorists

While Tompkins, Suleiman, and Beach each organizes reader-response theory according to different rubrics, I have found the most useful schema for my purposes to be Steven Mailloux's in *Interpretive Conventions*. In his introductory chapters on

psychological and social reading models he presents an even more amazing catalog of theories than the others I have mentioned: "affective, phenomenological, subjective, transactive, transactional, structural, deconstructive, rhetorical, psychological, speech act and other criticisms" (19). He calls this "metacritical chaos" and proposes to bring order to it by comparing the most prominent reading models and their attendant critical theories. To accomplish this task he limits himself to the five reader-response critics who have had the most influence in the United States; these are Stanley Fish, Norman Holland, David Bleich, Wolfgang Iser, and Jonathan Culler. To distinguish their relationships he constructs a schema (Figure 7) in which he progresses from the earliest critics who explore reader subjectivity in psychological models (Holland and Bleich) to the critics who explore the concept of intersubjectivity through a phenomenological model (Iser and Fish's early work) to the most recent structuralist and post-structuralist response theories in the social models of Culler and the most recent work of Fish. I shall explore the critical approaches of the theorists who stand at each extreme of the schema: Norman Holland and Stanley Fish.

The way that Mailloux proceeds to develop his own response theory for the reading of American fiction intrigues me and provides me a working metaphor for this chapter. In the first two chapters of his book Mailloux compares the approaches in his schema according to the three key elements that a critical theory should address: "an account of interpretation, a model of critical exchange, and a model of reading" (23). He finds all of the theories he explores to be wanting in some way,

SUBJECTIVISM

David
Bleich's
subjective
criticism

primacy of
subjectivity

PSYCHOLOGICAL MODEL

Norman
Holland's
transactive
criticism

transaction
between
reader and
text within
reader's
identity
theme

PHENOMENOLOGY

Wolfgang
Iser's
phenomeno-
logical
criticism

inter-
action
between
reader
and text

INTERSUBJECTIVE MODEL

Stanley
Fish's
affective
stylistics

text's
manipu-
lation
of reader

STRUCTURALISM

Jonathan
Culler's
structuralist
poetics

reading
conventions

SOCIAL MODEL

Stanley
Fish's
theory of
interpretive
strategies

authority of
interpretive
communities

A Reader-Response Spectrum

Figure 7

leading him to propose in his third chapter a "rhetoric of entanglement" (73), a temporal model. He shows how this rhetoric of entanglement results in "sequential responses from the reader" that lead her/him to build "a final interpretive synthesis" (90). In subsequent chapters he describes his theory of "interpretive conventions": "communal procedures for making intelligible the world, behavior, communication, and literary texts" (149). His metaphor of entanglement works for both of my approaches to *Fallen Angels*: a highly subjective response is a way of getting intimately entangled with a text, and the idea of interpretive conventions weaves me into the intricate threadings of my teacher community.

Reading Subjectively

Louise Rosenblatt and Transactional Theory

The work of Louise Rosenblatt, a pioneer in reader-response theory, offers a good introduction to the basic principles of this way of reading. Although I do not intend to explore her work in depth, I want to establish several of her principles as the ground for my reading of *Fallen Angels*. Rosenblatt first expounded her theory in 1938 in *Literature as Exploration* where she explained that each reader produces a "unique experience" as a result of reading because each brings "personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations" as well as present psychological and physical conditions to the reading (37). In *The Reader, the Text,*

and the Poem in 1978, Rosenblatt set out to present, as she said, a "matured and more developed theory of the literary work of art and the implication for criticism" (xii). In her second book she rejects the critical extremes which (1) view the reader as a *tabula rasa* who receives the imprint of the poem or which (2) view the text as empty, awaiting the content brought by the reader (1-5). Reading is a temporal event, one that unfolds through time, and the reader's response is conditioned by this temporality. Rosenblatt uses the word text to designate "a set or series of signs interpretable as linguistic symbols," and her word poem is a generic term for all literary forms (12).

In considering the poem as an "event," Rosenblatt draws two conclusions about the reader and the text: (1) the text is a stimulus, activating the reader's past experiences with literature and with life; (2) the text functions as a blueprint, a guide through which the reader selects, rejects, and orders responses during the reading (11). She describes the transactional process in which " 'the poem' comes into being in the live circuit set up between the reader and the 'text'" (14); in other words, the reader brings the poem into being. While this process is clearly not objective, it is not wholly subjective because "the physical signs of the text" enable the reader "to reach through himself and the verbal symbols to something sensed as outside and beyond his personal world." The transaction between reader and text breaks the boundary between inner and outer worlds and constructs a new world (21).

Norman Holland and The Identity Theme

While Rosenblatt theorizes about the transaction between reader and text, she does not offer a concrete way to enact that transaction. Norman Holland provides both a succinct statement of his version of transactional theory and a strategy for performing it in his essay "UNITY IDENTITY TEXT SELF." Like Rosenblatt, he carefully defines the terms which undergird his thinking.

Holland's aim in the essay is to fill in the white spaces between the big words of his title. He accomplishes this after a considerable amount of careful reasoning through which he arrives at this sentence: "Identity is the unity I find in a self if I look at it as though it were a text" (Holland 121). What he means by this sentence helps us work with his theory.

Holland shares his concept of text with the formalists and New Critics: Text refers simply to "the words on the page" (118). Unity, however, signifies something more complex than the organic unity that New Critics find in the work. For Holland, unity designates a point of arrival which results from the exploration of themes in a text, an exploration by which he selects thematic details and distills them into a central theme. Unity is also complicated by psychological considerations of the self, by which Holland means "the real total person of an individual, including both his body and his psyche" (120-21). Identity is another term complicated by psychological thought, and after considering a number of possible meanings, Holland settles on an idea by Heinz Lichtenstein, "the most precise of the modern theorists of identity."

Lichtenstein holds that "character" or "personality" refers to one form of "the infinite sequence of bodily and behavioral transformation during the whole life of an individual'" ("Identity and Sexuality" qtd. in Holland 120). From this idea, then, Holland declares that "we can be precise about individuality by conceiving of the individual as living out variations on an identity theme much as a musician might play out an infinity of variations on a single melody" (120). He explains that a theme and variations does not consist of the individual notes, but that "their structural relationship to one another" is vitally important and that this relationship remains constant through a lifetime of transformations" (121). If we are hoping to demonstrate Holland's theory, then we need to know more about the musical concept of theme and variations than he tells us in this essay.

Holland's metaphor refers to a principle of construction in musical form: A melody (a theme) is presented and then followed by a number of modifications (variations). Although he implies it, Holland does not explain how such a construction is unified; instead he tells us that "an invariant sameness" constitutes a unity, a "centering theme" that may not be unique to an individual but that may describe many individuals in the same way that a literary theme may describe many texts (121). Here, then, are two key ideas that, I think, help elucidate Holland's dense text: (1) "A variation always has something in common with the theme (otherwise it would not be a variation on the theme)," and (2) a variation "always deviates in some way (otherwise it would not be a variation of the theme)." These

commonalities can, therefore, be designated as the "fixed" elements, and the deviations can be designated as the "variable" elements (Apel 324-25). What I want to make clear in these two distinctions is that despite the entanglements of the variations, the theme is always there in some manifestation or another, and those manifestations, if I am reading Holland correctly, constitute the "identity" theme that a number of us may share as we experience the text.

So, how do we entangle ourselves in these entanglements? First, Holland tells us, we arrive at the identity theme, the unity in the text, as a function of our own identity theme. Our individual readings differ from the readings of all others because we each bring different information to the text, we search out themes that are important to us, and we then transform that reading experience into something that has unique significance and that satisfies us ("Unity" 122-23).

Holland outlines this process with the acronym DEFT which supports his central belief that "interpretation is a function of identity." Under an overarching principle of "identity re-creates itself," he "teases out three strands" (or "modalities" as he refers to them) that govern the relationship between a text and a reader. DEFT stands for the modalities Defense, Fantasy, and Transformation which he explains sequentially, noting, though, that "obviously they all go on together" (124). The word modality both reflects his musical analogy, his sequential presentation of DEFT, and his logicity since it derives from the Latin word *modus*, referring to both the

sequential arrangement of tones on a musical scale and the manner of asserting or denying a proposition in logistics (*Webster's 762*).

The DE stands for our various mechanisms for coping with the world, among them defense mechanisms and "systems of symbols and values." We interpret a text, take it into ourselves as a new experience, by casting it in terms of these mechanisms. The next step, the F of the acronymn, consists of the way in which we construct pleasurable fantasies as a consequence of reading the text. Such fantasies allow each reader to re-create the work "in terms of his own identity theme" (126). In the last stage, the transformative T, we complete the re-creation of our identity from the text, "putting the work together at an intellectual or esthetic level." We achieve our unity in a number of ways: creating our own version of a Platonic or Aristotelian aesthetics; comparing our experience to the experiences of others; bringing other knowledge to bear on this reading experience; placing our experience within a tradition; or by "treating it as an encoded message to be decoded" (126). In my reading of *Fallen Angels*, this last transformation makes the most sense because I see the novel as a metaphor for the warring self, which I shall now demonstrate using Holland's DEFT approach.

Reading *Fallen Angels*/Reading the Self

In *Fallen Angels*, Walter Dean Myers seems to juxtapose two worlds, the world of home in the United States and the world of war in Vietnam, but as I read the novel I find myself living actively in a third world—my mind in the mind of Richie Perry, the central character. That is the world I explore in this reading.

September 15, 1967. Anchorage, Alaska. Richie Perry, a seventeen-year-old high school graduate from Harlem who has elected for financial reasons to join the army rather than to go to college, is being transported to the war. Although he is supposed to be excused from duty as a result of an injury, the personnel file containing this information is misplaced, and he is sent on to Vietnam. The novel narrates the year in which he struggles to stay alive so that he can return home.

September 1967. I have chosen to go to college and am deferred from the war. A student at the College of William and Mary, I have declared my major—English—and I elect courses in Romantic and Victorian English poetry as well as aesthetics. I also choose to study American history from the Civil War to the present, although my experience has taught me that we will never make it to the present: We will linger in the Civil War and the First World War, and suddenly the Second World War will be but a blur as we rush to the end of the semester. We are living in the Cold War and the Vietnam War, but they are on the other side of the world. We are safe in the hallowed halls of ivy, my friends and I.

I see Richie in a world of developing camaraderie. I meet a succession of people who will populate his world for a year, most important among them his friend Harold Gates, known only as Peewee. There's Lt. Carroll from Kansas, and we will see him killed. Johnson from Savannah, Georgia, and Captain Stewart, the company commander, are among the number, as well as Lobel, a Jewish soldier who keeps talking to us about the movies. (Actually, there's a fourth world in this novel, that world of easy heroism one sees on the silver screen.) There are a few women, among them Judy Duncan from Irving, Texas. Everyone is from somewhere, and I never forget that they all want to make it home again. On the other side of war are a few more important people, especially Richie's mother and his little brother Kenny. Then there's Mrs. Liebow, and once I meet her in the novel I connect: She was Richie's last English teacher.

When I began to teach, I feared that my students would have to go to the war, and I wondered what I was giving them to help them survive it. I was at a disadvantage, never having seen that world except in the graphic accounts on the evening news. Commentators in those days were fond of saying that we were living the war right there in our living rooms, but I did not believe them. In Vietnam with Richie I saw a war I couldn't imagine in the living room. But, back to my teaching. What about Beowulf, the best of heroes in the best of halls? Would his heroism help my students gone off to war?

Reading Richie's story, I couldn't recall a conversation with one of my students such as the one Richie had with Mrs. Liebow, and any wisdom I might have possessed fell far short of hers. Richie recalls once talking to her about playing basketball:

I would feel a pressure to give in, to let a rebound go over my head, to take the outside shot when I knew I had to take the ball inside. . . . I told Mrs. Liebow, my English teacher, and she had said that it was what separated heroes from humans, the not giving in, and I hadn't understood that. (36)

Maybe the war was another game, cruel and fatal, and who I ask, were the real players? Who moved the pieces around and who got moved? Who designed strategies and who trucked knee-deep in the mud and stench? Was Vietnam a giant chessboard? Who were the knights and kings?

I am weaving myself into the text already, but I am not following Holland's strategy sequentially. I understand now what he means when he says that all this happens at once. What I am trying to do is set the novel up so that I can play that identity theme, that single melody spinning into space out of all those variations that make up our personalities, Richie's and mine. In this way, we are all characters, inside the novel and out of it, too.

Other than the people in the novel, I respond most to the letters that Richie writes. He and I are people with language. We own it, and we cannot exist without it. It constructs us, and we construct the world with it. Early into his tour of duty Richie is chosen to write letters to the families of the dead because he has a way with

words, and continually through the novel he writes letters to his mother and brother. These two kinds of letters organize the novel, both in terms of what happens inside the world of Richie's mind and inside my mind, too. They trace the fate of innocence from the polite letter Richie writes when Lieutenant Carroll is killed to the horrific one he wishes he could write at the end of the novel.

In the first letter, he writes that Lieutenant Carroll died bravely, honorably: "All of the guys in the squad who served under him are grateful for his leadership and for having known him. I am sorry to write to you under these circumstances" (131). Near the end of the novel one devastating scene occurs in which American soldiers burn the bodies of their fallen comrades. This, ironically, is to protect the bodies from mutilation by the enemy. In their frenzy, the soldiers forget to retrieve the name tags from the dead, and so their identities go up in the flames. Richie imagines a bitter letter that would communicate what happened:

We lost your son, ma'am. Somewhere in the forests he lies, perhaps behind some rock, some tree? We burned his body, ma'am. In a rite hurried by fear and panic, we burned what was left of him and ran for our lives. Yes, and we're sorry. (256)

Fallen Angels tells the story of sorrow that shatters the psyche, that winds through a year relieved only in the final scene when on the wings of a silver plane, the Freedom Bird, Richie and Peewee, hand in hand, "are headed back to the World" (309). It is a journey I have hoped for since the day I met him in Anchorage. September 15, 1967.

Identity as Entanglement

The language that never leaves our head is like colorful yarn, endlessly spun out multicolored threads, dropping into a void, momentarily compacted. entangled, elusive. . . . Writing is largely a process of choosing among alternatives from the images and thoughts of the endless flow, and this choosing is a matter of making up one's mind, and this making up one's mind becomes in effect the making up of one's self.

James E. Miller, Jr.
Word, Self, Reality:
The Rhetoric of the Imagination

In trying to respond to *Fallen Angels* I have gotten all entangled in metaphor: tracing the weave, tracing the self in the texture of the novel, the self as text; locating the self and identity by picking that one melody out of the strands of variations, playing that melody while I play the text and it plays me. These metaphors are not exclusive, though. Their interweaving illustrates just how complex the reading process becomes, how entangled we get with the words on the page.

Reading the novel becomes the act of writing the novel when, as Miller suggests in *Word, Self, Reality*, I choose "alternatives from the images and thoughts of the endless flow" of the stream of consciousness. Myers doesn't employ a stream-of-consciousness technique, but as a reader I find it everywhere in the novel because I am always thinking about thinking; that is one of the variations on my identity theme. The identity theme that I follow in *Fallen Angels* describes all of us at certain times in our lives: it is the theme of becoming, the theme that emerges through our rites of passage, that links us all but at the same time makes us unique

because our coming of age story is like no others in its particularities, its details. This identity theme emerges from what we do and how we think, how the mind works, how it wars with itself as we are initiated into adult life. The theme is simultaneously about victory and defeat, about the dream that we will achieve greatness or the fear that we will disintegrate. It is about defending our position, saving our minds from fragmentation so that in the process of becoming, we are not destroyed, as Richie suggests:

An image of the VC we had killed flashed through my mind. . . . his body sprawled out in the mud, was no longer a human being. He was a thing, a trophy. I wondered if I could become a trophy. (84-85)

Here Richie asks the big question of our shared identity theme: Will I become the hero or the victim of my own life?

Framing Identity

The development of the identity theme in Richie's life begins in high school; two recollections in the novel illustrate what Holland calls variations. The first occurs in a conversation with Mrs. Liebow at Stuyvesant High School in Harlem. Once, when he was fifteen, she talked to him about a doubleness she saw in him: "'You have to get out of yourself, Perry,'" she had said. "'You're too young to be just an observer in life'" (35). Ironically, it is his position as observer that lets us experience the war as we do in *Fallen Angels*. Richie can "see," articulate what others cannot, take pictures in language, and hand them to us.

In retrospect, Richie defines what it means to be an observer: "There was always a way to frame things, to put them into a romantic setting, that made you feel good" (35). This framing image contributes to what Holland calls adaptation and transformation. After the death of Lieutenant Carroll, Richie frames the experience, but it is less romantic than the pictures he has made of his life in high school:

Lieutenant Carroll was inside of me, he was part of me. Part of me was dead with him. . . . I just had these pictures of him walking along on his patrol or sitting in the mess area, looking into his coffee cup. It was what I was building in my mind, a series of pictures of things I had seen, of guys I had seen. I found myself trying to push them from my mind, but they seemed more and more a part of me. (137)

This moment is complex in its imagery. First, to use the language of post-structuralism, Carroll has become part of the text of Richie's life; he is intertext, a term I shall deal with in my second response to this novel. He is woven into the fabric of Richie's life. The rim of the coffee cup is another framing image, and from what we learn about Carroll, we can imagine that he is daydreaming about his wife and children. Finally, the pictures are like part of a movie that Richie is filming in his mind, a movie of all these men and their relationships, of events in his life that will change forever the person that he can be.

These pictures culminate in the final scene of the novel as Richie and Peewee are headed home, and the final image completes Holland's transformation of identity. As the Freedom Bird glides toward California, Richie slips into memory, back on patrol in the boonies. This patrol is extraordinary and symbolic, the final clip in his war

film. He locates himself in a central position; he is the unity that links the living and the dead. As they walk the boonies, past rice paddies, he brings up the rear behind the living, Monaco, Peewee, Walowick, Lobel, Brunner, and Johnson. When he turns around, he sees the dead: "Behind me, trailing the platoon, were the others. Brew, Jenkins, Sergeant Dongan, Turner, and Lewis, the new guys, and Lieutenant Carroll" (309). This is where he stands as a man who has made it through, where he will always stand in the forward march of life.

In this final picture, his theme is mine, and yours, I would guess. Ahead of us others lead, behind us march the dead. I did not march into the Vietnamese hell, and so I did not become a man in the same sense that Richie did or that all the people who went to the war did. War dead march behind me, though, chief among them my childhood friend who near the end of his tour of duty, after that fateful year, went one day for a swim and drowned in a strange land. I have my own pictures. His gangling walk. The way he looked at me when, telling a joke and breaking into laughter, he turned his head slightly to the left, his shining black hair falling into his eyes. The way he looked at school across the gym where he seemed inaccessible among his friends, all older than I. The crowded funeral home, the stifling sweetness of the little room where he lay, his body swollen, his face beyond calm, his family sitting there to the right, hands extended. My pictures. Pain. The unbecoming. And I, a sophomore in college, going home, sitting at my small desk to prepare Ibsen's *Ghosts* for a class on Tuesday morning. Becoming a teacher.

Becoming Somebody

Reflecting on the conversation with Mrs. Liebow, Richie recalls that playing basketball helped him dispel his sense of loneliness, "the feeling of not belonging to the life that teemed around me." At the basketball courts, he recalls, "I was somebody else there: Mr. In-Your-Face, jiving and driving, looping and hooping, staying clean and being mean, the inside rover till the game was over" (35). Part of the identity theme is struggling with this question "who am I?" It seems that during the painful years of adolescence we become a number of somebodies. We model ourselves after people we admire or think that we admire, and then we decide that such a person is not who we are, so we try something else. Perhaps it's sports, or fitting into the group that most appeals to us. That works, too; it feels good to be part of something larger than we are. But there's still the matter of who we are. The music of Richie's language, his rhythms and rhymes, symbolize the joy of such moments, but they are, at last, part of a game that is diversionary. Such games are variations on the theme of self, and we still have to extract that one string that sings us.

The problem of being Somebody continues to trouble Richie during the war, and he defines it in terms of Johnson, a soldier from Savannah, Georgia, who was "about as black as a human being could get and as thick as he was wide. Even the whites of his eyes were dark" (29). Richie admires Johnson's experience and savvy: "He knew things. He knew when somebody was doing something that he didn't like. He

knew when one of the black guys was being messed with. And he knew when to put his butt on the line" (113). In short, Johnson knows how to survive in the war, and "the war made him a certain somebody" (113). In the war Richie becomes aware that survival might mean becoming "somebody else," somebody other than "Mr. In-Your-Face." His description of himself as "jiving and driving" and his admiration for Johnson illustrate what Holland calls "the millions of ego choices that constitute the visible human . . . ever changing and different, yet ever continuous with what went before" ("Unity" 121). Constructing a self to survive the war becomes one of the variations of Richie's identity theme: "I had better think about killing the Congs before they killed me. . . ." He reasons that maybe such killing "was right. But it meant being some other person than I was when I got to Nam. Maybe that was what I had to be. Somebody else" (216).

The gruesome imagery of defacement, when Richie kills his first Viet Cong, graphically defines the "somebody else" that war demands. Almost out of control, Richie empties a clip of ammunition into the enemy's face. When he finishes:

There was no face. Just an angry mass of red flesh where the face had been. Part of an eyeball dangled from one side of the head. At the top there were masses of different-colored flesh. There was a tooth, a bit of a skull. I turned away. (181)

The enemy is defaced, but so is Richie, the joyous dance of his high school heroism replaced by the still tableau of death: "I had killed a man. I thought about how he looked. . . . I remembered looking down at him and feeling my own face torn apart" (182). Hero or victim? Variations on a theme of becoming somebody.

Variations on Heroism

The identity theme emerges, then, from what is both outside us and inside us. Sometimes, Richie recalls, the easy play on the court did not define him among his fellow players. He describes the transformation that occurred in him during those uneasy moments: "There would be a flow of action around me and it would seem as if I were outside of myself, watching myself play ball, trying to establish a place for myself on the hard park courts." When he tells Mrs. Liebow about the pressure he feels in such moments, "pressure to give in," she puts his feelings into perspective: "She said that it was what separated heroes from humans, the not giving in, and I hadn't understood that. It was a weakness in my game, not about being a hero" (36). The war offers variations on the heroic theme, a theme in which idealism may reflect part of the pleasurable fantasy Holland includes in his theoretical model. What kind of hero do we expect in war? What kind of hero can a person become? Is it possible to realize the ideal in the realities of the Vietnamese landscape or in the everyday world we inhabit?

One variation on heroism spins out of the action of being a good soldier. When Richie tries to write his brother Kenny about the war, he tries to identify himself through this variation:

Being a good soldier meant doing your job. For the guys in the squad, it meant killing the enemy. Before I went into the army I had thought about being a writer. Teachers said I used words well. But writing that I had done a good job killing just didn't work. (190)

He has already killed the enemy, defaced a man and himself, and he knows that this is not heroism.

A chaplain who comes to talk to the company offers an idealistic variation on the heroic theme. He tells the soldiers that "everything we did we did for the highest reasons that men knew:

'You are defending freedom,' he said. 'You are defending the freedom of Americans and of the South Vietnamese. Your acts of heroism and courage are celebrations of life, and all America thanks you.' (215)

This is the patriotic ideal, heroism for the fatherland, bravery for others, the ultimate altruism in the struggle for the victory of Good, the vanquishing of Evil.

Later, when Richie tells Lobel that he has not written to tell Kenny how the war really is, Lobel upholds the heroic ideal from the popular culture: "'You gotta tell him it's just like the way things are in the movies. . . . you tell him what this is really like, and who's going to come to the next war?'" Richie fears that Kenny will romanticize the war, "'start thinking about heroes and stuff like that,'" to which Lobel responds:

'Heroes?'

'You know, to a kid if you kill somebody and the somebody is supposed to be a bad guy, you're a hero.' (268).

Now the notes of heroic variations play in and out of each other. Being somebody and killing somebody may be variations on the same theme, but the person who gets killed is also "somebody." When one identity is found, another is lost. That's the nature of war.

Lobel's simple dichotomy of Good and Bad, however, may be necessary for Holland's kind of fantasy. We fantasize a heroism that defeats Evil; such a fantasy is essential to the Great American Hero that the chaplain constructs and to the John Waynes that the movies make, but it does not play out in the character of Richie in the novel, nor, I wager, does it play out in most of our lives. Sometimes the struggle is too complicated for cultural formulas, no matter how glorious they sound or how real they look before us on the screen. Such heroes are made of images and cameras; most of us are not such grand, or shallow, fabrications. We weave our texts from sturdier threads.

The text of Vietnam heroism is a tattered one, the result of pulling and tearing at the fabric of that awful war in critical debates that split apart a nation. Soldiers who came home from that much critiqued struggle found neither ticker tape parades nor national celebrations. They found themselves the disenfranchised, often the defenders of battles in which they had risked their own lives for something much larger than themselves. In the Vietnam War, however, that "something" was less easily defined than it had been in the previous wars. Vietnam was not a world war in the same sense as those foreign conflicts, and its heroes were not lauded as others before them. What price heroism? Personal torture for some, for many the hell of homecoming. That is the part of Richie's story that Myers does not tell, but I know it. I know it in the haggard faces of veterans who could not find a place in the world of home, who wore fatigues as badges of courage, who, as some said, "let themselves go" as their

hair grew long and depression ruled them. I know some of them; I have taught some of them. They are variations on the theme of my identity.

Unity

Holland contends that when we finish reading a novel such as *Fallen Angels*, "we put the work together at an intellectual or esthetic level" according to the overarching principle of his theory: "identity re-creates itself" ("Unity" 126). We can accomplish this putting together in several ways, one of which is that we bring our knowledge to bear on it, evaluate it.

Richie works at answering the question "who am I?" throughout the novel by juxtaposing his knowledge of himself before the war with images of himself during the war. Recalling that at seventeen he had been a kid, he realizes that the war is transformative: "And now all the dying around me, and all the killing, was making me look at myself again, hoping to find something more than the kid I was" (186). He identifies the variations that have been part of his identity, and he thinks about himself becoming a man, achieving Holland's unity: "Maybe I could sift through the kid's stuff, the basketball, the Harlem streets, and find the man I could be" (187). Later, he questions who he has become in the war: "Who the hell were these people? These soldiers? Was I really one of them? If I was, could I ever be anything else again?" (295-96). He has played out one of Holland's identity variations, but he doubts that he can remain this man that war has constructed. Finding the person that

we can be is one of the quests of human life, and it is a function of all the games that we play, the streets we cross, the wars we survive, both the physical ones and the psychological ones.

We experience the movement toward unity in the two images of holding hands at the end of the novel. In the final hospital scene, Richie lies on a gurney awaiting surgery for the wounds he has sustained in the last near-fatal attack. Monaco has been holding his hand, and as the doctor arrives and pulls their hands apart, Richie thinks: "I had never been in love before. Maybe this was what it was like, the way I felt for Monaco and Peewee and Johnson, and the rest of my squad. I hoped this was what it was like" (301). This seems to be a totalizing experience for him, this achievement of intimacy, and it seems to go beyond male bonding, the camaraderie of friendship and sport. This love, symbolized by the simple act of holding hands, is reiterated in the final scene of the novel as Richie and Peewee, holding hands, fly out of hell.

Holland says that another way to transform the fantasy into a total experience is to treat it "as an encoded message to be decoded" ("Unity" 126). What Myers has encoded into his text is intensely personal for me because the Vietnam War framed my entire college experience. I was aware that while I labored with stream of consciousness in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as A Young Man*, a portrait that didn't seem to be part of my experience, that other portraits were being lived out in a war that seemed a world away. When I read Theodore Dreiser's *An American*

Tragedy, I wondered where the American Dream was, whose Dream it was, if it were real, had ever been real. In those reading days I went to college safely and quietly, while others, more vocal and more public, were shot to death on the campus at Kent State.

Then, after college, teaching my high school students, I watched my aunt and uncle agonize daily over the fate of their only son in Khe Sahn, one of the fiery spots of the war. I heard them tell stories of his friend, killed in action, or of a comrade's neck broken as he was catapulted from a convoy truck passing over rough terrain.

I heard the silence of his return, knew that he spent hours in his room behind a closed door, looking at pictures and slides. Now I wonder, knowing Richie, what my cousin has done with his mental pictures. Do they flash before him sometimes? Are they in color? I have stood back in later years, watched myself not move toward him, saw him changed so that I felt such a move would intrude into his sanctuary. In reading *Fallen Angels* I weave myself more deeply into his silence as I contemplate that unifying unspoken love that threads through men and women who stand to kill, to conquer, and to preserve.

The Poem of the Mind

Nothing that I can say seems to end this part of the chapter quite right. Each reading of *Fallen Angels* has been a deeply emotional experience for me. The novel is a "poem" as Rosenblatt means that term in its broadest generic sense, but is also a

"poem" in the way that Wallace Stevens' seems to mean in his phrase "the poem of the act of the mind":

The poem of the mind in the act of finding
What will suffice. It has not always had
To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
Was in the script.
Then the theatre was changed
To something else. Its past was a souvenir.
It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
It has to face the men of the time and to meet
The women of the time. It has to think about war
And it has to find what will suffice. ("Modern Poetry" 239-40)

The theatre of war in *Fallen Angels* is the theatre of the "poem of the mind," the place where the script changes, where Harlem becomes a souvenir of the past, where we learn to speak the language of the living and the dead.

Reading/Responding in an Interpretive Community

Stevens' poem moves me from the theatre of war to the theatre of the classroom as I respond in another way to *Fallen Angels*. This time I am working with the theory of Stanley Fish, who stands at the opposite end of Steven Mailloux's reader-response spectrum. My reading from a collective perspective is also personal, however, because one of the variations of my identity theme is that I am an English teacher, and I cannot read this novel without locating it in the world of my reading and teaching experience. I begin with an introduction to the idea of interpretive communities, the central concept of Stanley Fish's social reader-response theory.

Interpretive Communities

Fish explains this concept in his essay "Interpreting the Variorum." His position throughout the essay is antiformalist as he attacks ways of reading which originate from the belief that the text is self-sufficient and that meaning is embedded in it, and which ignore and devalue the act of reading as a temporal, experiential event. In the reading procedures he proposes, "readers' activities are at the center of attention, where they are regarded not as leading to meaning, but as having meaning" (Tompkins 172). These activities include making and revising assumptions, rendering and regretting judgments, arriving at conclusions and abandoning them, asking questions and supplying answers, and solving puzzles. Such acts are not the kind that follow specific procedures or aim for certain goals, but instead constitute "a moving field of concerns, at once wholly present (not waiting for meaning, but constituting meaning) and continually in the act of reconstituting itself" (Tompkins 172). Later he clarifies the concept of reading which supports such activities. It is not, he says, "simply reading," but reading that results from his membership in a community of readers who share similar interpretive strategies, that is, an interpretive community.

I direct readers to Fish's full definition of such communities in "Interpreting the Variorum," although here I will discuss those characteristics which are reflected in my reading of *Fallen Angels*. Interpretation, or "text making," as he defines the term, is not "completely random": "It is the fragile but real consolidation of interpretive communities that allows us to talk to one another" (182). Reading is an

act of conversation for me, a conversation between the text and me, and eventually, in the act of my teaching, a conversation with my students about the texts we are experiencing in the classroom. Fish explains that interpretive strategies are learned; they are neither natural nor universal (183). To continue the conversation metaphor, then, I am the product of all the talking that has gone on in the English classrooms, or communities, in which I learned to read, and my teaching continues the construction of such communities.

For my purposes here I shall define a broader interpretive community than the localized classroom, and though it does not include all English teachers, I am confident that many of my colleagues in the profession will feel at home in the reading I am about to describe. First, however, a few clarifications: membership in the group and the nature of the individual reader.

How do we know if we belong to such a community? Fish says that "The only 'proof' of membership is fellowship, the nod of recognition from someone in the same community, someone who says to you what neither of us could prove to a third party: 'we know'" (184). Interpretive communities, then, are not secret societies; they situate us in worlds of knowledge that we construct.

Fish defines a reader in an interpretive community as "the intended reader," but he does not limit this term to mean the reader whose single goal is to comprehend the author's purpose (174). Neither is Fish's reader the one who simply registers a response to a text and then talks freely about it, associating the text with other

experiences or simply locating his experience alongside a character in a story. Instead, Fish's reader is educated, holds opinions and concerns, and is in command of linguistic competencies (174). In other words, Fish's reader knows how to read; the experience of the reader's response to a text occurs as a function of these how-to's that the reader shares with the other members of the interpretive community.

Intertextuality and the Interpretive Community

Without taking a poll, I know that I am part of that large group of English teachers who are "continually interested in how the students' experience with one text is related to their experience with another text, or with all the other texts in their reading history" as Richard Beach describes us (*Teacher's Introduction* 37). As readers we are, Fish says, "predisposed to perform certain acts" in our experience with the text. We "find" themes because we are looking for them, we "confer significances," for example, on "flowers, streams, shepherds, pagan deities" and we "mark out formal units." Our disposition to perform such acts constitutes a "set of interpretive strategies, which, when they are put into execution, become the large act of reading" (179-80). In this explanation, Fish answers the question Roland Barthes asks in *Image-Music-Text*: "Who executes the work?" Fish emphasizes an important element of his theory: These interpretive strategies do not come into play after the text has been read. Instead, they "are the shape of the reading," inseparable from the

activity of reading, and thus "they give texts their shape, making them rather than, as is usually assumed, arising from them" (180).

In declaring that all of us who are predisposed to this way of reading constitute an interpretive community, I am pushing reader-response to its most recent post-structural developments. I am identifying us as post-structuralists whose mutual strategy involves, in this chapter, the concept of intertextuality. I am aware that the term is defined quite differently in various theoretical contexts, so I shall specify what I mean by it. I derive my definition from Roland Barthes' metaphors of textuality. In *The Death of the Author*, Barthes defines text in terms of intertext: "The text is a fabric of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture" (Adams 1132). In "From Work to Text," Barthes creates a more complex image of intertextuality as the "stereographic plurality of signifiers" (Harari 76). I have introduced both of these definitions in the previous chapter, and now I add this further amplification to them:

Any text is a new tissue of past citations. Bits of code, formulae, rhythmic models, fragments of social languages, etc. pass into the text and are redistributed within it, for there is always language before and around the text. Intertextuality, the condition of any whatsoever, cannot, of course, be reduced to a problem of sources or influences; the intertext is a general field of anonymous formulae whose origin can scarcely be located; of unconscious or automatic quotations, given without quotation marks. ("Theory of the Text" 39)

What I want to demonstrate now is my reader-response to *Fallen Angels* from this perspective, from inside the community of English teachers who hear in everything they read echoes of what they have read, not as sources or influences, but as strands

from which they weave the texts of their lessons and with which they collaborate with students to weave the fabric of knowledge. Each of us will recognize our own quotations "without quotation marks" based on all the texts we have lived through.

The Title

My first "automatic quotation" in *Fallen Angels* emerges when the title transports me to another textual landscape, that world inhabited by the most notorious fallen angels of western literature, Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Milton's epic portrays in the grandest scale that archetypal conflict between Good and Evil, its apparent hero the Ruler of Paradise challenged by his angel Satan, who, as a consequence of the subsequent war, falls out of Paradise:

Him the Almighty Power
Hurled headlong flaming from the ethereal sky
With hideous ruin and combustion down
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell
In adamant chains and penal fire,
Who durst defy the omnipotent to arms. (1.44-49)

The imagery of these lines appropriately sets the stage for the fiery hell of Vietnam that I fall into with Richie Perry, but the characters of the novel are not Satan and his lieutenant Beelzebub.

After the fall, "overwhelmed / With whirlwinds of tempestuous fire, "Satan (Hebrew: "enemy, opponent, adversary") speaks to Beelzebub (Hebrew: "lord of the flies"):

'If thou beest he . . . but O how fallen! how changed
From him, who in the happy realms of light
Clothed with transcendant brightness didst outshine
Myriads though bright' (1.76-87)

Satan describes the brilliance of heroic glory lost and then turns to the task that unites them:

'Fallen cherub, to be weak is miserable,
Doing or suffering: but of this be sure,
To do aught good never will be our task
But ever to do ill our sole delight,
As being the contrary of his high will
Whom we resist.' (1.157-62)

Remembering this text, this world, I anticipate that the novel will define just such an archetypal struggle, and I will not be disappointed.

Beelzebub himself rules in another text into which I am woven, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* with its Edenic intertext. In a sense, it also tells the story of fallen angels. These innocent schoolboys fall from the sky as their plane crashes while it is attempting to rescue them from some future cataclysmic war. The story traces a community from its shaky creation in an Edenic Paradise to its near apocalypse in the fiery forests of a hell of the boys own making. [Intertext: Satan: "A mind is not changed by place or time. / The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven" (Milton 1.253-255)]. Someone arrives to rescue Golding's young students, transformed by their attempts to survive into life and death combatants, warring in the struggles between Good and Evil.

Two of the many symbols of this war are Simon and The Beast of the novel. At one point in the story, Simon as a Christ figure, has a conversation with The Beast, represented to him by the head of a pig slaughtered by Jack and the Hunters and stuck on a pike in a forest bower. During an epileptic seizure, Simon's imagination transforms the pig's head into "the Lord of the Flies," who speaks "in the voice of a schoolmaster," and whose words declare the impossibility of Good defeating Evil. As The Beast speaks, Simon thinks that he is inside the Beast's "vast mouth" with all its blackness, "a blackness that spread." The Beast warns him not to stop Jack and his Hunters in their malevolent takeover of the island: "'We are going to have fun on the island! . . . Or else,' said the Lord of the Flies, 'we shall do you. See? Jack and Roger and Maurice and Robert and Bill and Piggy and Ralph. Do you. See?'" (Golding 133). "Do you" means "kill you, eradicate your goodness from this world." As I anticipate *Fallen Angels*, I wonder who The Beast will be. Will it be the enemy, the Viet Cong, or will it be The Beast that the pighead defines in Golding's novel, that darkness inside us, that Heart of Darkness of Conrad which brings us at last to a black epitaph of human existence, Kurtz's final "'The horror, the horror'" (Conrad 85). The Beast rebukes Simon: "'Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill! . . . You knew, didn't you? I'm part of you? Close, close, close, I'm the reason why it's no go? Why things are what they are?'" (Golding 133).

Reading Myers' novel, I discover that some of Golding's fallen angels (Jack and his band) are closer to Milton's angels than to Myers'. Myers' angels are the

preservers of Paradise, of the world of peace, the heroes to which the chaplain refers as men whose "acts of heroism and courage are celebrations of life" (215). The title of the novel comes from a prayer that is first spoken when we experience the first casualties. The prayer subverts, even inverts, my Miltonic intertext:

'Lord, let us feel pity for Private Jenkins, and sorrow for ourselves, and all the angel warriors that fall. Let us fear death, but let it not live within us. Protect us, O Lord, and be merciful unto us. Amen' (44)

Although the phrase "angel warriors" echoes Milton, these soldiers are the young, the inexperienced, the men who suffer the fate of innocence in the fiery hands of war.

Camaraderie: The Intertexts of Love

As the story of the relationship between Richie and Peewee unfolds in *Fallen Angels*, I hear Homer and Vergil singing of the bonds between comrades in arms. At the end of the novel Richie defines the relationships that have developed during the war: "I had never been in love before. Maybe this was what it was like, the way I felt for Monaco and Peewee and Johnson and the rest of my squad. I hoped this was what it was like" (301). The word love in this passage creates intertexts for me as I remember the theme of friendship in Homer's *Iliad* and Vergil's *Aeneid*.

Iliad. In his epic of the final days of the Trojan War, Homer invokes the Muse to sing of a soldier's anger:

Anger be now your song, immortal one, Akhilleus' anger,
doomed and ruinous, that caused the Akhaians loss on bitter loss
and crowded brave souls into the undergloom, leaving so many
dead men— (Fitzgerald I.1-5)

This is the hero's anger over the spoils of war, over Agamemnon's taking of Briseis, a Trojan woman that Akhilleus feels rightly belongs to him. Through seventeen of the epic's twenty-four books, Akhilleus' anger will not be assuaged; his refusal to help the Achaians (Greeks) fight the Trojans brings the war to a virtual standstill.

Although Akhilleus refuses to fight, he agrees to allow his best friend Patroklos, dressed in Akhilleus' mighty armor, to go into battle against Hektor. Although the Homeric poet does not explicitly describe the love between these comrades, Akhilleus' response to the subsequent death of Patroklos at Hektor's hands is sufficient proof of a deep bond:

A black stormcloud of pain shrouded Akhilleus,
On his bowed head he scattered dust and ash in handfuls and
befouled his beautiful face, letting black ash sift on his fragrant
khiton [tunic]. Then in the dust he stretched his giant length and
tore his hair with both hands. (18.25-30)

Richie's affection for Lieutenant Carroll and his response to his death reminds me of this fraternal bond, expressed so grandly by Homer and so tenderly by Myers:

The war was different now. Nam was different. Jenkins had been outside of me, even the guys in Charlie Company had been outside. Lieutenant Carroll was inside of me, he was part of me. Part of me was dead with him. I wanted to be sad, to cry for him, maybe bang my fists against the sides of the hooch. But all I felt was numb. (*Fallen Angels* 136)

Stirred by his enormous grief, Akhilleus rejoins the battle and avenges the death of Patroklos. Then, in an act of ultimate humiliation, he drags Hektor's body around the walls of Troy in full view of the fallen hero's grief-stricken family. He refuses to

return the body for a proper burial until Hektor's father, King Priam, petitions him in the name of the love between a father and a son.

In *Fallen Angels*, there is no equivalent paternal bond, but Myers symbolizes the fraternal bond between Richie and Carroll in that final imaginary patrol at the end of the novel, where, in a long line of soldiers, living and dead, Carroll brings up the rear, completes the picture, seals it into memory. He also symbolizes the bond between Richie and Peewee in the image of holding hands which I discussed earlier.

Aeneid. While Homer portrays this brotherly love on a giant scale, Vergil tells a more intimate story of the friends Nisus and Euryalus during the war in which Aeneas and his Trojan comrades defeat their enemy on the plains of Italy. A dazzling young hero, Nisus is "a man-at-arms / With a fighting heart" and "A quick hand with a javelin and arrow," (9.241-244). As the story opens, he is guarding a gate with his comrade Euryalus, "handsomer / Than any other soldier of Aeneas / Wearing the Trojan gear"; Euryalus is, Vergil says, still "a boy whose cheek / Bore though unshaven manhood's early down." The poet tells us that "One love united them, and side by side / They entered combat" (9.245-250). Together they volunteer to reconnoiter to find Aeneas, a patrol not unlike those in *Fallen Angels*. Coming upon an enemy camp, they slaughter the Romans, but are caught in the act, and both are killed. Euryalus falls:

As a bright flower cut by a passing plow
Will droop and wither slowly, or a poppy
Bow its head upon its tired stalk
When overborne by a passing rain. (9.617-620)

In these images Vergil captures the innocence of the soldiers who fall in the war, and these are the soldiers, too, of Myers' war. Nisus fights brilliantly with his sword, but he, too, falls: "Pierced everywhere, / He pitched down on the body of his friend / And there at last in the peace of death grew still" (11.630-33). The poet immortalizes them in his song much in the way that Richie immortalizes his fallen comrades in the pictures he carries in his mind: "Fortunate, both! If in the least my songs / Avail, no future day will ever take you / Out of the record of remembering Time" (633-35).

In that "remembering Time," I hear a conversation between Vergil and Tim O'Brien, one of the best storytellers of the Vietnam War. Throughout my reading of *Fallen Angels*, O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* emerges as an intertext in the flow of Richie's story:

Forty-three years old, and the war occurred half a lifetime ago, and yet the remembering makes it now. And sometimes remembering will lead to a story, which makes it forever. That's what stories are for. Stories are for joining the past to the future. . . . Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story. ("Things" 40)

Myers participates in this conversation, too; his novel is another "record of remembering Time," another story which joins past and future in the same way that intertextuality connects my life as a reader and teacher.

At Home and At War

One moment in *Fallen Angels* captures my attention more than it might that of other readers because I am so grounded in the classical traditions, especially epic poetry. In this moment Richie considers the relationship between home and the war. Home is synonymous for him with what he refers to as "the World" throughout the novel. He needs it to remain the same, unchanging in the face of all the changes that are taking place within him: "The thing was, I needed the people in the World to be okay, and to be the same as when I left them. I was holding on, now, and I needed something to hold on to." Going off to the war, he recalls, he had thought that he would never die in combat and that "we would all go home somehow satisfied" (186-87). We are reminded throughout the novel of this idea of home as stability, a world unchanging. Other soldiers link us to home, especially Sergeant Gearhart, who writes three letters to his wife and distributes them among the company so that in the event of his death, one of the letters might make it home.

Richie's concept of home transports me to the landscape of Homer's *Iliad*, to a quiet moment that ends Book VIII of the poem. After a day of fighting, the Trojans bivouac on the plain that faces the Greek ships:

So with hearts made high these sat night-long by the outworks of
battle, and their watchfires blazed numerous about them.

As when in the sky the stars about the moon's shining are seen in
all their glory, when the air has fallen to stillness,

and all the high places of the hills are clear, and the shoulder
out-jutting,

and the deep ravines, as endless bright air spills from the heavens
and all the stars are seen, to make glad the heart of the shepherd;
such in their numbers blazed the watchfires the Trojans were
burning
between the waters of Xanthos and the ships, before Ilium.
(Lattimore 8.553-661)

I quote this lengthy passage for a distinct intertextual purpose: It has its own intertext. Woven within this scene of war is the moment of home, the recollection of security and peace under the star-filled sky, a peace known to the shepherd in his pastoral world, unchanged by the distant war. The shepherd's hills are Richie's Harlem streets, a safe haven, at least in memory. After all, what is a war story? Why does Homer tell us about all that brightness, that starlight, those campfires? Isn't it so that his imagery will detach us from the war? Doesn't that imagery argue against the whole system of war? Doesn't it remind us what's been given up while we await the sunrise on the Trojan plain? Doesn't it recontextualize us? That's what Tom O'Brien says:

And in the end, of course, a true war story is never about war. It's about sunlight. It's about the special way that dawn spreads out on a river when you know that you must cross the river and march into the mountains and do things you are afraid to do. It's about love and memory. It's about sorrow. It's about sisters who never write back and people who never listen. ("How to Tell" 91)

I go to such great care here to illustrate these intertextualities so that I can indicate the pleasures of response which are available to us, as Barthes says, from that "fabric of

quotations" which results "from a thousand sources of culture" (Adams 1132) when we read as members of a particular interpretive community.

All readers in the community of English teachers will create their own intertextual links to *Fallen Angels*, everything from the obvious host of war novels, including *The Red Badge of Courage* and *All Quiet on the Western Front* to memorable poems such as Thomas Hardy's "The Man He Killed" and the brilliant poems of World War I, Siegfried Sassoon's familiar "Suicide in the Trenches" among them. I especially wanted to elaborate on the text of letters, connecting the novel to Walt Whitman's "Come Up From the Fields Father" where, one Ohio autumn a daughter calls her family together to read an ominous letter, to realize that "The only son is dead," (Whitman 31), but there is not enough time for everything.

There are, of course, other kinds of texts. The novel, full of references to film, recalls *Platoon*, for example, perhaps the most graphic of all the Vietnam films. And there is that unforgettable picture of the naked child fleeing her burning village. We cannot forget the text of My Lai. So many texts. So many intertexts.

I could continue this conversation between texts indefinitely, but I will end with several texts that are interwoven for me into one of the most electrifying moments in *Fallen Angels*, a scene in the Vietnamese rice paddies that Walter Dean Myers has etched into my psyche. Even when I hear the title of his novel, the images of this moment flash cinematically before me.

On a rainy Tuesday morning, some ARVNs catch a Vietnamese woman and two children near the edge of the paddies. Without an interpreter, they can't communicate, so they let the three go. Feeling sorry for the children, Peewee wants to give them a gift, so, using, a handful of grass, he starts making a doll. I quote the subsequent action in its entirety because neither summary nor paraphrase can capture it:

Tuesday. Raining. It promised to be the worst day of the war. . . .

I watched as some guys from Charlie Company started talking to the Vietnamese woman. They were just kidding around with her, talking stupid stuff about how they were looking for some cheerleaders. They followed her to the edge of the camp. Meanwhile Peewee was working hard trying to get his little doll together to give to her kids.

I watched as Peewee stood, putting the last touches on the doll. I thought it was cool when the woman stopped just before she reached the dikes and handed one of the kids to a guy from Charlie Company.

The GI's arms and legs flung apart from the impact of the blast. The damn kid had been mined, had exploded in his arms.

Guys not even near him, guys who had just been watching him take the kid into his arms, fell to the ground as if the very idea of a kid exploding in your arms had its own power, its own killing force.

I saw the woman running across the paddy. I saw her fold backward as the automatic fire ripped her nearly apart. I saw part of her body move in one direction, and her legs in another.

The woman's other child stood for a long moment, knee deep in water and mud, before it, too, was gunned down.

I turned and saw Peewee walking away. The doll he had made lay facedown in the endless mud.

It was raining again. (230-31)

As a member of an interpretive community first trained in formalist reading techniques, I see this scene as complete, framed and wrapped in rain. It seems both a linear movement through time and space and a completed circle, a frozen moment of experience. I know that Peewee has a tender side, and I respond to his desire to offer a moment of tenderness to these children. Beyond that, however, when the scene is over, I do not see Peewee. I see the child, shattered. I see the fallen soldiers. I see the mother and the other child, shot dead in the rice paddy.

My own face glazed with rain from the reading, I hear music, a song that has played through my head many times, a song that I have taught as poetry, a song for fallen angels. At first I hear it off there in the distance, but as the sound of the exploding shells fades, I hear it more distinctly. "Where have all the flowers gone?" it asks? And "Where have all the young girls gone?" And "All the young men?" "Long time passing /.../ Long time ago?" It is a song of the bittersweet love that ends when war intervenes, when young men "all in uniform" have "gone to graveyards, everyone." And its refrain gently asks the ambiguous question of protest: "Oh, when will they ever learn? Oh, when will they ever learn?" (Seeger "Where"). The word "they" implicates all of us in war, those who create it, defend it, criticize it, fight in it, die in it, and lose in it.

I hear another song of protest as the child explodes before my face. I am thinking about the Vietnamese mother in this scene. I know there are other "enemy" mothers who will not blow up their children (Are those her children?). I hear another singer, a poet asking questions:

- 1) Did the people of Viet Nam
use lanterns of stone?
- 2) Did they hold ceremonies
to reverence the opening of buds?
- 3) Were they inclined to quiet laughter?
- 4) Did they use bone and ivory,
jade and silver, for ornament?
- 5) Had they an epic poem?
- 6) Did they distinguish between speech and singing?

Perhaps, I think, a mother answers:

- 1) Sir, their light hearts turned to stone.
It is not remembered whether in gardens
stone lanterns illumined pleasant ways.
- 2) Perhaps they gathered once to delight in blossom,
but after the children were killed
there were no more buds.
- 3) Sir, laughter is bitter to the burned mother.
- 4) A dream ago, perhaps. Ornament is for joy.
All the bones were charred.
- 5) It not remembered. Remember,
most were peasants; their life
was in rice and bamboo.
When peaceful clouds were reflected in the paddies
and the water buffalo stepped surely along terraces,
maybe fathers told their sons old tales.
When bombs smashed those mirrors
there was only time to scream.
- 6) There is an echo yet
of their speech which was like a song.
It was reported their singing resembled
the flight of moths in moonlight.
Who can say? It is silent now. (Levertov 517)

This is the story, too. Paradise. Innocence. An ancient culture with an epic poem.
Lost.

The Poem of the Act of the Mind

What I have attempted to perform here is what Wallace Stevens calls, as I have pointed out earlier, "the poem of the act of the mind." This has not been easy, because "response to literature takes place in the black box of the mind, and it has been difficult to look inside and see what's going on" (Probst 655). At the last I have allowed Denise Levertov to speak for me of that bitter irony of war when so much is lost, but which we seem to see only in our vision of ourselves and our loss. I have tried to play out my identity theme distinctly from the entangled variations that I have lived through as a human being. I have collaborated with Richie and with Walter Dean Myers, with Norman Holland and Stanley Fish, with Homer and Vergil, with Tim O'Brien, with Walt Whitman, Wallace Stevens, and Denise Levertov to execute the text of the novel. And I have been Rosenblatt's keyboard, too, performing that most difficult music, the song of myself.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Mapping the Territory of the Female Imagination: Mother/Daughter Relationships in *The Leaving*

First, a story.

Once upon a time, and a very sad time it was, though it wasn't in my time, nor in your time, nor in any real time, there was a man who told secrets to other men. And the man was a Critic King and the other men were his vassals. And no woman ever heard the secrets. And no woman ever read the books which the secrets were about. But the king had a daughter. And one day, the daughter read the books and heard the secrets. And the daughter saw that the secrets were not real secrets and the books were not real books. And she was very angry. So she talked to other women. Through nights and days and dreams and waking the women talked together. And the king and his vassals grew old and died. The women looked at each other's golden faces and heard each other's golden voices. And they lived long together in the land, whole again, which they called Feminist Criticism.

When Maggie Humm opens her survey of feminist criticism from the 1960s to the 1990s with this fairy tale (*A Reader's Guide* 1), she makes the point that feminist criticism has had a much shorter gestation period than the timelessness suggested in her little story. Then she moves on to her larger story of the many plots in the development of feminist criticism. I want to use her story to point out some key ideas that I shall investigate in my own overview of feminist literary theory and criticism.

Deconstructing the Kingdom

First, the matter of power. Humm's fairy tale deconstructs (and finally destroys) that bastion of all fairy tales: the patriarchally constructed world. This is the world where men rule, singly and collectively, and where men make decisions, at least in fairy tales, as to the disposition of their daughters' futures. Power is always a function of maleness which in the fairy tale is the most important gender in the universe. Feminists work to change this patriarchal world and even to build a new one.

Second, the matter of language. The male inhabitants of the fairy tale own language to such an extent that women do not have access to it and to the books that contain the knowledge created by language. This is a world ruled by male-dominated theory and patriarchal languages. Women are kept in two senses of that word. First, they are kept in the sense of being controlled by men. Second, they are marginalized intellectually, kept out of the mainstream of knowing. In other words, they have no epistemology: They do not know how they know except as men tell them.

Gender finally leads to a quiet revolution in the Critic Kingdom. One day the king's daughter gains access to the books and their language. I will not make a big deal about how her privileged status may make this possible, since this is a fairy tale. However, she gains access; she begins to see that everything in the kingdom really is a social construction. I will not comment on her reading strategies since I assume she

was taught by men. What I must assume, though, is that she is uncommonly brilliant because she sees through the ruse of male language. She discovers that these men have made their world and the women in it, too. Her subsequent anger leads her to share her new knowledge with other women. Their conversations help them create a community, and their talking and thinking result in a new world order.

One turn of the plot in Humm's story surprises me: All those privileged and once powerful men just get old and die. Now this is too convenient, too easy, I think to myself. Of course, one of the problems of my reading is that I am making a one-to-one correspondence between the fairy tale and the development of feminist criticism. This, of course, is just like a man reading: "This equals That"; "The story moves logically to its resolution." Now I must revise these sentences, this reading, if I am to be convincing in my feminist reading of *The Leaving*. Humm's story has told me that I am in fairy tale time. So why do I impose patriarchal linearity on the chronology of her story? That's easy, you say: You're a man. Correct. What I want to demonstrate in this chapter is that men can learn new ways of reading, can revise their reading strategies to contemplate how women read and write the world. A feminist reading is a revisionist reading, as I shall explain later.

I had written a final sentence to my interpretation of the story as Humm gives it to us, and I erased it. You will see why. What I originally wrote was this: "In the real world which this fairy tale imitates, many males have spoken in strident tones about the philosophies, theories, and practices of feminist criticism. Nonetheless,

Humm wants to finish her little story, so she just lets the old men wither away and die." Allow me to deconstruct this patriarchal writing.

First, the fairy tale does not have to imitate the real world. As a matter of fact, it is perhaps better thought of as a representation, if it represents anything at all, of the psychological experience which may be termed real only as a manifestation of each person's mental processes and their relationship to lived experience. Now to the clause "many males have spoken"; this is an untenable chauvinistic clause because it assumes complete agreement in the community of feminist thinkers and writers. Feminists are hardly in agreement on their approaches and their practices, as my overview of feminism will demonstrate. What my sentence does, of course, is create that patriarchal dichotomy of men/women, or as the poststructuralists would say, that binary opposition which organizes the world too easily into this or that.

Now I must revise this last sentence in which I am trying to explain my revision of my original writing. Why did I write "men/women" rather than "women/men"? I certainly cannot say that I wrote it because it "sounded right" to my ear. That is an affirmation that both my physical ear and the metaphoric ear of my mind hear like a man. And I certainly should not say that I constructed that pairing of terms because it's a "natural" phrase to me. Should I say that it came so quickly that I did not even think about it? That writing men/women is a habit? Yes. That's what it is. A habit. And one lesson of feminist criticism is that we have to break those old habits of our ways of reading.

The new women in Humm's fairy tale are not some new variations on the idea of princess. Their golden nature does not lie in tiaras or velvet robes; it emanates from their newly acquired language. The former princess and all of her new sisters speak in "golden voices." Their powers of speech are so great that they create a land that is "whole again." I'm not sure what Humm means by that phrase whole again. I do not question it just because I am reading as a man. Instead, I wonder: When was it ever whole before? Perhaps she really means "whole for the first time." Since they re-name the land "Feminist Criticism," we are to assume that all the male language and all the male criticism died with its speakers. Now that would be a fairy tale.

We can imagine the construction that goes on in the new land of Feminist Criticism. First, the former princess moves out of the palace. That house is too patriarchal, since the word palace derives from the Latin word *Palatium*, referring to the "Palatin Hill in Rome where the emperors' residences were built" (*Webster's* 847). Obviously, then, the Feminist Critics do not construct new palaces of their own. That would be merely to reconstruct the hierarchy of patriarchy, and, as Audre Lorde's metaphor puts it so creatively, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" (*Sister Outsider* 110). In other words, the daughters had better not repeat the sins of the fathers in the way they construct the world they live in. In their new status as women who know differently, the alternative of how to live is clear (as I continue my elaboration of the fairy tale). They dwell in one wonderful

house as a community of collaborators who each has a room of her own. They celebrate their diversities, and they call their home The House of Difference.

Metaphors for Feminist Theory

The House of Difference

The construction of a house provides an apt metaphor for the building of feminist theory that has occurred in the last three decades. Naomi Schor, borrowing the metaphor from Audre Lorde, describes this new theoretical and critical house as the "'house of difference'" (*Zami* 226 qtd. in Schor 262).

Schor helps locate us in the theoretical landscape in which the house of difference has been built. She arrives at her metaphor following a description of American literary education before the 1970s, locating her house in the context of other constructions in language—ways of reading and teaching—which preceded its construction. Chief among these are New Criticism and structuralism, both impersonal rhetorics which taught us (the pronoun is ambiguous, but I believe she means both men and women) to "speak from the position of the universal." When she refers to the price paid for such rhetorical practices as "the cost of painful mutilations and self-denials" (262), she seems to be referring more specifically to women. She describes the old house, the prefeminist academy, as a place where both "readers and teachers of literature were assumed to be neutered beings who left their

multiple subjectivities at the door" (262). I disagree with her characterization of these readers and teachers because some of them were men who probably did not perceive themselves to possess multiple subjectivities but thought of themselves as complete organisms. In their linear thinking, some of them were probably convinced that their teaching and thinking were the ways in which all people teach and think.

Schor describes the modern academy as a place where diversity is respected, a house of learning that includes a wide range of inhabitants, including "male, female, black, Hispanic, young, old, gay, lesbian, bisexual, Jewish or Arabic, postcolonial or metropolitan" (262). She does not elaborate on Lorde's house metaphor, but I shall do so because I believe that the way Lorde's narrator defines "the house of difference" in *Zami* is pertinent to my discussion of feminism. Being housed, located, having a place to live, is one of the central themes in *Zami*, which Lorde calls a biomythography. The narrator, a black lesbian, speaks about living in a state of difference, of uncertainty, with other people who are different: "For some of us there was no one particular place, and we grabbed whatever we could find from wherever we found space, comfort, quiet, a smile, non-judgment" (226). She observes that each of them has unique needs, pursuits, and alliances, and that none of them could "settle for one easy definition, one narrow individuation of self." What they finally come to realize is that "our place was the very house of difference rather than the security of any one particular place" (226).

In relation to the development of feminist theory, the house of difference is home to many inhabitants. The theorists and critics who live there do not share a "single large critical system" and they do not agree on one way of reading which comes from "a single authority figure or from a body of sacred texts." There is no "Mother of Us All or a single system of thought to provide their fundamental ideas." Instead, they derive their tools of literary analysis from the broad spectrum of critical inquiry we call literary theory (Showalter, "Revolution" 4). Their "golden voices" have spoken since the 1960s, as Maggie Humm tells us, from critical perspectives as diverse as myth criticism, psychoanalytic criticism, Marxist-socialist-feminist criticism, French feminist criticism, Black feminism, lesbian criticism, poststructural/deconstruction/postmodern criticism, and Third World feminist criticism (Humm 1-32). What is noticeably missing from Humm's book is reader-response criticism, and that is the perspective from which I shall read *The Leaving*, working out of the ideas in Patricino Schweickart's illuminating essay "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading." As has been true for my approach to all the theories in this book, I am interested in the ways on which theories teach us to read, and Schweickart maps out an approach that I believe is useful to all readers who want to explore texts written by women.

The word toward in the title of Schweickart's essay suggests something that is true of the history of feminist criticism: It is always on the move. Humm points out that shifts in feminist thinking "seem often breathtakingly speedy to outsiders," but that

the development of feminist criticism teaches a lesson: Feminist ways of reading and writing the world have been continually expanding to address larger issues of gender, race, class, and sexual preference (21). The titles of important essays in the field reflect this movement: Elaine Showalter's "Toward a Feminist Poetics"; Adrienne Rich's "Notes towards a Politics of Location"; Barbara Smith's "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism"; Deborah MacDowell's "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism"; bell hooks' "Toward a Revolutionary Feminist Pedagogy"; and Barbara Christian's admonition to avoid speed in the creation of a black feminist theory in "The Race for Theory."

The Feminist Quilt

Building a house of difference has been neither easy nor quick: "This house was not built in a day or by a single hand; the process of construction is collective and at times contentious" (Schor 262). Perhaps what each of the various theorists and critics have been constructing is a room of her own. Humm's history makes it clear that there is no single feminist literary criticism, so, how do all these theories relate? Cheryl Torsney offers another intriguing metaphor for the construction of feminist criticism: the piecing of a quilt.

To combine Lorde's and Torsney's metaphors we might say that quilting is one kind of work that goes on in the house of difference. In contrast to the New Critics' art object, the sophisticated "well-wrought urn in which each element reinforces the

value of the single artifact," Torsney's domestic metaphor of a "critical quilt" represents "myriad alternatives to androcentric criticism," something made "of plurality, strong and varied, pieced in community" ("The Critical Quilt" 180). New Criticism represents, of course, the world of the Critic King and his vassals in Humm's fairy tale. New Criticism offers one self-confident "correct" way of reading; women who practiced New Criticism did so according to the formalistic rules and rituals of that way of reading. Torsney is careful to title her essay "The Critical Quilt: Alternative Authority in Feminist Criticism," replacing the hierarchial authority of the single male voice of the Critic King with the multivoiced authority of the Land of Feminist Criticism.

A quilt is constructed from a number of layers of fabric—the back, which is usually a solid color, the batting or "insulating material" which is the "utilitarian substance" that makes the quilt a comfort in its everyday use, and the pieced top. This last layer, of course, is the most brilliant creation, stitched together as Torsney describes it from Sister blocks" (181).

History

Most writers who survey the development of feminist criticism (Humm, Torsney, Showalter, Abrams, Selden and Widdowson, Culler), agree that it took place in three phases. In "The Feminist Critical Revolution," Showalter offers a succinct history of feminist criticism which began in the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s,

with the publication of Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970), the first major work of feminist criticism in the United States. In its first phase, feminism had three major concerns. The first was with what Showalter calls "the misogyny of literary practice" (4), and what Torsney describes specifically as the stereotypical portrayal of women in male texts as "bitches, sex goddesses, and old maids" (181). The second concern was with what Mary Jacobs calls the "textual harassment" of women in male and popular texts, and the third concern was the exclusion of women from a literary history that was dominated by men (Showalter 5). The second phase of feminist criticism was focussed on the inquiry into women's writing as a specific field. In other words, women discovered that "women writers had created a "literature of their own," and they set about to "map the territory of the female imagination and the structures of the female plot" (Showalter 6). I take my title for this chapter from Showalter's imaginative geographical metaphor. Finally, the third phase acknowledged that, in addition to a literature of their own, women had a criticism of their own," a perspective from which feminists began to engage in "a radical rethinking of the conceptual grounds of literary study" (Showalter 8). All three of these concerns are reflected in my work with feminism in this chapter. Reading Canadian writer Budge Wilson's collection of short stories, I intend to investigate how Wilson maps out "the territory of the female imagination" as I enact a revised way of reading.

Ways of Reading

Reading Differently

In exploring Budge Wilson's maps in *The Leaving*, I want to enact, as I said earlier, one of the specific aims of feminist criticism, that is, to confront the problem of what it means to give a feminist reading. Such a reading, for example, may focus on "techniques of signification, such as the mirroring of mothers and daughters or textual moments of mother/daughter empathy, which are undervalued in traditional criticism" (Humm 8).

I know that in some quarters a man giving a feminist reading is suspect, but I stand here on a point of view that Showalter makes: "While feminist criticism neither must nor should be the exclusive province of women, it is important to understand that its history and expression were determined by issues of gender and sexual difference" ("Revolution" 4-5). I am very sensitive to this history and to women's writing, and I do not intend to appropriate a woman's way of thinking or reading as my own. Rather, I am interested in the ways in which feminist theory and criticism can teach me how to become a different reader, a better reader, a more sensitive reader.

In view of this goal, I am always reminded of Virginia Woolf's famous androgynous image in *A Room of One's Own*, a hallmark of feminist literature. Woolf describes a scene in which a girl and a young man walking down a London

street stop at a corner where they are picked up by a cab that glides off "as if it were swept on by the current elsewhere" (96). In her imagination this image of confluence and fluidity is invested with a "rhythmical order" that eases the strain on her mind caused by thinking of "one sex as distinct from the other" (97). Consequently, she imagines a higher level of confluence than the convergence of girl, man, and taxi. Her mind envisions a "natural fusion," and, recalling Coleridge's assertion that "a great mind is androgynous," she sketches "a plan for the soul":

In each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain, the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain, the woman predominates over the man. The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating. If one is a man, still the woman part of the brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. (98)

Though this may sound naive almost sixty years after it was written and in light of the burgeoning field of feminist criticism, I connect with Woolf's thinking about the enriching power of difference and connect Woolf's ideas to Lorde's call for creativity sparked by the dialectic of difference. Woolf's cab might be considered, then, another version of the housing metaphor where difference is celebrated. Or, in another image, Woolf and Lorde contribute two of the most brilliantly colorful pieces to the feminist quilt top.

The house of difference in Lorde's *Zami* is implied as a contrast to the house figure in her famous essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." The Master's House is, of course, another version of the palace in the fairy

tale of the Critic King and his daughter. In this case, however, it is that American symbol of the oppression of slaves and of the suppression of their language, writing, and knowledge. The Master's tools are the words with which he constructed and maintained his power over the blacks who supported his vision of patriarchy. Lorde calls for a new language of criticism, a new critical practice in which women support each other in their differences. What she says about interdependency between women different in color and sexual orientation applies, I believe, to the point I am making about the differences that enrich us:

Difference must not be merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters.
("The Master's Tools" 111)

Perhaps it is this kind of powerful dialectic that leads Showalter to believe that "feminist concerns can bring a new energy and vitality to literary studies, for men as well as women" ("Revolution" 4) and to conclude that women in the 1990s are demanding "a new universal literary history and criticism that combines the literary experiences of both women and men, a complete revolution in the understanding of our literary heritage" (Revolution 10). Showalter describes the movement toward gender studies, as a "new phase" (2) of feminist criticism in *Speaking of Gender*.

Areas of Feminist Inquiry

What areas of difference spark Lorde's creative dialectic and release Showalter's energy and vitality? What has produced such a dazzling quilt of feminist critical inquiry? What ideas do feminists investigate within the sister blocks of Torsney's quilt? Victoria Walker lists areas of inquiry which suggest the creative possibilities of reading from the feminist perspective. I offer some of her ideas here, having combined some of them and added my own clarifications in some instances: (1) the reconstruction of a distinct history and literary tradition for women; (2) the relationship of women's writing to the traditional male canon and the formation of an alternate canon; (3) black feminist criticism; (3) representations of women in literature, the visual arts, and in popular culture; (4) the debate over gender: biologically determined or socially constructed? (5) the concept of androgyny; (6) the traditions and culture of lesbians; (7) what it means to read from gendered perspectives; (8) women's writing, both its nature and the conditions of its production; (9) autobiography and 'life writing' (Lorde's *Zami*, for example); (10) the question of difference; (11) questions related to the existence or the possibility of a specific female language and the subversion of patriarchal language; (12) subjectivity and the constitution of gender identity; (13) women in relation to the issues of post-colonialism and post-imperialism; (14) the search for a female logic as opposed to male logic; and (15) the possibility of a distinctly female way of knowing, a female epistemology (Walker 39).

Giving a Feminist Reading

Understanding both the broad shape of the development of feminism and the wide range of the issues it investigates, how do we live as readers in the house of difference? How do we give a feminist reading? This is the particular question which I address in this section.

I have been referring throughout this chapter to patriarchal constructs, and a good way to define women's ways of reading is to set them against men's ways of reading. I realize that the warring metaphor is at play in this sentence, so I revise it to read "to consider them alternatives to men's ways of reading." In "Reading As a Woman," Jonathan Culler characterizes three "likely concerns" of patriarchal reading. Notice that he is careful in using that word likely. First, "the role of the author would be conceived as a paternal one and any maternal functions deemed valuable would be assimilated to paternity." Second, "much would be invested in paternal authors, to whose credit everything in their textual progeny would redound." Third, "there would be great concerns about which meanings would be legitimate and which illegitimate." In the elaboration of this third idea, Culler's sexual language aims to authenticate the paternity of texts and to prevent illegitimacy by "controlling intercourse with texts," the aim being "to prevent the proliferation of illegitimate interpretations" (520). Culler clarifies the task of feminist criticism in its third phase (the investigation of the whole of critical practice). The work, he says, is not to construct a dichotomy, to "reject the rational in favor of the irrational," but to attempt

"to develop critical modes in which the concepts that are the products of male authority are inscribed in a larger textual system" (520). This seems to be related to what Showalter calls for in the movement toward gender studies as the new phase of feminist criticism. What this criticism might become, however, is not a new phase of feminist criticism but a new textual system, as Culler suggests, which is inclusive of differences.

In "Reading as a Woman," Culler asks the question that concerns me here: "how should we read? what kind of reading experience can we imagine or produce? what would it be to read 'as a woman'?" (521). He offers his answer that reflects the cyclical nature of the female experience in contrast to the linearity of the male experience: "For a woman to read as a woman is not to repeat an identity or an experience that is given but to play a role she constructs with reference to her identity as a woman, which is also a construct, so that the series can continue: a woman reading as a woman reading as a woman" (522). Culler's language echoes the famous line of one of the pioneer feminists, Simone de Beauvoir's famous line "One is not born a woman, one becomes one" (*The Sex Which Is One* 301).

He concludes "Reading as a Woman" with an idea that provides all readers access to the way of reading he has described: "The noncoincidence reveals an interval, a division within woman or within any reading subject and the 'experience' of that subject" (522). I need to explain Culler's terminology in preparation for the next section of this chapter.

First, the phrase within any reading subject is a key one for me because it also includes men as readers who can learn to read as women read. To recall a metaphor from my earlier chapter on theory, this kind of reading provides another pair of spectacles, another way of looking at the world in the best sense of the origins of the word theory: theorein: Greek for "to look at."

Second, the term reading subject refers in its broadest sense to the individual's conscious or thinking self (Hawthorn 204), but it is implicated and complicated in many theories which I shall not discuss here. I explain it to make clear that it means something different than the simple word reader, and it is considered the opposite of the term object, the thing out there that the reader reads. This broad definition of the term subject now allows me to move on to Culler's word interval.

The interval to which Culler refers is the space that reading opens up between the social construct of self (woman or man) and the process of becoming a different self that the act of reading stimulates. Some theories refer to the state of being housed in that interval as intersubjectivity. What this means is that the subjectivity of the subject (reader) is not specific to the person reading, but that it is a "collective phenomenon." This term relates to ways of reading from the center portion of Mailloux's reader response schema (Figure 7). If you will recall, I chose to read *Fallen Angels* from the two extremes presented on that chart—Holland's highly subjective model and Stanley Fish's poststructural interpretive community model. What I propose to do here is to read *The Leaving* from the critical stance represented

in the center of Mailloux's chart, what he calls the intersubjective or phenomenological approach. Intersubjectivity in this way of reading means that the meaning of the text is not a received meaning, as it is, for example, in a New Critical reading. Instead, the meaning of the text results from the reader's interaction with the text. The reader actively internalizes the text so that the reader's view of the work "becomes, in part, a view of himself: the work has been structured into the reader and is no longer a merely objective fact" (Hawthorn 99). In this way of reading, the reader enjoys a much more creative role than is possible from some other theoretical perspectives.

Finally, the word role and its relationship to reading as a woman. Words are creative events. As I have discussed in my reading of *The Giver* from a deconstructive perspective, words do not limit the way we read; instead, they open the possibilities for multiple meanings. Reading celebrates the ways in which words help us become someone that we were not before we began to read. They have transformative powers. John Ashbery describes the transformative power of reading:

[A]t the end a person is somehow given an embodiment out of these proliferating reflections that are occurring in a generalized mind which eventually run together into the image of a specific person, 'he' or 'me,' who was not there when the poem began. (*The Craft of Poetry* qtd. in Gardner 147)

Ashbery's "generalized mind" corresponds to the subject who begins the reading. His "proliferating reflections" perhaps occur as a result of Steven Lynn's "wonderful things about words," the ways in which "we can use them to try out ideas, to

speculate, to put on roles and explore" if we have open, critical minds. Lynn describes the power of words in the context of his assertion that "anyone can do feminist criticism—and do it 'honestly'" (*Texts* 195).

A Feminist Theory of Reading

"To put the matter plainly," Patrocino Schweickart asserts in "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading," reader-response criticism needs feminist criticism" (531). She then proceeds to explain why this is so and to illustrate how feminist criticism can be interwoven with reader-response concerns to provide a new way of reading.

To set up her theory, Schweickart reviews the three problems of reader-response theory that Jonathan Culler says have preoccupied its practitioners; Culler refers to previous theories as stories of reading. First, the matter of control: Does the reader control the text, as Norman Holland and Stanley Fish contend? Or, does the text control the reader's response, as Wolfgang Iser and others contend? Second: In terms of the subject (reader) and object (text) relationship, who supplies what? What is already there, inside the text? What does the reader bring to the text? Third: What about the endings of these stories of reading? Do readers come away with meanings (a happy ending) or do they feel that reading is impossible and that the meaning of texts is undecidable (the unhappy ending)? ("Reading Ourselves" 529-30).

Changes occur when feminist criticism enters the reader-response conversation. Gender and politics, both suppressed in other reader-response models, become prominent as literature, defined as "the activities of reading and writing" becomes "an important arena of political struggle, a crucial component of the project of interpreting the world in order to change it" (532). The word change is critical here. Schweickart stresses the point that feminist criticism is not just a way of interpreting literature. It is, instead, a "mode of praxis," and the point of such praxis is "to change the world"; in the act of reading, "literature is realized as praxis. Literature acts on the world by acting on its readers" (531). Perhaps I need to explain the word praxis here. Praxis is a Greek word meaning action or practice, and it is derived from the word *prassein* which means literally "to pass through" (*Webster's* 924). Schweickart's implication, then, is that reading is an activity in which we do not pass through a text, but the text passes through us and then affects the way we act as we pass through the world.

Schweickart's essay is an affirmation of Torsney's quilting metaphor because Schweickart stitches her theory of reading into Adrienne Rich's essay "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson." The metaphor of the house is transformed here as Schweickart investigates Rich's visit to the literal and figurative home of the poet of Amherst.

Schweickart works through a close reading of Rich's essay to illustrate how it represents a "silent" and "unobtrusive" "commentary on the process of reading"

women's writing (537). The Rich essay offers, she suggests, an alternative to the primarily resistant mode in which women have traditionally read male texts. Rich creates three metaphors through which she achieves an intersubjective relationship with Dickinson and her texts. First, as an American woman poet she understands Dickinson and her methods, thereby enabling her to serve as a witness for Dickinson's defense. Second, she literally travels through time and space to visit Dickinson's house to enable her to gain access to the house of Dickinson's mind through the poet's writing. Third, she hovers like an insect against the screens of the poet's windows, "trying to connect" (Schweickart 537-39).

Schweickart explains how each of the three metaphors contributes to a feminist reading model. In the judicial metaphor the reader supports the woman writer against "patriarchal misreadings that trivialize or distort her work." The second metaphor, the visit to the house, illustrates "a principal tenet of feminist criticism: a literary work cannot be understood apart from the social, historical, and cultural context within which it was written" (537-38). The metaphor of the visit is the key to the intersubjective relationship between reader and writer. The text is no longer an object; it is the "manifestation of the subjectivity of the absent author—the 'voice' of another woman." This means that "To read Dickinson, then, is to try to visit with her, to hear her voice, to make her live in oneself" (538). The third metaphor, however, signals the reader's awareness that the visit is only a metaphor because, as the insect against the screen, the reader can only try to connect. The author is absent

from the house (538). In addition to these metaphors, Schweickart calls attention to Rich's use of the first person voice and the subjectivity that this voice brings to her reading of Dickinson.

Returning to Culler's designation of the three reader-response stories of the reading process, Schweickart now describes the feminist story as she has seen it implied in Rich's essay. The relationship between reader and writer in this story is an "intersubjective construction":

The reader encounters not simply a text, but a 'subjectified object': the 'heart and mind' of another woman. She comes into close contact with an interiority—vision—that is not identical with her own. (542)

Schweickart's stress on the word not indicates that all women do not share the same experiences, that each reader sets up her own intersubjective relationship with the writer of the text she reads.

What about the larger community outside the intersubjective relationship that reading establishes between writer and reader? What about the interpretive community of Stanley Fish, for example? Schweickart suggests that the feminist reading process implied in Rich's essay addresses this as well: "to read a text and then to write about it is to seek to connect not only with the author of the original text, but also with a community of readers" (545). This said, I make my own attempt now to stitch my square into the critical quilt, to work here in a room of my own, in the house of feminist theory as I read Budge Wilson's *The Leaving*. I am the visitor

to the house of her mind and the minds of her characters, and I am the insect at the window, trying to connect with the absent author inside the room.

Introducing *The Leaving*

For we think back through our mothers if we are women.
Virginia Woolf: *A Room of One's Own*

The title of Budge Wilson's short story collection *The Leaving* is a metaphor for the relationships between the women characters in most of the nine stories in the volume. Each narrator experiences a leaving as part of the difficult process of growing up. "The Metaphor" explores the death of a favorite English teacher and the question of mothering framed in a young girl's use of figurative language.

"Lysandra's Poem" tells the story of the loss of a friend as a consequence of a poetry contest while "My Mother and I" investigates the loss of a father who, though long believed to be a hero, turns out to be quite ordinary. "Mr. Manuel Jenkins" involves a bittersweet infatuation of a young girl and her mother for a transient who, in the end, must leave their world.

The title story, located at the center of the collection, is a coming-of-age story for both a young girl and her mother who both leave behind their self concepts constructed for them by the men in their family. "Waiting" offers portraits of two sisters, one the extroverted star of the family and the other a kind of "lady in waiting" who blossoms into a young woman at the end of this story, leaving behind the pallid

image that has always stood in sharp counterpoint to her sister's colorful life. The emotional conflicts in the hauntingly beautiful "My Cousin Clarette" grow out of the jealousy that a young girl who considers herself plain feels for her cousin whom she describes as "a shot of pure crimson in our comfortable beige life" (154). The leaving occurs years later when she witnesses Clarette's suicide as her cousin steps into the path of an oncoming train. "Be-ers and Do-ers" is the one story which disappoints me in this collection because I cannot believe in the basic plot or in the pedantic and grating language of the mother. Ironically, this is the only story in which Wilson deals with a mother/son relationship; most stories in the collection focus on relationships between females: mothers and daughters, sisters, and friends. In "Be-ers and Do-ers," Albert's mother has been disappointed in the boy all his life because, like his father, he has been content to "be." His sister is the narrator who reports a fire just after Christmas and tells us how eighteen-year-old Albert saves his family from disaster. As he stands before his mother with his hands blistering, she tells him, "And that . . . is what I've been looking for, all your life. Some sort of a sign that you were one hundred percent alive" (185). As it turns out, he isn't alive by her standards, and the rest of his life seems to be spent just "being."

"The Pen Pal," the last story in *The Leaving*, deals with a young girl's desires to share the secrets of her changing body as she reaches puberty. Lacking a strong relationship with her mother, she writes intimate letters to a distant pen pal who turns out to be a boy. The story's epistolary form makes it unique in the collection.

I have briefly described each of the stories in the order in which they appear in the book; I see the whole book as a unified structure in which the stories are arranged in pairs around the title story. "The Metaphor" and "Lysandra's Poem" both deal with the figurative uses of language and with young women writing themselves into being. "My Mother and Father" and "Mr. Manuel Jenkins" both are commentaries on male/female relationships and the limitations and possibilities that such relationships offer to female characters. "The Leaving" brings all of these subjects—language, relationships, the process of becoming—into focus in one amazing story. The next pair, "Waiting" and "My Cousin Clarette" investigate female relationships which result from the contrast between the fate of a plain girl and her vivacious counterpart. The last two stories, "Be-ers and Do-ers" and "The Pen Pal," inquire into the dynamics between males and females, again in terms of the theme of coming-of-age.

As a reader, I believe that the most powerful stories in the collection deal with the ways in which the female characters use language to understand themselves and to construct their world. I have chosen to read "The Metaphor" and "The Leaving." In these two stories, female narrators come to some sense of their own identities because they, as Woolf says, think back through their mothers. When Woolf uses that phrase in *A Room of One's Own*, she is referring to writers and their literary mothers, but here I want to use the idea as a metaphor for reading these stories. I have also

chosen these two stories because they portray different mother/daughter relationships. In "The Metaphor," the relationship is problematic; in "The Leaving," it is positive.

Reading "The Metaphor"

Mothers: Literal and Figurative

Charlotte, the narrator of this story, is caught between two worlds, each represented by a powerful woman in her life. She tells us her story from her perspective as an adult, looking back and making sense out of her experiences in the seventh grade and in the tenth grade where she had the same English teacher, Miss Hancock. Miss Hancock exists in one world of the story, the classroom; a flamboyant extrovert, she reads poetry so beautifully that her students are "bewitched, transformed" (11). The other world of Charlotte's story is her home where her mother rules in an icy coldness that contrasts her sharply with Miss Hancock.

At the center of this story is that contrast and Charlotte's reading of it. As I read the story, I see these two women as mothers for Charlotte; her own mother is little more than a biological necessity; she is unable to understand Charlotte's nature and to respond to her feelings. Miss Hancock, on the other hand, is her intellectual mother, the woman who teaches her how to express her feelings as she copes with the process of moving through the difficult world of adolescence. The tool she provides Charlotte is writing and the creation of metaphors.

Descriptions of Miss Hancock frame the story, and it is no secret that she is the mother who has the lasting influence. Wilson contrasts the two mothers from the very beginning of the story in the way that Charlotte reads them. In the first sentence of the story, Charlotte remembers Miss Hancock in the seventh grade as "plump and unmarried and overenthusiastic" (9). Well-chosen, each of these words proves to be the opposite of Charlotte's mother who is thin, married, and totally in control. Miss Hancock dresses whimsically, in "peasant blouses encrusted with embroidery, from which loose threads invariably dangled" (9). These loose threads serve as metaphors for the untidiness of Miss Hancock's appearance, and her clothes are complemented by her fondness for "luminous frosted lipsticks" in hot pink and magenta and by the "modulations of color, toners" and shadows around her eyes. Topping off her extraordinary countenance is a "profusion of busy curls . . . brightly, aggressively golden" which Charlotte's mother pronounces as "'in bad taste . . . like the rest of her'" (10).

Education by Metaphor

In attention to the hypnotic power of Miss Hancock's appearance, Charlotte tells us that she taught creative writing so wonderfully that the class felt as if they "were as drugged by words as some children are by electronic games" (11). In terms of the development of Charlotte's language in the story, it is important to notice that she describes things at first in similes; she makes direct comparisons, as she does here in

her simile for the power of Miss Hancock's teaching. Earlier she has described her teacher as moving around the room "like a heavy bird" who "fluttered and flitted from desk to desk" (9). This simile of a bird in flight will return in the tenth grade section of the story. There it appears as a metaphor, a result of Miss Hancock's most important lesson, "an impassioned discourse on "The Metaphor." Charlotte describes the power of the lesson: "Miss Hancock may have been in poor taste, but at that time in my life she was my entry to something I did not yet fully understand but that I knew I wanted" (12).

After the metaphor lesson, Miss Hancock opens up the world of language to her students by declaring that "The Metaphor is yours—to use, to enjoy, to relish" (12-13), and she sets them to the task of using this new knowledge, suggesting that they freewrite: "Write quickly. . . . Don't think too hard. Let your writing, your words, emerge from you like a mysterious and elegant blossom. Let it all out . . . without restraint, without inhibition, with verve" (13). Such advice would be, of course, anathema to Charlotte's restrained, inhibited, and low-key mother. In Miss Hancock's classroom Charlotte begins to build a house, to inhabit a home in metaphor, a home that is the antithesis of the arid house she shares with her mother and father.

Robert Frost tells us that we cannot live without metaphor:

What I am pointing out is that unless you are at home in a metaphor, unless you have had your proper poetical education in the metaphor, you are not safe anywhere. Because you are not at ease with figurative values: you don't know how far you may

expect to ride it and when it will break down. ("Education by Poetry" 35)

The kind of "poetical education" that Miss Hancock is providing Charlotte is described in Frost's metaphor of the ride. Language will take us somewhere, give us a sense of direction. Like any conveyance, however, it may break down, and we should be prepared for this.

When Charlotte accepts Miss Hancock's advice, she constructs a metaphor that pictures her mother as a public building:

My mother is a flawless modern building, created of glass and the smoothest pale concrete. Inside are business offices furnished with beige carpets and gleaming chromium. In every room there are machines—telex machines, mimeograph machines, and sleek typewriters. They are buzzing and clicking away, absorbing and spitting out information with a speed and skill that is not normal. Downstairs, at ground level, people walk in and out, tracking mud and dirt over the steel-gray tiles, marring the cool perfection of the building. There are no comfortable chairs in the lobby.
(14-15)

The imagery of the metaphor actually describes Charlotte's house as well, the home where she is not really at home. She is more at home in metaphor.

The key words in Charlotte's metaphor describe her biological mother and the "flawless" world she has created in all areas of her life. The entrance to the house recalls the gleaming building. Charlotte tells us that the "polished, antique, perfect" hall table is in perfect taste with its "silver salver for messages" and its "small ebony lamp with a white shade." The world of her mother is a world of clear contrasts, as these opposite colors symbolize. People, for example, have good taste or they have

poor taste. The steel-gray tiled floor of the metaphor is realized in the entrance hall's black and white tiled floor which shines in the sunlight "unmarked by any sign of human contact," unlike the mud tracks on the office building's tiles. Perhaps that mud is Charlotte's desire to mess up the perfect entrance hall, where, ironically, she has had trouble standing up, "having slipped and fallen" there "once too often" (18). This a hard place to envision as a home.

[The androgynous persona in me realizes that this is a description of a mother, but I have trouble with the imagery of Charlotte's metaphor. Her mother seems to me to be a perfect patriarchal construction. She is a man. The description of the tall building carries obvious sexual connotations, and the language of the metaphor figures the worst stereotype of the driven, unfeeling, career-ladder father who has no time to "invest" in his daughter and for whom home is a place for coming and going and for receiving messages, as the stark imagery of the entrance hall suggests. In keeping with my reading of the mother, Charlotte's father appears to be the stereotypical submissive female:

My father, thin and nervous, was careful about hanging up his clothes and keeping his sweaters in neat piles. He certainly did not fight with my mother. In fact, he said very little to her at all. He had probably learned early that to complain is weak, to rejoice is childish, to laugh is noisy. And moving around raises dust. (24-25)

Ironically her father's name is Arthur, but he is clearly not to be associated with England's legendary, magical and powerful king.]

The "cool perfection of the building" in Charlotte's metaphor has its counterpart in her mother's "cool and orderly spirit" (23) and in her mother's position in the community where she is "the mainstay . . . the rock upon which the town was built," Charlotte tells us, "if one were to believe her admirers" (25). Her mother's carefully constructed exterior countenance and the polished world she lives in are reflected also

in her unforgiving attitude: "Perhaps because she juggled her community jobs, her housework, her cooking and her grooming with such a quiet, calm efficiency, she felt scorn for those less able to cope" (25) She directs this scorn at Charlotte in a traumatic event that occurs during her daughter's tenth grade year in high school.

By the time she becomes a tenth grader, sixteen-year-old Charlotte has masked some of her youthful exuberance with an attitude that is "outwardly blase," and "singleminded"; she is maturing physically: "I was pretty; I had real curves; I was anonymous; I melted into the crowd" (29). She is surprised to discover that her English teacher that year is Miss Hancock, who enters the classroom "wings spread, ready to fly" (30). The cool sophomores do not appreciate Miss Hancock's exuberance, and they ridicule her when she tries to excite them with Tennyson's "Ulysses": "'Behold the Bard!' 'Bliss! Oh, poetic bliss!' 'Hancock! Whocock!'" (31). Charlotte registers the moment in horror. The "cool and careful person" that she has become does not know what to do, and she feels "caught in a stranglehold between shocked embarrassment and a terrible desire for concealment" (32). Even though she tries to speak to Miss Hancock after class, she offers no comfort to the teacher who has given her the gift of metaphor. Miss Hancock reaches out to her, however, asking, "Still writing metaphors?" To which Charlotte replies, "Oh, I dunno" (33) although each night she writes metaphors in a notebook that she keeps especially for that purpose. She makes no other effort to connect to her teacher; the tragedy that follows throws her into an emotional trauma.

Reading Androgynously

This is the tragedy:

One late afternoon in March of that year, Miss Hancock stepped off the curb in front of the school and was killed instantly by a school bus. (34)

How am I to read this sentence? What does it mean to read this sentence as a woman? Let me try out my Virginia Woolf metaphor of the androgynous selves.

One late afternoon in March of that year

Reading as a man. I see all kinds of symbols that will lead me to a "reading." For example, it is late afternoon. Should I suggest that this is a metaphor? That the end of the day represents an appropriate setting for the end of a life? It is March. Is it still winter? Or are we on the cusp of spring? If it's winter, then, the end of winter and the end of the day pair up to imply that the time sets the stage for a death. This is nicely linear. Every word seems to move forward to support my reading.

Reading as a woman. I wonder if I should try to make every one of these details mean something. Couldn't the "one" be simply that? One day, like no other day? Then, couldn't "late afternoon" just tell me that Miss Hancock, devoted to her work, has stayed late in the school to finish up reading some papers or preparing for the next day's class? If I place too much emphasis on these opening words as symbolic, then I may be moving toward a reading that makes me very uncomfortable. That uncomfortable reading might suggest that the next action reported in the sentence is deliberate. I may not be willing to believe that.

*Miss Hancock stepped off the curb
in front of the school
and was killed instantly by a school bus*

Reading as a man. Knowing Miss Hancock's history during the past year with her unappreciative and abusive sophomores, I can understand the import of these three details. I see that this stepping off is clearly a willful act, a knowing, conscious control of her movement. She has had more than she can take, and this action represents her giving in, the ultimate act of derangement. She has, quite simply, gone mad as a consequence of the pressures of trying to teach English to unappreciative students. Because she understands the power of figures in language, she has artfully constructed the perfect metaphor for her own death. She enacts the Tennyson lines that she read on that first traumatic day of class:

*I am part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margins fade
For ever and for ever when I move. (31)*

In her madness, she lets the metaphor of these lines construct the landscape of her death. Her deranged state, of course, has caused her to misread Tennyson and to make metaphor of Ulysses' desire to literally travel to new lands, as he suggests in his words: "Come my friends, / 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world" (Tennyson 32) . In her next move, however, she chooses to read Ulysses' literal gleaming, "untravell'd world" as metaphor. What he has says in Tennyson's poem is that he seeks adventure rather than to sit around, feeling useless at home: "How dull it is to pause, to make an end, /To rust unburnishe'd, not to shine in use!" (32). When Miss

Hancock enacts the metaphor, she reads death as another possibility for the human spirit. She can fly on the wings of her spirit to another world, more poetic, perhaps, than the classroom.

Reading as a woman. I wonder what was on Miss Hancock's mind, how she was so preoccupied with the cares of the day that she let down her guard for a fatal moment and stepped into the path of that school bus. What might have been on her mind? Her family? An elderly parent that she cares for? An evening engagement? What a bitter irony, that the vehicle that transported her students to her should be the instrument of her leaving them and that the landscape of her life should be the location of her death. Perhaps she slipped off the curb rather than stepped off it. After all, Charlotte was not there to see what happened, so her report is second hand at best. We cannot take second hand information as fact. As a matter of fact, we all construct the world as we see it, so this detail really gives me nothing to go on in terms of interpreting the event as anything more than a tragic and untimely accident.

Reading androgynously. I don't want for one minute to suggest that reading as a man opens up a whole world of complex symbologies in this sentence that reading as a woman does not. Nor do I want to suggest that reading as a woman must be as literal as I might seem to suggest here. What I do want to make clear is that the man reading seems all too eager to locate Miss Hancock in the stereotypical world where women who cannot cope with the pressures of everyday life simply go mad and have to be locked away in the attic or engineer their own leaving. In such a male reading

the old polarities, the either/or, the binary opposition of male rationality and female rationality, govern human behavior.

Living Without Metaphor

Having said that, I return to Wilson's story, which, as you can see, has engaged my intersubjectivity in more ways than one might imagine. Charlotte responds hysterically to the death of her teacher, even accepting the blame for it in her guilt over having not stood up for Miss Hancock against the class and for having not reached out to her: "I killed her! I killed her!" (35). In keeping with her cold and unforgiving nature, and in contrast to my androgynous ambivalence about how to read the news of the death, Charlotte's mother reads it clearly. Characterizing Charlotte's response as "extravagant" (37) and encouraging her not to "lose perspective," she presents the facts of the situation: Miss Hancock "couldn't keep order, and she had only herself to blame. . . . A woman like that can't survive for five minutes in the high schools of today. There was nothing you could have done'" (36). Aside from her incredibly faulty logic in assuming that a failure to keep order is a necessary assurance of death, she goes on to explain how Charlotte should see the world in terms of this event:

'A sure and perfect control is what separates the civilized from the uncivilized. . . . If you would examine this whole perfectly natural situation with a modicum of rationality, you would see that she got exactly what she deserved.' (37)

The language of this explanation is the antithesis of metaphor. Metaphor is slippery, as Frost tells us, and we cannot expect to ride it with "sure and perfect control."

Ironically, the mother's distinction between "civilized" and "uncivilized" counteracts her effort to help Charlotte. Incidentally, the mother is unnamed in the story, and in her explanation of the power of perfect control, she represents more of an idea than a human being. Her logic seems perfectly flawed when she characterizes the death of a favorite teacher as a "perfectly natural situation," and her word modicum suggests a moderation that seems very foreign to her language and her ideas. She clearly represents the extreme opposite of Miss Hancock; it is hard to establish a sense of moderation in this story. She pushes her belief that Miss Hancock "got exactly what she deserved" into the bizarre when she accuses Charlotte of "disturbing the even tenor of our home" (37). This is no home for Charlotte. It is a shell, at best a house from which she comes and goes.

Living in Metaphor

In a very important image that signals Charlotte's interpretation of this moment years later when she is telling us this story, she symbolizes the double nature of the leaving that takes place in "The Metaphor." The image inscribes Charlotte's mental change within the language of the female body: "With a sure and perfect control, I uncoiled myself from my fetal position on the sofa" (37). In the circularity of the image she becomes the mother who gives birth to herself as a young woman, and her

language of "sure and perfect control" suggests the power that she gains over her own life when she refuses the power of her mother's world view.

Similarly, she transforms her mother's language into her own when she takes up residency in the house of metaphor where she is at home, where she can deal with the death of her poetic mother, Miss Hancock: "Extravagantly, without a modicum of rationality, I began to write" (38). What she writes is a metaphor that describes a circle, the primary feminine sign as opposed to the masculine line. As a symbol, the circle has long been "associated with the idea of a protected or consecrated space, the center of the motherland, a ceremonial space where all the inhabitants were equal" (Walker, *A Woman's Dictionary* 4). Charlotte's metaphor casts Miss Hancock as a birthday cake with extravagant frosting that is intensely peppermint, "too sweet, too strong"; decorated with "white roses and lime-green leaves," the cake is a rich chocolate, "soft and very delicious." Charlotte again transforms her mother's language about taste as she creates Miss Hancock as a cake whose "true fine flavor" could be perceived only by "those with great sensitivity of taste." The cake is filled with party favors, she tells us, which, if kept, will turn into "pure gold." Finally, she rejects her mother's world view as she values this creation. Most children, she concludes, would find it delightful, but "most grown-ups would have thrown it away after one brief glance at the frosting" (38). What Charlotte has learned is that it is much more difficult to read the world when you are trying to see and to live below the surface, beyond the appearance of things. That hard exterior of the world is

where her mother lives, but Charlotte has begun to understand, has been born into what Schweickart calls an "interiority." As a result of Charlotte's reading and writing the text of her world through metaphor, and of my reading of Wilson's story, we both have, as Schweickart suggests, come "into close contact with an interiority—a power, a creativity, a suffering, a vision—that is not identical" with our own ("Reading Ourselves" 542).

**"The Leaving":
Tracing the "Continuous Thread of Revelation"**

Introduction

The title story provides the most positive example of a mother/daughter relationship in the collection. "The Leaving" covers a ten-year span in the life of its narrator, from her first awareness of what it means to be a woman until she is a university student thinking back through her mother and telling this story. The story grows out of her recollection of a three day trip that she took with her mother. She was twelve at the time, and now, as an adult, she interprets the trip not only as her own coming-of-age story, but her mother's as well. The most important element in the story is the strong bond that develops between mother and daughter as a consequence of the trip. Both of their lives are changed because they learn to think differently, to see the world differently. As a result, they create positive futures for

themselves and each other. The mother's construction of her life after the trip also changes and transforms the male-dominated world of her family.

The twenty-two-year-old narrator tells the story in eight sections. In reading it, I am going to imagine myself quilting to demonstrate how I think Wilson wants us to read her story, to piece it together. My reading process reflects Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory and Schweickart's emphasis on intersubjectivity in her feminist theory of reading. Intersubjectivity is the thread with which I stitch myself into the fabric of Wilson's text.

Iser's Theory: Reading the Gaps

A key concept in Iser's model for the reading process is signified by the word gaps, or, in its fancier, theoretical form, indeterminancies. In his theory ("The Reading Process" 50-69), Iser asserts that a text only takes on a life when it is "realized" or "concretized" in the activity of reading. In other words, the text does not exist until a reader brings it into being by interacting with the words on the page. This interaction is a creative process, and it also involves words that are not written on the page. Iser says that a text is not completely written, that it contains gaps, moments which are left open, spaces in which things are left unsaid, places (also called blanks) where the flow of the narrative is interrupted in some way. Such blank spaces engage our imaginations so that "whenever the flow is interrupted," we are given the opportunity "to bring into play our own faculty for establishing

connections—for filling in the gaps left by the text itself" (55). We are always, he says, looking forward and looking backward so that "during the process of reading, there is an active interweaving of anticipation and retrospection." "Activating the reader's imagination" is part of the writer's work, Iser says, and "no author worth his salt will ever attempt to set the whole picture before his reader's eyes" (57). Wilson has not set the whole picture before us in her story, and reading "The Leaving" engages us actively as we pass through the story and fill in the empty spaces she has left there.

In giving an example of gaps, Iser points to the authorial intrusions in nineteenth century fiction, places where the author stands back from the story and addresses the reader as, for example, Dickens and Thackeray do. There are, of course, many kinds of gaps, some more subtle than others; Wilson's most obvious gaps are literally blank spaces on the page which separate the eight sections of her story. Whatever the nature of such gaps, Iser believes, the indeterminacies they create are "fundamental preconditions for reader participation" ("Indeterminacy" 14).

Quilting "The Leaving"

As I stitch together the squares of Wilson's quilt, I will keep in mind a metaphor from Mary Catherine Bateson's *Composing a Life* in which she describes the process for deciding how to live as a woman in a changing world:

There are no singular models, but only resources for creative imagination. . . . [Y]ou cannot put together a life willy-nilly from odds and ends. Even a crazy quilt, the various pieces, wherever they come from, have to be trimmed and shaped and arranged so they fit together, then sewn firmly to last through time and keep out the cold. Most quilts are more ambitious: they involve the imposition of a new pattern. But even crazy quilts are sewn against a backing; the basic sense of continuity allows improvisation. Composing a life involves an openness to possibilities and the capacity to put them together in a way that is structurally sound. (62-63)

Square One

There are no singular models [for composing a life], but only resources for creative imagination.

As the unnamed narrator recalls the story, it opens just before the departure for the trip. At three o'clock in the morning, her mother stands beside her bed and tells her to get ready to go away with her. Thinking back on that moment, the narrator describes the conditions of her existence in a world where children had little or no rights, where "there were no choices and very few questions," where children did as they were told: "If your father wanted you to shovel snow or fetch eggs, he told you, and you did it. He didn't ask. He told. Same with Ma" (104-05). This first square ends in a dialogue in which the narrator questions why she has been chosen to go, to which her mother replies "Because yer the smartest. And because yer a woman" (105). In the final sentence of this section the narrator tells us, "I was twelve years old that spring" (105).

Gap One

I begin to fill in this first gap in a moment of retrospection, thinking how spare the language is in that last sentence, and how it seems appropriate for the world I have just entered one scene ago. I do not know the narrator's name, and I think that if I knew it I might be able to picture her. I know nothing about her mother's appearance, either, but I anticipate that later I will be able to name these characters and to imagine how they look. The spare details of the first section seem mostly to exist in order to set up an inquiry into the mother/daughter relationship. As my eyes pass through the gap, I think about how surprised I am that Ma considers the girl to be a woman. Her age and the fact that it is spring set me to anticipating, in Iser's sense of my activity as a reader, what this scene will mean as I piece the story together. I read spring as the season of rebirth in nature, and in conjunction with that interpretation, I read twelve to imply the beginning of the narrator's birth into adulthood. Already I am reading the trip as metaphor. I sense that Ma (I don't know her name yet) has, in Bateson's terms, brought her "creative imagination" into play in the decision to take this trip. In retrospect, I think that three o'clock in the morning is a carefully calculated departure time. I wonder where the men in the story are. Sleeping soundly, I venture.

Square Two

At the same time, you cannot put together a life willy-nilly from odds and ends.

Although this section focuses almost entirely on Ma, I also learn a great deal about the daughter from the way she uses language. She first describes her mother's physical appearance: "tall," "rangy," with a "strong handsome face," high cheekbones and a good firm chin line," full lips, and a mouth "held in a set straight line." Her eyes are "veiled." The word veiled immediately sets me to making connections about veils as symbols of "modesty, virtue and withdrawal from the outside world" (Biedermann 365). I know that in certain cultures women wear veils to conceal their sexuality. The narrator interprets her mother's veiled eyes, "as if she had shut herself off from her surroundings and was thinking either private thoughts or nothing at all" (105). I wonder about this new information, about the relationship between the set mouth and the veiled eyes. As details accumulate, I discover that Ma's eyes sometimes "come alive with concern and love" although at other times she retreats "behind her frozen face." I am curious about the conditions of Ma's life as I learn that her clothes are "baggy," "shabby," "faded," and "graceless." As I move from word to word, I think about how much Budge Wilson has packed into the language of this story, but also about how much has been left unwritten, how actively this story is engaging my imagination.

In the remainder of the section we hear the details of the departure: how carefully Ma has planned, her provisions for food, the walk down the mountain and

the six miles to town. Just as I am thinking how important this trip must be, Ma tells us in her stark manner why we are leaving: "I plans t' do some thinkin'" (108). I notice now that I am using the pronoun we. I am not an observer of this journey any more; the narrator has pulled me inside the story; I am an active participant walking down the mountains, curious and expectant. During the six-mile walk I notice with the daughter how the frost lends "a silver magic to the bushes and the rough ground" and how the moonlight gives "a still dignity to the shabby houses" along the road. I am learning to respect the power of the narrator's adult imagination to bathe the starkness of her remembered world in nuance and color.

The first stop on the journey is Annapolis where Ma has arranged for us to stop over at a friend's empty house until the train arrives. Her composition of the journey, I realize, is anything but "willy-nilly" (Bateson), and I begin to wonder: What's our destination? How long will we stay? The daughter has the same questions I do, and when she asks Ma, we both hear, "Dunno. Till it's time" (109).

Gap Two

"Till it's time for what?" I want to ask as my eyes pass through the short blank space on the page. I have learned a lot, but I am still puzzled. What's the girl's name? How has her mother arranged this stop over in Annapolis? I imagine that she has a limited set of friends and acquaintances in town; their farm seems so isolated up on the mountain. How far away is our destination? I try to imagine what Ma's life

has been like before she got married. What kind of view of the world does she have? I imagine, as the story progresses, that this urgency to leave derives from some major upheaval in her life.

I remember other trips I have read about, especially the trips Eudora Welty describes in *One Writer's Beginnings* where she says that the trips she and her family took on the train and in the car were "wholes unto themselves":

They were stories. Not only in form, but in their taking on direction, movement, development, change. They changed something in my life: each trip made its particular revelation, though I could not have found words for it. (75)

The trip I am taking with Wilson's two women is a story, too, and as I try to visualize it taking place, one part of my mind is also thinking about its metanarrative nature: it is also a story about telling a story. It's that kind of circular event in which we travel back into the landscape of memory as our imagination helps us make sense out of where we have been, both literally and figuratively. Perhaps the most important word Welty uses in her reflection on trips as stories is revelation; in that word I imagine the veil over Ma's eyes. In retrospect, I try to imagine her life, and I wonder why she veils her eyes. Surely it is not for the same dark reason that Hawthorne's minister wears his black veil. The story does not seem that ominous. In anticipation, I wonder: Will the veil be lifted? And, finally, I realize that as we read, we wear a veil that is lifted for us by the storyteller as we stitch the pieces of the narrative together in our minds.

Square Three

Even in a crazy quilt, the various pieces, wherever they come from, have to be trimmed and shaped and arranged so they fit together, then firmly sewn to last through time and keep out the cold.

In the first words of section three the narrator interprets one meaning of the trip with Ma, telling us that the "six-mile walk had shunted me straight from childhood into adolescence" (109). She has, then, in Bateson's quilt metaphor for composing a life, trimmed and shaped that piece of her experience so that it fits together with the other pieces of her life.

I notice Wilson's pacing as a storyteller as I move quickly through this short section, about one third the length of section two. In the previous sections I have pointed out many details to demonstrate the imaginative power of "The Leaving" and how it actively engages me as a reader. My analysis would spin out to an enormous length were I to continue to read every detail with this kind of attention.

Consequently, I begin here to trace two concerns, to focus my attention on the developing relationship between the mother and daughter and on the role that the men in the family play in that relationship. Although my references to "the narrator" and "her mother" may seem a bit tedious, I cannot name either of them because I am demonstrating how I respond as I read through the story, and I can name them only when I learn their names. This naming, as you will see, is central to the revelation of the story, the lifting of the narrative veil from our eyes.

In section three we ride the train from Annapolis to Halifax, and the narrator's two biggest concerns are money and the men left at home. Her mother will not tell her where she got the money for the trip. As her mother sleeps, the girl thinks of her father and her brothers at home. As she asks herself a series of questions, I begin to fill in the gaps of the story, to construct what life for the women has been like on this mountain home. The narrator wonders: "How would Pa and my brothers cook their dinner? How would they make their beds? Who would they complain to after a hard day?" (111). I see that the men are the center of the home, that they are waited upon, that they do not perform the simplest household chores. I see, too, that the two women exist to provide for and comfort these men. I wonder: To whom do the women complain after a hard day's work? I construct a world where these women, like the children the narrator described in the first section, do as they are told, where there are few choices.

The narrator's remaining questions are equally revealing: "who would fetch the eggs, the mail, the water, the groceries? Who would wash their overalls, mend their socks, put bandages on their cuts?" (111). The picture grows clearer: These two women are servants. As we journey on the train, I understand that they are also escapees from the prisonhouse of "home," but I know that "prisonhouse" is my language, not theirs. The narrator's concerns indicate that she is conditioned to her subservient role in the family; she concludes this part of the story with a sentence that

convinces me: "It was inconceivable to me that they could survive for long without us" (111).

Gap Three

The narrator has presented me such a vivid picture of the male/female relationships at home that, in this gap, I begin to construct the years of Ma's life which have led to this leaving. The life she has lived, I imagine, has worn her down. She has reached a point at which she cannot continue as the angel in the house, the quiet woman who waits on her men and makes few if any demands. I begin to anticipate that part of the lifting of the veils in "The Leaving" will be the revelation of Ma's story or some very important event that takes place when they return. I anticipate that they will return, but I cannot be sure.

Square Four

This section covers the arrival in Halifax, the Nova Scotian capital, the two days spent there, and the decision to return home. The narrator recollects that they spent the first day exploring the city where the bridge to Dartmouth "lifted its enormous metal wings into the sky" (112). This image of flight combines with other images of freedom in this section. I stitch the story squares together into an interpretation of this trip as a flight to freedom.

As they stand on the bridge looking at the ships below, "headed for Europe, for Africa, for the distant north," Ma begins to talk: "It was as though she were trying to tell me something important, but didn't want to say things right out. 'They're goin' somewheres,' she said" (112). Maybe, I think, Ma has begun to feel that her life has no direction that has motivated the leaving. The destinations that the ships represent, the freedom to travel to other worlds, obviously fascinates Ma, and I begin to move intersubjectively into her experience: Based on the little that I know about life at home, it is becoming clearer that Ma's life is going nowhere. This trip to Halifax is perhaps her first effort at "goin' somewheres."

When they visit Dalhousie University, the relationship between mother and daughter unfolds more clearly as another image of freedom emerges. The reason why Ma has chosen to bring her daughter on this trip is implied in her remarks about education: "'If yer as smart as the teacher claims,'" she said, "'maybe you'll come here some day t' learn'" (112-13). When the daughter questions where the money will come from, her mother replies, "'They's ways'" (113). Ma has a vision, I begin to think, for her daughter's future: She will not remain a servant in the master's house. Her intelligence will be the wings on which she takes flight, her language one of the tools for crafting freedom.

As they walk through the city on a dazzling May day, window shopping and visiting the Public Gardens, the daughter asks her mother why all the people they encounter seem so happy, and her mother replies that it may be more than the

brilliant weather: "'And maybe some of them's free,' she added" (114). This image of freedom reaches its high point in this section. Part of the story veil is lifted, and we come to understand the impetus for the leaving.

During a visit to the public library on the second day, Ma sees a copy of *The Feminine Mystique* and surprises us with the news that she has read it. We learn that she has a fifth grade education: "'Even if y' leaves school in grade five, y' kin read. Y' reads slow, but y' knows how'" (114). She responds to her daughter's curiosity about the book by explaining that she has found it in a box delivered to them by the Salvation Army. She has spent the last year reading Betty Friedan's book, which she describes as if it were a person: "'She was a real troublin' book. But she was good,'" and she has learned the most important lesson, perhaps, of her life: "'Found I weren't alone'" (115). The revelation seems to ease some tension in the story, and the narrator remembers that her mother's mouth, usually set and straight, became "soft and cheerful" (116). Ma also reveals that the egg money has financed the trip, and the news sends "a thrill of fear" running through her daughter who wonders "what Pa would do" (116). Her fear is consistent with what we know of the power that her father and brothers have over her life and her mother's. Her conscious fear manifests itself that night in her unconscious, in "strange and troubled dreams" (116).

Gap Four

Obviously, my major anticipation has to do with what effect Ma's discovery of herself as a member of the larger community of women will have on life at home. I anticipate difference in how mother and daughter will handle this new knowledge, and I remember that the girl is only twelve, her life very much conditioned by her responses to the men in the house. Only now, it seems, is her life becoming conditioned by her mother as a person with potential authority in the world.

Square Five

Only thirteen lines long, this section announces the end of the trip as the narrator registers change in her mother's demeanor: "There was hope in her look and an odd fierce dignity" (117).

Gap Five

I move swiftly through this space, anticipating what I know will be a confrontation at home with a list of questions that fires off rapidly in my mind. Will Ma be able to stand up to Pa? What will the brothers do? What will the daughter do? Does she have sufficient strength to support her mother if the need arises? I imagine a confrontation in the kitchen. The ceiling is low, and I feel stifled. I assume the place will be a wreck since the men have no concern for taking care of the home.

Square Six

Most quilts are more ambitious: they involve the imposition of a new pattern. But even crazy quilts are sewn against a backing; the basic sense of continuity allows improvisation.

A bus trip home. The long climb up the mountain. The mother's mouth "back in its taut line," and her eyes "troubled." These are the images out of which the narrator tells us that she "could feel a difference" in her mother, a "new dogged strength in the set of her face." My question about the daughter's strength in supporting her mother is answered as I read: "There was no strength in me, except such as I derived from her" (117).

Inside the kitchen, we encounter Pa who seems "to fill the entire room" (118). This detail does not surprise me. This is his house. In a voice "low and threatening," he demands an explanation: "'Where you bin, woman?'" (119), and his first words tell the story I have anticipated. Ma has no name to him; she is a gendered opposite whose work is to please him, to satisfy him, to answer his questions. His remark reminds the narrator of a life full of "woman" commands:

'How come my supper's not ready, woman?' 'Move smart, woman! I'm pressed fer time!' 'Shut up them damn kids, woman!' 'Move them buckets, woman! They're in my way!' 'This food ain't fit t' eat, woman. Take it away!' (119)

When Ma tries to respond to his question, he tells her, "'Shut yer mouth, woman, and git my supper'" but what happens next is the most crucial moment in "The Leaving":

She moved to the center of the room and faced him. 'My name,' she began, and faltered. She cleared her throat and ran her tongue over her lower lip. 'My name,' she repeated, this time more steadily, 'is Elizabeth.' (119)

This is the power that she has gained: The ability to name herself, to construct herself, to find, in the intimacy of her name, the freedom to release herself from the oppressive language and the domination of her husband. Although he mocks her by sarcastically repeating her sentence, he leaves, and as she instructs her daughter to help her and to "Act smart there, Sylvie," she names the narrator for the first time. In terms of Wilson's construction of "The Leaving," this double naming is central to the events which follow in the remaining sections. Against the "backing" of her world, Elizabeth has begun to improvise a new world.

As section six concludes, Elizabeth enacts one of the political aims of feminism—to change the world. Although she at first concedes that it is too late to change her sons, she asks one of them to carry in the water, even though, as Sylvie notes, "Water carrying was woman's work" (122). He obliges, silently, and she thanks him, Sylvie tells us, "in a speech as unusual as her other one" (122). It is clear that this has been a world of mostly one way communication: Man to woman. Elizabeth has begun to change that in her courageous action and in her language.

Sections Seven and Eight

Composing a life involves an openness to possibilities and the capacity to put them together in a way that is structurally sound.

The power of language effects change in the house. Elizabeth stands up to her husband, but she does not nag. Sylvie figuratively constructs the difference between nagging and her mother's subsequent responses to her husband. "Nagging," she explains, "is like a constant blow with a small blunt instrument. It annoys, but it seldom makes more than a small dent." When Elizabeth speaks up, "her instrument was a shining steel knife with a polished cutting edge," a "weapon" (123) to convince Pa that if he pushes her too far, she will react.

Other changes stitch the story together in the remaining sections. Pa begins to call Elizabeth by her name. Next, she gets a room of her own, an attic storeroom that she converts with her sons' help into "her own place—her escape," from which she always emerges, Sylvie remembers "softer, gentler, more still" (123-24). Sylvie goes to Dalhousie University, and it is during the years of her education that she tells this story. On her last trip home, she recalls, her father spoke to Elizabeth "as though she were more of a person and less of a thing," and she acknowledges that the two love each other "with a kind of love that is difficult for my generation to understand or define" (124- 25).

In Section Eight, Sylvie reflects on the story in a particularly feminist frame of mind. She does not try, like a man, to tie the events of her life up into a neat bundle or to explain away every detail. When her "mind approaches the reasons for all that happened," her "thinking slides away" and her "vision blurs." She is content to dwell in an uncertainty that is often very hard for men to accept. She is certain that "the

book and the leaving do not explain everything": "Maybe my mother was ready to move into and out of herself anyway; and no one can know exactly what went on in her thoughts before and after she left" (125). The in/out and before/after imagery makes me think of the way that Elizabeth has composed her life and that Sylvie has told their story: "But even crazy quilts are sewn against a backing; the basic sense of community allows improvisation" (Bateson 62-63). The word crazy here has no connection to the craziness of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*. This quilt is a product of creative acts, of artistry that does not necessarily have to follow a fixed pattern.

Elizabeth has first learned that she belong to the community in Friedan's book. In an appropriate ending to the story she tells, Sylvie writes over her mother's language as she resists closure in her interpretation of the leaving: "But of that strange three-day departure, I can say, as Ma did of her book, 'She was a real troublin' trip. But she was good'" (125). As I read this final sentence I realize that in stitching, I have been looping the thread of my quilt work, tracing a series of circles. Elizabeth read a text, and Elizabeth's life became a text for Sylvie's growing up, and Elizabeth and Sylvie became a text for Sylvie's story, and Sylvie's story is the text of Wilson's story. And now I stitch myself in: I am a man reading a woman (Wilson) reading a woman (Sylvie) reading a woman (Elizabeth). Thinking back through the mothers; thinking how we stitch together the quilts of our lives:

The events of our lives happen in a sequence in time, but in their significance to ourselves they find their own order, a timetable

not necessarily—perhaps not possibly—chronological. The time as we know it subjectively is often the chronology that stories and novels follow: it is the continuous thread of revelation.
(*Welty 75*)

Knowing subjectively. Reading intersubjectively. Reading as a man. Reading as a woman.

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CHAPTER NINE

Listening to the Voices: Reading in the African American Tradition

Truly, you must now know that the word Negro in America means something not racial or biological, but something purely social, something made in the United States.

Richard Wright

Being a Negro American has to do with the memory of slavery and the hope for emancipation and the betrayal by allies and the revenge and contempt inflicted by our former masters after the Reconstruction.

Ralph Ellison

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others. . . . One ever feels this twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, too unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.

W. E. B. Dubois

In an overview of black American literature, Houston S. Baker, Jr., one of the eminent contemporary scholars in the black literary tradition, describes a basic knowledge that is necessary for understanding black literature in America. The first essential is a definition of the black American which he provides with the words of Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, cited above in the first two epigraphs. These quotations are commentaries on the institution of slavery and the ramifications of that institution. I have added the words of DuBois (Appiah 5) to draw together Wright and Ellison in one image that names the doubleness they describe. DuBois' double-consciousness is basic to the reading of Ernest Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying*

which I shall give in this chapter. Baker's second essential piece of information is implied in the three epigraphs, and it is that the black American as a "social product" is best understood in a "sociohistorical framework" ("Black Literature" 2). Gaines' novel situates us in that framework; it depicts a post-Reconstruction patriarchal Southern mentality. The novel is a web of voices speaking the images of "eyeing," images that ultimately are transformed as the central characters name themselves "I, a Man" in a world that has denied them that identity.

An Introduction to Black Literary Theory and Criticism

In his essay "Criticism in the Jungle," Henry Louis Gates, Jr., a leading scholar of African American studies, provides a broad framework for investigating the black critical tradition. First, he asks a series of questions which define the largest issues in the tradition: What is the formal relationship between "black" literatures (Afro-American, Caribbean, and African) and Western literature? How is a black text located in the Western tradition? What constitutes a central body of black texts, a canon, and how is that canon situated in terms of the traditional, mostly white, mostly male, Western canon? ("Criticism" 2-3). These huge questions are beyond the scope of this chapter where I aim to provide a point of entry into this critical tradition by demonstrating specific ways of reading African American literature. First, a matter of semantics. I use the non-hyphenated phrase "African American" to

represent this tradition in American literature. When I cite others who use other designations, I remain faithful to their language. I do not use the term "minority literature" because I agree with Barbara Christian that "minority" locates certain literatures

firmly in a Western dualistic or 'binary' frame which sees the rest of the world as minor, and tries to convince the rest of the world that it is major, usually through force and then through language. ("Race" 351)

In addition to the larger questions with which he frames an inquiry into the black literary tradition, Gates asks specific text-oriented questions that I shall use to shape my inquiry into *A Lesson Before Dying*. While not a novel written specifically for young adults, *A Lesson*, I believe, will find its place alongside Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and *A Gathering of Old Men* on many of the lists of "best" novels for young adults. It is one of the most powerful novels I have read in the last four or five years, and I especially recommend it for use in classes of mature readers. One of its major themes is freedom and the ways in which its African American characters achieve different kinds of freedom despite the oppression of the dominant ideology. In my reading of Gaines' novel, I want to demonstrate how his characters use language to create a measure of power out of which they can negotiate, and, in some cases, overcome the control of the masters.

These are the questions Gates's asks:

[H]ow do we read black texts? Can the methods of explication developed in Western criticism be 'translated' into the black idiom? How 'text-specific' is literary theory, and how

'universal' are rhetorical strategies? If every black canonical text is, as I shall argue, 'two-toned' or 'double-voiced', how do we explicate the signifyin(g) black difference that makes black literature 'black'? And what do we make of the relation between the black vernacular tradition and the black formal tradition, as they inform the black text? Do we have to 'invent' validly 'black' critical theory and methodologies? ("Criticism" 3)

I shall attempt to answer three of these questions before I begin my reading of the novel. First, however, I believe it will be helpful if I provide two pieces of background information: the first deals with the concerns of literatures that have been marginalized, that have remained outside the mainstream of national literatures, and the second provides an overview of the development of contemporary African American literary theory.

Marginalized Literatures

Theorists and critics in the field of literatures that have been kept outside the mainstream usually share three motivations in their work to locate these traditions in larger frameworks:

- 1) to specify the biological, psychological, socioeconomic, historical, political and/or linguistic shaping forces on literature;
- 2) to counter negative majoritarian presuppositions, images, practices, canons, and institutions; and
- 3) to recover and scrutinize denigrated literary works, creating new cultural histories. (Leitch "Pluralizing" 94)

Each of these motivations interweave as important factors in African American literary criticism.

First, one of the major events in the development of the tradition was the Black Arts movement in the 1960s. Then the phrase "Black is Beautiful" came to include the recognition of cultural artifacts that had shaped and were shaping a literary tradition despite the oppression of African Americans throughout American history. These artifacts included the slave narrative as an American literary form, spirituals as powerfully coded forms of communication, and the power of the African American vernacular in the linguistic practices of this country.

Second, these recognitions began to counter the domination of white literature as the defining form of "American" literature. They set into motion the process of critiquing racial stereotypes that had characterized the presence of African Americans in the popular culture. These stereotypes included familiar characters such as the Black Mammy, Aunt Jemima, Black Sambo, and Jim Crow as well as prevailing ethnic notions that blacks were savage, ugly, inferior, and incapable of sophisticated writing.

Literary works formally unrecognized were recovered and scrutinized as important statements of the presence of African Americans in the literary traditions of the United States. These works made their way into school curricula. People who had formerly thought of "black" literature in the stereotypes of *Little Black Sambo* (the first black text I remember) and the Uncle Remus stories began to discover the

worlds created by "lost" writers like Zora Neale Hurston. The poetry of Langston Hughes began to appear in anthologies, and serious study engaged indigenous forms such as Frederick Douglass' *Autobiography*. The Black Arts movement and its political parallel, the Black Power movement, began to shape a new cultural history for the United States.

Historical Contexts

A brief look at how African American theory and criticism emerged in the context of the 1960s and subsequent decades helps us understand current work in the field. In terms of ways of reading, early work in African American criticism occurred as a reaction to the New Critics' formal way of reading and their claim for the universality of meaning. Leading black theoreticians, among them Larry Neal and Amiri Baraka, worked out of principles of social realism: "black art was directly related to black life: it imitated it." Therefore, the only way to read African American literature was "broadly cultural and richly contextualized." Art, these earlier leaders asserted, did not exist for art's sake, as the New Critics claimed. It was not universal; it was particular to a people and its culture. During the 1960s, black history was first introduced into school curricula to contextualize the black experience for both blacks and whites (Gates "Ethnic," 291).

In the 1970s, change occurred as a reaction to the social realism of the 1960s. Black literature replaced history as the predominant locus of analysis; leading critics

emphasized texts as acts of language. After 1975, scholars demonstrated that the "blackness" of a text resided in its "practical uses of language," and they used formalist and structuralist strategies to guide their readings. At the same time, black women's studies emerged and gave new energy to the field (Gates, "Ethnic" 292).

Changes that occurred in the 1980s may be seen as a combination of the work of the two previous decades. In the "new black aesthetic movement" of the 80s, scholars "began to re-theorize social—and textual—boundaries" as they employed poststructural theories and investigated the "black, expressive, vernacular culture." Their close reading strategies inquired into both the literary text and the "social text" (Gates, "Ethnic, 292). I shall employ poststructural strategies in my reading of *A Lesson Before Dying*, especially in terms of the intertextualities of the novel.

Reading African American Texts

Having established these broad contexts, I shall now attend to Gates's questions about ways of reading African American texts. I agree with Vincent Leitch that Gates has constructed "a helpful intertextual theory" ("Pluralizing" 89), and I believe that he offers a practical point of entry for readers unfamiliar with African American literature and culture. The answers to his questions necessarily overlap and comment on each other, so the following section should be read as one continuing theoretical event.

How do we read black texts?

Gates describes his reading as eclectic; he draws, he says, on "the activity of reading as practiced by critics outside the black literary traditions" ("Criticism" 4). He uses, then, some principles of theories that I have discussed in earlier chapters, but he also explains that his use is improvisatory, not unlike playing jazz. I discuss this musical analogy later in this section. Gates believes, as I do, that theory is enabling; it helps us work with texts, and we are not obliged to read out of only one frame of reference ("Criticism" 4).

*Can the methods of explication developed
in Western criticism be 'translated' into the black idiom?*

"Theory," Gates contends, "like words in a poem, does not 'translate' in a one-to-one relationship of reference." He says that critics of black literature use "any 'tool' which helps us to elucidate, which enables us to see more clearly, the complexities of figuration peculiar to our literary traditions" ("Criticism" 4). A number of his key words here are instructive of his approach to reading and my application of it to Gaines' novel. First, in his analogy between theory and the language of a poem, Gates implies the freedom that theory gives us to negotiate, to play with language in a context where words are not fixed entities. Instead, words are capable of a plurality of meanings; analysis opens up texts rather than rigidly defines their meanings. Second, Gates refers to "the critic of black literature," a phrase which does not privilege any reader of the tradition but includes all critics. Third, "the complexities of figuration" is at the heart of Gates's reading, figuration

here meaning the ways in which a word stands for something other than itself as, for example, in a metaphor or simile.

In his phrase "our literary traditions," Gates emphasizes the importance of the critic's awareness of context by pointing out that the African American writer as the producer of texts occupies spaces "in at least two traditions: a European or American literary tradition, and one of the several related but distinct traditions." Therefore, "the 'heritage' of each black text written in a Western language is "two-toned or double-voiced": "Its visual tones are white and black, and its aural tones are standard and vernacular" ("Criticism" 4). In terms of ways of reading, this image of doubleness enriches the black text, conceptualizing rather than obliterating the "many-strandedness of black literatures," which are defined by their 'hybridity' (Leitch "Pluralizing," 89). In reading *A Lesson Before Dying* I trace the weave of these double strands and demonstrate how they "figure" Gaines' text.

*How text specific is literary theory,
and how universal are rhetorical strategies?*

In his Introduction to *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the Racial Self*, Gates declares that "All theory is text-specific, and ours must be as well" (xix). He makes two points that help answer the question about the text specificity of theory, one a general commentary on the creation of theory and the other a commentary on the application of theory.

Critical theories arise, Gates explains, "from a remarkably small group of specific texts"; from these texts critics have derived general rules and ways of doing

practical criticism. They also have developed broader theoretical concepts which address both the nature and the function of literature and criticism (*Figures xv*).

Recalling his own education in theory, Gates creates a useful metaphor that also reflects my attitude about how theory serves us as we apply reading strategies to our texts:

[L]iterary theory functioned in my education as a prism, which I could turn to refract different spectral patterns of language use in a text, as one does daylight. Turn the prism this way, and one pattern of color emerges; turn it that way, and another pattern configures. (*Figures xvii*)

Theory, then, illuminates the text at which we are looking. This is, I contend, one of the values of having a working knowledge of the wide range of strategies contemporary theories offer us. In the turns of the metaphoric prism, in the application of our working knowledge, theory allows us to shine light through a text. Not every theoretical strategy, of course, illumines every text. Contemporary literary theories challenge the traditional claim that a "single universal poetics" is "applicable to all humanity" (Leitch "Pluralizing 83), and Gates clearly agrees with this idea. Theories of criticism, he says, are not "universal procedures similar, say, to surgical techniques" (*Figures xv*). The developments in contemporary literary theories in the second half of the twentieth century have reflected the insufficiency of one way of reading (formalism) to illuminate texts produced in a world that challenges not only what we know but how we know it.

If every black canonical text is . . . 'two-toned' or 'double-voiced', how do we explicate the signifyin(g)

black difference that makes black literature 'black'?

The most specific for me in relation to ways of reading, this question motivates answers that provide practical strategies for analyzing African American texts. Gates explains the importance of this question:

For a critic of black literature to be unaware of the black tradition of figuration and its bearing upon a discrete black text is as serious a flaw as for that critic to be unaware of the texts in the Western tradition which the black text echoes, revises and extends. ("Criticism" 6)

Critical attention, he contends, must focus on the "most repressed" element in the black tradition: "the language of the black text" (6). Language and the forms that it takes in shaping narrative are the loci of my critical inquiry in this chapter.

How shall I proceed? Gates tells me that "[b]lack literature is a verbal art like other verbal arts," and, working out of structuralist theories of the text, he tells me that the text is "a world, a system of signs" that reflects the world view, the consciousness of its writer. When we read a black text, then, we must be conscious of its blackness and the ways in which blackness is signified:

We urgently need to direct our attention to the nature of black figurative language, to the nature of black narrative forms. . . . [W]e must begin to understand the nature of intertextuality, that is, the nonthematic manner by which texts—poems and novels—respond to other texts. (*Figures*, "Literary Theory," 40-41).

In my close reading of *A Lesson*, I pay attention to all three of these issues: (1) to black figurative language as a form of signifyin(g); (2) to black narrative forms as part of (3) the intertextuality of the novel. I focus on two intertextual structures: on

autobiography as a variation on slave narratives and on spirituals as coded communication in the world of American slaves.

Signifyin(g) in the Black Tradition

To focus on the repressed language of the black text, Gates has developed a "theory of reading that arises from Afro-American culture" (*Black Literature*. "The Blackness" 286). He calls his approach "critical signification," and he derives it from "the black rhetorical strategy called Signifyin(g)," associated with folklore in the Signifying Monkey tales. Gates' punctuation of the word "signifyin(g) appears to enact the double-voicedness of the black literary tradition, the *g* in parenthesis signifying the proper spelling in standard English while the word without the *g* signifies the power of speech in the black vernacular.

Although I will not go into depth about the derivation of signifyin(g) from the African folktale, some explanation is necessary to clarify its use in critical signification. Gates explains that the Signifying Monkey is the "profane counterpart" of the Yoruba sacred trickster Esu-Elegbara. Esu is the counterpart of Hermes, messenger and interpreter of the gods in classical mythology (*Figures*, "Literary Theory" 48-49). Both figures are characterized by their ability to bring about transformations. Deriving from these mythical figures, signifyin(g) refers to the transformative power of language.

Gates defines signifyin(g) as a concept that is "entirely textual or linguistic." In this practice, "a second statement or figure repeats, or tropes, or reverses the first" ("Literary Theory" 49). This linguistic skill, the ability to say one thing and mean another, has been basic to the survival of blacks "in oppressive Western cultures." Gates contends that the ability to read these significations, to decipher their complex codes, is a fundamental "metaphorical literacy." It is, he declares, "just about the blackest aspect of the black tradition" ("Criticism" 6). It is clear, then, that the critic of black literature must be able to read the significations of the black text in order to understand its meanings.

In "The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey," Gates has gathered together other critics' definitions of signifyin(g); the following ones are helpful in my reading of *A Lesson Before Dying*:

[Signifying] can denote speaking with the hands and eyes, and in this respect encompasses a whole complex of expressions and gestures. (Roger D. Abrahams 288)

[Signifying] can also be employed to reverse or undermine pretense or even one's opinion about one's own status. (Claudia Mitchell-Kernan 289)

What pretends to be informative may intend to be persuasive. The hearer is thus constrained to attend to all potential meaning carrying symbolic systems in speech events—the total universe of discourse. (Mitchell-Kernan 289).

Each of these definitions describes different forms of signifying which occur in the language of Gaines' novel, and I shall return to these during my discussion of the

book. At this point I include them to establish a foundation for the wide range of possibilities they offer in reading African American literature.

A Lesson Before Dying: An Introduction

People and Places

The novel is set in Louisiana in the late 1940s. Its dichotomized black and white world echoes life in the pre-Civil War South. The plantation house of the wealthy Henri Pichot looms above the poor dwellings of the black people who live in the Quarter where we spend time in the houses of two aging friends, Tante Lou and Miss Emma. Their young male relatives, the central characters in the novel, each suffers a crisis of entrapment. Tante Lou's godson Jefferson is in jail, awaiting death by electrocution for a murder he did not commit. Miss Emma's nephew, Grant Wiggins, feels trapped in his life as the school teacher in the Quarter. Miss Emma and Tante Lou are deeply religious, and the church is a focal point of life in the Quarter, serving both as a spiritual center as well as the school for poor black children.

In the nearby town of Bayonne, the action of the novel occurs in the courthouse where a trial initiates the action and where the narrative unfolds in a tiny cell and a visiting room. The town, like the plantation, is segregated: Whites uptown, and blacks in the back of town where The Rainbow Club is located. Grant Wiggins takes us to The Rainbow Club, mostly when he needs to escape from the Quarter and when

he wants to see his girlfriend, Vivian Baptiste, also a schoolteacher. At the end of the novel we spend an anxious April morning moving slowly through the town as its inhabitants react to the preparations for Jefferson's execution.

We make brief visits to some of the private homes of people in the novel, among them Henri Pichot's house to which we return on several occasions, always in the role of suppliants before the master. We are briefly in Vivian's apartment where she lives with her two small children. On the penultimate morning of the story, we visit two homes which symbolize the differences in the lives of blacks and whites. We begin that morning as Mose Ambrose, the minister in the Quarter, prepares for one of the most difficult days of his life. In Bayonne we stop in on the sheriff, Sam Guidry, who is married to Henri Pichot's sister Edna, as he has his breakfast. And we are often inside the small house where Grant lives with Tante Lou and in the house where Miss Emma, grief stricken over the fate of her godson, grows steadily weaker in the months from October to April in which the story takes place.

The Central Characters

The two key figures in the novel are Grant Wiggins and Jefferson. Their lives are woven together in an intense and intricate relationship. Each man suffers forms of imprisonment which are both literal and metaphoric. Jefferson's imprisonment in the Bayonne jail serves as a metaphor for the racial injustice of the slavery system and the continuing oppression of that system almost a century after the Emancipation

Proclamation. Grant, although "freed" by the advantage of a university education, feels literally entrapped in his position as the teacher in the quarter. His mind is a metaphoric prison because he lacks the strength of will to free himself; he feels trapped in the cycle of poverty and ignorance which the white culture perpetuates.

Speech Acts

Gates' double-voicedness appears in the novel in the speech acts of the white and black characters. Jefferson is devastated by his defense attorney's naming of him as a "hog" at the end of the trial. He allows this naming to construct him and to paralyze him. "Hog" reflects the ethnic belief that blacks are little more than animals who exist to satisfy the hungers of the white man. The hog, unlike the mule or the horse, accomplishes no work in the world. It exists solely for the purpose of feeding the master and his people, its death sustaining those who slaughter it. This image of the hog is a continuous thread in the fabric of the novel, and I trace its weave through the text.

Similarly, Grant Wiggins lives in a double-voiced world where he is caught in the web of white language. Having mastered the master's tools, as Audre Lorde would refer to the language of the patriarchy, he is not free to use these tools in the presence of white men. His narrative is double-voiced as well. He tells the story in both standard English and in black vernacular.

The Narrator, Present and Absent

Grant tells the story in the first person point of view. The first sentence of chapter one locates him in a paradox that is symbolic not only of his position in the novel but also of the lives of blacks in a predominantly white world: "I was not there, yet I was there" (3). This sentence literally reflects the way that he tells us the story: He reports from his own observations, and he tells us what other people have told him. In his first sentence he is referring to the trial in which Jefferson is convicted and sentenced to death by electrocution. In the course of the novel he becomes a metaphorical attorney for the defense in Jefferson's second "trial," but he is also absent from that one.

Signifyin(g) Rhetoric

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.

Claude McKay

The Hog Image

The novel opens on a Friday afternoon in late October and tells the story of the trial, including the conflicting versions of the murder of a white store owner as presented by Jefferson and by the prosecutor. It introduces the image of the hog

which governs the shape of the novel. Claude McKay's sonnet "If We Must Die" (Baker, *Black Literature* 165) establishes the death of a hog as the most ignoble of deaths. "If we must die," its speakers say, "O let us nobly die, / So that our precious blood may not be shed / In vain." The poem juxtaposes the two contrary images that characterize Jefferson in the novel, a hog and man, animal and human, and its final declaration is that the speakers will die nobly, standing: "Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack, / Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!" (Baker 165). Gaines's novel appears to be signifying on the images of this poem. One of the central concerns of Miss Emma is that Jefferson will walk like a man to his death, and the novel is filled with images of standing, images that signify literal standing as well as "standing for." McKay's poem provides us a sociohistorical dimension for these images in the novel.

Attempting to gain sympathy for Jefferson, his lawyer denigrates him as a "cornered animal" who struck the store owner "quickly out of fear, a trait inherited from his ancestors in the deepest jungle of blackest Africa." He tells the jury that Jefferson is "A thing to hold the handle of a plow, a thing to load your bales of cotton, a thing to dig your ditches, to chop your wood, to pull your corn" (7-8). He emphasizes Jefferson's illiteracy: "Ask him to name the months of the year. Ask him does Christmas come before or after the Fourth of July? Mention the names of Keats, Byron, Scott" (8). He saves the ultimate degradation until the end as he makes his final plea: "What justice would there be to take his life? Justice, gentlemen?"

Why I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this" (8). This description robs Jefferson, finally, of his status as a human being; it devastates him to such an extent that he believes the attorney's words are true. In post-structural terms he becomes a social construction of a more powerful man with a more powerful language. The novel proceeds out of this moment to investigate how a man reduced to an animal can reconstruct himself as a man. Appropriately, at the end of the novel Jefferson's own words, written in his diary, effect that reconstruction. He discovers that he has the power to declare himself a man and in so doing to erase the name "Hog."

Signifyin(g) in the Kitchen I

Several of the novel's most powerful scenes occur in the kitchens of Emma, Tante Lou, and Henri Pichot. Chapter two builds on the image of the hog with two signifying sentences which set into motion the narrative threads that weave Grant and Jefferson into each other's lives. On Monday, after Jefferson is sentenced to death by electrocution, Tante Lou and Miss Emma inform Grant of his role in Jefferson's salvation. Gaines establishes the power and stability of these two women in the images with which he introduces them into the story. At the trial Miss Emma has sat "as immobile as a great stone or as one of our oak or cypress stumps" (3), and on this Monday afternoon as they sit in Tante Lou's kitchen, their strength is reiterated: "They sat there like boulders, their bodies, their minds, immovable" (14). In that

kitchen they issue Grant an imperative that will change him just as they want him to change Jefferson.

You the Teacher

Miss Emma states her case: "I don't want them to kill no hog," she said. "I want a man to go to that chair, on his own two feet."

Signifyin(g) can denote speaking with the hands and eyes, and in this respect encompasses a whole complex of expressions and gestures. (Roger D. Abrahams)

Images of eyes occur almost constantly throughout *A Lesson Before Dying*, and they signify in the manner of Abraham's definition. After Miss Emma's statement, Grant realizes that the two women are communicating to him: "Now both she and my aunt looked at me as though I was supposed to figure out the rest of it. We stared at one another for a few seconds before what they expected began to dawn on me" (13).

When he understands and begins to protest, Emma says "He don't have to do it," but that is exactly the opposite of what she means in terms of Gates' definition of signifyin(g) as "the ability to say one thing and mean another" ("Criticism" 6). She repeats "You don't have to do it," but Grant realizes what her "dry, mechanical, unemotional" delivery means because he reads the faces of the two women: "they were not about to give up on what they had in mind" (13).

Miss Emma's signifying continues when she explains why Grant must go to visit Jefferson: "You the teacher" (13).

Signifying: What pretends to be informative may intend to be persuasive. The hearer is thus constrained to attend to all

potential meaning carrying symbolic systems—the total universe of discourse. (Mitchell-Kernan)

Grant is caught in the double-voiced universe of discourse. Trained as he is in the language of the university, he also knows how to hear the language of his culture. Miss Emma's apparently simple statement of fact says one thing and means another. It says, literally, "You are a teacher in the local school." But it signifies much more. Grant (and we) read it to mean a number of things. On one level of signification it translates into power: "You live in both the white world and the black world, and you can negotiate meaning. You know how to communicate, to reach people: You can reach Jefferson when no one else can. You have the gift of persuasive language." On a much deeper level, the sentence signifies obligation: "You owe Jefferson the dignity of his manhood. You owe the elderly in this community the peace of mind that will come with the transformation of Jefferson from hog to man. You owe black people the freedom from oppression that your education, in some measure, enables you to possess. You do not have a choice."

When he responds that "Jefferson is dead," and that he "can't raise the dead," that all he can do is "try to keep others from ending up like this," he is ignored "as though I hadn't said a word" (14). Grant's language figures the Biblical story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, and this figuring of the Christian hero will become crucial in the critical significations of the novel.

Flight

In the same scene Tante Lou issues Grant a command: "You going with us up to the quarter," meaning, again, "You have no choice." He will accompany them to Henri Pichot's house. At this point the thread of Grant's imprisonment appears in the fabric of the novel: "I hated this place, and all I wanted to do was get away. I had told her I was no teacher, I hated teaching, and I was just running in place here. . . . [N]o matter how loud I screamed, she would not hear me now" (15). Tante Lou's silence is also an act of signifying.

Signifyin(g): In the Kitchen II

Chapter three, which chronicles the trip to Pichot's house and the events that occur there, is full of signifying language. Approaching "Pichot's large white and gray antebellum house," Grant resents that they have to enter the house through the back door, reminding his aunt that "It was you who said you never wanted me to go through that back door ever again," which elicits Miss Emma's "He don't have to go." This sentence has become a litany of Grant's obligation: "Miss Emma said it for about the hundredth time. She was looking at me but not seeing me, and not meaning what she was saying, either" (17). Pichot is entertaining friends in the library, but he comes when Miss Emma asks for him. After explaining that she does not want Jefferson to die a hog, she asks Pichot to speak to the sheriff and secure permission

for "the teacher talk to my boy for me." She declares her purpose: "I want the teacher make him know he's not a hog, he's a man" (20-21).

Signifyin(g) can also be employed to reverse or undermine pretense or even one's opinion about one's own status. (Claudia Mitchell-Kernan)

When Pichot does not respond, she signifies: "I done done a lot for this family and this place, Mr. Henri." He tells her to let Reverend Ambrose visit Jefferson, that she should be more concerned with the boy's soul. She persists, however, in her request, and Grant tells us that her tenacity shocks one of Pichot's guests: "He could not believe what he was hearing" (22). When Pichot continues to evade her request, she issues a command related to the sheriff: "Tell him to ask his wife all I done done for this family over the years" (23). Decoded, this sentence illustrates Mitchell-Kernan's definition of signification. It contains the same imperative that she has issued to Grant in "You the Teacher." Her sentence signifies Pichot's obligation: "I have served you well for a long time, and now you owe me something in return. I expect you to deliver it. Although I may seem to be at your mercy, we both know that I have power. I can negotiate because of what I have done for you."

Signifyin(g): At the School

In two memorable scenes in chapters seven and eight I pick up the textual threads I am tracing, one woven into Jefferson's imprisonment in the image of a hog and the other woven into Grant's feeling of entrapment as a teacher.

Jefferson

When Dr. Joseph Morgan, school superintendent in the parish, makes his once-a-year visit to Grant's school, his inspection recalls the days of slavery. Following perfunctory inquiries into the religious knowledge and patriotic practices of the students, he inspects their teeth. Grant remembers history and provides us a sociohistorical context for the moment: "At the university I had read about slave masters who had done the same when buying slaves, and I had read of cattlemen doing it when purchasing horses and cattle." He cannot resist sarcasm: "At least Dr. Joseph had graduated to the level where he let the children spread their own lips, rather than using some kind of crude instrument. I appreciated his humanitarianism." His inspection of teeth having not completely erased the human status of the students, Morgan concludes his visit with a compliment to Wiggins: "You have an excellent crop of students" (56). Morgan's language degrades the students and all black people. Blacks are animals or plants, but in the eyes of whites such as Morgan, they are not people.

Grant

In chapter eight Grant, standing by a fence and watching some students cutting wood for the winter, remembers a lesson his old schoolteacher taught him. The title of the novel indicates that there is a lesson before dying, but this is misleading. There are many lessons and many teachers. Tante Lou and Miss Emma, for

example, teach lessons in pride and brotherhood, and Grant's teacher has taught him about freedom and flight.

Reflecting as he stands by the fence, Grant questions his life: "What am I doing? Am I reaching them at all? . . . Is it just a vicious circle? Am I doing anything?" (62). The image of the circle brings round a memory of his former teacher:

It was he, Matthew Antoine, as teacher then, who stood by the fence while we chopped the wood. He told us then that most of us would die violently, and those who did not would be brought to the level of beasts. (62)

The animal imagery here links Grant to Jefferson and links Grant's past to the present. Antoine has had but one lesson to teach before dying: "He could teach us only one thing, and that one thing was flight." The lesson signifies: "Because there was no freedom here. He said it, and he didn't say it. But we felt it" (63).

In his memory Grant recalls how his attitude seemed to challenge Antoine who responded with cynicism and whose manner also signified his meaning: "So you think you can? No, he did not say it with words, only with his eyes. You will be the loser, my friend. Maybe he did not say 'friend'; 'fool,' more likely." The key element of the remembered conversation confirms Grant's sense of present entrapment: "You want to learn, I will help you learn. Maybe in that way I will be free, knowing that someone else has taken the burden. Good, good, you want to learn? Good, good, here is the burden" (63).

Antoine situates himself (and later Grant) in history as he describes the impossibility of effecting change:

You'll see that it'll take more than five and a half months to wipe away—peel—scrape away the blanket of ignorance that has been plastered and replastered over those brains in the past three hundred years. (64)

The most devastating of Antoine's lessons comes when he is an old man and Grant visits him. He is bitter, and he warns Grant that the university has not taught the most important lesson: "I need to know about life. . . . What do I know about life? I stayed here. You have to go away to know about life. There's no life here. There's nothing but ignorance here'" (65). He intimates that to remain is to be always constructed by the white master: "Just go on and be the nigger you were born to be, but forget about life" (65). This word nigger and Grant's imprisonment in the image it creates is the heavy burden that weighs on Grant's mind as he sets out to teach Jefferson how to become a man, how, in the end of his life, to stand tall, how to prepare himself so that his soul can take the flight to freedom. This imagery of flight is also woven into the novel in one of its intertexts.

At the Jail

Chapters nine through eleven detail the series of visits to the jail. At first Miss Emma accompanies Grant, but the visits are uneventful: Jefferson will not talk, and he refuses most of the food that she brings. Although I have no space to discuss it here, food and eating are powerful signifiers in the novel. After a while, Miss Emma

weakens and decides that she cannot continue the visits, so Grant goes alone. On one of his subsequent visits we continue to trace the weave of animal imagery in the story.

The Hog

In a shocking scene, Jefferson pretends to be a hog. At first he asks if Grant has brought some corn, explaining, "That's what hogs eat" (82). Then he defines himself: "I'm a old hog," he said. "Youmans don't stay in no stall like this. I'm a old hog they fattening up to kill" (83). Then, he kneels on the floor beside the bag of food that Miss Emma has sent. Grant describes the scene: He "put his head inside the bag and started eating, without using his hands. He even sounded like a hog" (83). Trying desperately to reach Jefferson, Grant implores him to respond because, if he does not, white men will succeed in making him no more than an animal: "You want me to stay away and let him win? The white man? You want him to win?" (84). Despite his plea, Jefferson remains unresponsive.

You the Teacher

Chapters thirteen through fifteen cover one Sunday in which Reverend Ambrose visits and talks to Grant about Jefferson's soul. He wants to know what Jefferson is "thinking deep in him." and when Grant replies that he cannot know that, Tante Lou repeats "You the teacher," signifying that she expects Grant to be able to read Jefferson in all his psychological complexities. A conflict well worth studying closely in *A Lesson* is the one that now begins to develop between different ways of knowing:

Mose Ambrose's security in his vision of spiritual freedom and the flight of the soul at death and Grant Wiggins' uncertainty about the nature of both human life and whatever life may exist in the hereafter. He recalls that he changed his faith at the university, and his thinking continues the thread of his own entrapment: "I had been running in place ever since, unable to accept what used to be my life, unable to leave it" (102).

Signifyin(g) Structures

Critical signification in Gates' theory of reading has another dimension in which a text can itself be "a signifying structure, a structure of intertextual revisions" because "it revises key tropes and rhetorical strategies" received from earlier texts. In African American history, Gates, explains, "authors seem, to revise at least two antecedent texts, often taken from different generations or periods within the tradition." For example, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) signifies on (or revises) a number of texts, among them Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945) as well as W.E.B. Dubois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Why create such signifying structures? Gates answers that such readings and critiques of other black texts are "an act of rhetorical self-definition" and that the African American "literary tradition exists because of these precisely chartable formal literary relationships, relationships of signifying" ("The Blackness" 290).

In *A Lesson Before Dying*, I chart or trace two signifying structures, the Negro spirituals and the slave narrative, "the earliest and most significant forms of oral and written literature created by blacks during slavery" and out of which "the fabric of tradition in Afro-American literature is woven." Spirituals reflected the slaves' religion and blended elements in both Protestant Christianity and African religions. Their coded language critiqued the plantation system and "the slave's search for freedom in this world." Slave narratives, which were both individually autobiographical and communal, created "a heroic fugitive character unlike any other in American literature" (Dixon 298). In his novel Gaines repeats the language of the spirituals and uses it to signify the theme of freedom. He revises the autobiographical narrative as a diary that records the transformation of a dejected man into a hero.

Signifyin(g) Structure I: Spirituals

The spiritual as an intertextual signifying structure first appears in the novel when, one Sunday afternoon, Grant hears Miss Eloise, a neighbor, singing her "'Termination song." In the tradition of the local church, on every third Sunday members "would stand and sing their favorite hymns and tell the congregation where they were determined to spend eternity" (97). Miss Eloise's song is the spiritual "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?" The repeating pattern of the spiritual asks a series of questions about witnessing the sacrifice of Christ on Good Friday. "Were you there when they crucified my Lord, when they nailed him to the

tree, when they laid him in the tomb?" (Johnson and Johnson 2: 136) it asks. There are no answers in the spiritual, and its presence at this spot in the novel serves several functions. It is a multiple signification. First, it echoes the recent conversation between Grant and Ambrose about Jefferson's soul; second, it serves as a prelude to Gaines' use of another spiritual, "Crucifixion," the language of which becomes an important symbol in Jefferson's "lesson." Third, it foreshadows Jefferson's death. Fourth, it is a coded commentary on the opening line of the novel: "I was not there, yet I was there" (3). What it signifies as it circles back to that first sentence is the literal absence of Grant at the trial as well as the literal absence of the singer at the crucifixion of the Lord. At a more complex level, it signifies the presence of all who have witnessed injustice and have suffered and died at the hands of others, a sacrifice for which Christ is the ultimate symbol in the Western tradition.

Interweaving

The Hog Image. On a subsequent visit that Miss Emma makes to the jail (Chapter 16), Jefferson repeats his performance as a hog, and when Tante Lou describes the experience later to Grant, the double-voicedness in the novel takes on a new dimension. She indicates that Jefferson is losing all touch with his humanity, that he was little more than a disembodied voice: "'You brought corn?' his voice said. Not him, my aunt said, just the voice. He didn't show a thing in his face. His eyes were blank, blank, blank, my aunt said" (121). This echoes the opening sentence of the novel, too: Jefferson is not there, but he is there. When he insists

that the visitors "'Th'ow something'" to him because he is a hog, his godmother, anguished, slaps him. After the visit, she implores Grant to continue: "'Cause somebody go'n do something for me 'fore I die,'" and his aunt repeats the litany of his obligation: "'Cause you the teacher'" (123).

The Spiritual. Grant continues his visits (chapter 17), and a few weeks before Christmas the first major breakthrough occurs as Jefferson initiates a conversation about "That chair" (138). Asking about the approaching holiday, he pretends ignorance in a signifying sentence: "'That's when He was born, or that's when He died?'" He pretends not to know, but he knows. When Grant answers "Born," Jefferson sets into motion some of the most powerful signifyin(g) in the novel. His text is an intertext that signifies on a spiritual. He replies, "'That's right,'" in the manner of a teacher, explaining "'Easter when they nailed Him to the cross. And he never said a mumbling word'" (139). The language of the spiritual which he quotes provides a complement to the question of Miss Eloise's 'Termination song: "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" Jefferson's quotation from "Crucifixion" suggests that this is his 'Termination song, unsung but spoken in his cell. The cell is itself a figure of Christ's imprisonment by Pontius Pilate. "They crucified my Lord," the spiritual begins, "An' he never said a mumblin' word." Its pattern tells the story of heroic silence: "They nailed him to the tree, They pierced him in the side, The blood came twinklin' down, and He bow'd his head an' died," but "He never said a mumblin' word; / Not a word, not a word, not a word" (Johnson and Johnson 1:

174). The irony of Jefferson's signifying on "Crucifixion" is that, after his execution, his own silence, which will raise him to an heroic level, will be broken by the words of his diary.

The signifying on spirituals continues when, in late February, Grant and Reverend Ambrose are summoned to Pichot's house (Chapter 20). There they receive the news that the execution will occur on the second Friday after Easter: "Friday, April eighth, between noon and three" (157). When Grant asks "Why that date?" Sheriff Guidry explains that it has to happen "before or after Easter. It couldn't happen during Lent" (156). Grant learns that another execution is scheduled before Ash Wednesday, and that "because of our state's heavily Catholic population, it might not go well to have two executions just before the beginning of Lent" (156). The execution date, then, is set in an act that is both political and religious. Gaines' signifies on the intertextual spirituals: The execution will not happen literally on Good Friday, but it will happen on a Friday and during the same hours as the execution of Christ.

In a moment of technical virtuosity, Gaines doubles his intertextual play. The scene at Pichot's house is already signifying on spirituals. Now he weaves together two texts on top of this first intertext. Sam Guidry makes a telephone call (text 1), and in between his sentences, Gaines inserts Grant's thoughts (text 2):

How do people come up with a date and a time to take a life
from another man? Who made them God?

'Audrey, let me speak to Sid,' Guidry was saying over the telephone.

Twelve white men say a black man must die, and another white man sets the date and time without consulting one black person. Justice? (157).

In these interwoven texts, Grant clarifies the spiritual as signifying structure:

And on Friday too. Always on Friday. Same time as He died, between twelve and three. But you can't take this one's life too soon after the recognition of His death, because it might upset the sensitive few. It can happen less than two weeks later, though, because even the sensitive few will have forgotten about their Savior's death by then. (158)

Grant's thinking reveals a number of ideas central to the novel. First, the power of the "sensitive few" white people who can determine the fate of a black man. Second, religion for these "few" is an empty ritual in which they observe and then forget the supreme sacrifice of "their Savior." Implied in this thought is the opposite way with which black people regard the death of Christ and the powerful role that the church and religion play in their lives, a role coded into the language of their spirituals.

In Grant's next visit to the jail (Chapter 22), Jefferson's references to "My last supper" continue the thread of the spirituals. His last supper will be a celebration of his desire: "I never got nothing I wanted in my whole life. . . . I want me a whole gallona ice cream. . . . Eat it with a pot spoon" (170). During this visit Grant offers to bring Jefferson a portable radio so that he can listen to music and so that he can have something that belongs only to him. He also offers to bring a notebook and pencil so that Jefferson can record his thoughts; Jefferson agrees to this plan.

On a subsequent visit that Grant makes to the jail, accompanied by Tante Lou, Miss Emma, and Mose Ambrose, he delivers a "lesson" to Jefferson on the nature of heroism and the potential that Jefferson has for it. Space prohibits me from discussing this powerful moment in favor of continuing my emphasis on signifying structures. On a later visit, Jefferson becomes the teacher and offers a lesson before dying, one in which he continues the thread of the spiritual.

Jefferson the Teacher. On the Thursday before Good Friday, Grant visits the jail. A number of intertexts are woven together in this scene. First, Grant translates the initial entry in the notebook for us after he tells us that it is written in a large, awkward script and contains no punctuation and capitalization. Jefferson describes a dream in which he is being taken somewhere; in subsequent entries the dream becomes a recurring image of his fear. He finishes the first entry with the hog image: *"If I ain't nothing but a hog, how come they just don't knock me in the head like a hog? Starb me like a hog?"* (220). Later, when we read the complete diary, it illustrates the double-voicedness of the African American tradition because it presents Jefferson in his own unschooled language, signifying the denial of an education to poor blacks.

A second intertext occurs in the reappearance of the imagery of the spiritual "Crucifixion" as Grant and Jefferson discuss Good Friday. We begin to realize that Jefferson is constructing himself as a man in the figure of Jesus, the Christian hero,

the central figure in his Aunt Emma's religious life. Responding to the news that tomorrow is Good Friday, Jefferson comments "to himself": "That's when He died. . . . Never said a mumbling word. That's right. Not a word'" (221). As they discuss the approaching execution, Grant encourages Jefferson to do something for Emma: "Walk like a man. Meet her up there" (222), and Jefferson responds with a lesson on what faces him.

Echoing the spiritual "Lonesome Valley" with its image of Jesus walking into the valley of the shadow of death, when "nobody else could do it for him, He had to walk it by himself," Jefferson explains that no one can go to the chair for him: "I got to go myself" (223). He sees himself in the figure of Christ:

'Who make people kill people, Mr. Wiggins?'
'They killed His Son, Jefferson.'
'And He never said a mumbling word.'
'That what they say.'
'That's how I want to go, Mr. Wiggins. Not a
mumbling word.' (223)

With that figuration as his context, Jefferson delivers a lesson on his place in the world and on the work that he must do: "Me to take the cross. Your cross, nannan's cross, my own cross. Me, Mr. Wiggins. This old stumbling nigger.'" He describes himself in words that recall the spiritual text "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child" (Johnson and Johnson 2: 30): "'Who ever car'd my cross, Mr. Wiggins? My mamma? My daddy? They dropped me when I wasn't nothing. Still don't know where they at this minute.'" He recalls his life as a virtual slave: "'I went in the field when I was six, driving that old water cart. I done pulled that cotten

sack, I done cut cane, load cane, swung that ax, chop, ditch banks since I was six.'" He transcends, finally, the image of the hog: "'Yes, I'm youman, Mr. Wiggins. But nobody didn't know that 'fore now.'" He describes the abuse he has suffered: "'Cuss for nothing. Beat for nothing. Work for nothing.'" This was his construction, his self, in the white man's world where, to survive, he played out the stereotype of the smiling Negro as happy child: "'Grinned to get by. Everybody thought that's how it was s'pose to be'" (224). He makes an indictment of the Teacher: "'You too, Mr. Wiggins, you never thought I was nothing else.'" He believed what others "taught" him that he was: "'I didn't neither. Thought I was doing what the Lord had put me on this earth to do'" (224). The lesson is a revelation to Grant: "'My eyes were closed before this moment, Jefferson. My eyes have been closed all my life'" (225). In a reversal of all of Jefferson's refusals to eat, he now performs a Christ-like act of feeding others, both spiritually and physically. Having taught the lesson of a noble spirit, Jefferson asks, as the chapter concludes, about the hunger of the body: "'Care for a 'tato,' Mr. Wiggins?'" The metaphor of food in the novel reaches its highest moment of signification in the final act of this scene.

Signifying Structure II: The Slave Narrative

The visit in which Jefferson agrees to write in the notebook sets up perhaps the most powerful structural signification in the novel. Language has been a tool of

liberation for Grant, even though his use of it is restricted around the white men he encounters, but now he offers Jefferson language as a tool of self-discovery and salvation. What Gaines sets up in the offer of the notebook culminates in Jefferson's diary, the most poignant event in the novel. A double signification occurs. Grant tells the story in the form of a very elaborate and extended diary of his experiences and his commentary on them. His story and Jefferson's diary converge as structural significations and revisions of one of the first forms of written African American literature, the slave narrative.

The slave narrative represents the attempt of blacks to write themselves into being.

In their introduction to *The Slave's Narrative*, Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. explain the significance and purpose of slave narratives in American literature. Their discussion, from which the quotation above is taken (xxiii), accurately describes what happens in Jefferson's diary. A number of clarifications are in order, however, in terms of the way that Gaines revises the form of the slave narrative as a signifying structure in his novel.

Slave narratives were autobiographical performances, autobiography referring to "a recollective/narrative act" through which the writer looks back over the events of his life and recounts them from the perspective of the present. The writer "is not a neutral and passive recorder but rather a creative and active shaper" who does not present events in simple chronological order, but who expresses them in "patterned significance" as present and past; present memory and past experience become

"present being" (Olney 149). Jefferson's diary enacts just such a performance. In its limited language it recounts the events of his life and his reflections on them up until the morning of his execution and reconstructs him as a man just as he loses his life. Paradoxically, however, his status as a man is preserved in the pencilled words of his pages.

Jefferson's diary revises the narrative form on which Gaines signifies; it does not follow the "master outline" of twelve sections that can be drawn from the great slave narratives. These include preliminaries to the actual narrative, among them an engraved, signed portrait and various testimonials to the narrator's existence. These preliminaries, in other words, establish the authenticity of the text. The actual narrative follows and contains a statement of being ("I was born") and various accounts of cruel masters, exemplary slaves, barriers to slave literacy, descriptions of the material status of slaves, the patterns of their existence, attempts at escape, the taking on of a new last name as an act of identity as a free person, and some reflections on being a slave (Olney 152-53). These narratives almost always recounted "the realities of the institution of slavery, almost never the intellectual, emotional, moral growth of the narrator" (Olney 154). These latter concerns—the reflection on slavery and the internal processes of "becoming"—are the substance of Jefferson's diary, appropriate as a revision of the slave narrative since it is written nearly 100 years after the abolition of slavery. Jefferson's diary is not a literal description of an institution that had been supposedly abolished; it is a metaphor for

the possibility of triumph over the continuing and dehumanizing effects of that institution. It is thematically related to the slave narratives. "Literacy, identity, and freedom," the "omnipresent thematic trio of the most important slave narratives" (Olney 158), all emerge from Jefferson's diary.

Jefferson makes forty-one episodic entries of varying lengths; the entries are unnumbered, but I have numbered them here for easy reference. He addresses the following subjects: visits to the jail (4, 11, 14, 15, 18, 19, 25); his dreams (3, 7, 17); work stories (6); love (9, 18); the act of writing and Wiggins' response to it (1, 8, 10, 12, 25); food (2); biblical stories (5, 21); Paul Bonin, the white deputy who befriends him (13); crying (16, 20); and final thoughts as his death approaches (22-41). Space permits me to deal with only a few of these compelling entries. Read in sequence, the diary affirms Jefferson's ability to read his world and to construct himself as a man within it.

Jefferson's narrative begins with a metaphoric "I was born" in the sense that his diary details his birth into language, his birth as a writer. He addresses the opening entry to Grant Wiggins, explaining that he has no experience as a writer: "i aint never rote nothin but homework i aint never rote a leter in all my life" (226).

The sixth entry opens with a reflection on God's favoritism of white people: "it look like the lord just work for wite folks cause ever sens i wasn nothin but a litle boy i been on my own haulin water to the fiel . . . so i get the peple they food an they water on time." Within this context he tells a rollicking story of boo and mis

rachel at lunch time. Boo describes how he defies the lord by saying "a ded niger is beter of an a live one any weekday" and how he continues his blasphemy "an saddy":

'im gittin drunk an say it agin an saddy standin in the midle the road hollin up in the air sayin come on an git me com on and git me see if i care an fallin down in the dich and rollin in the road and holin up the botle so the lord coud see it' (228)

The story moves at a breakneck speed, in the best tradition of humor in oral storytelling.

Jefferson records his fear of death in several entries in which he describes an ominous door. He prefers sleeplessness, because "i dont want dream bout that door ever time i shet my eyes" (231).

He reflects on the nature of love and how love is signified, whether by doing or saying: "i kno i care for nanan but i dont kno if love is care cause cuttin wood and haulin water and things like that i dont kno if thats love or jus work to do and you say thats love." He thinks about the diary: "i aint done this much thinkin and this much writin in all my lif before" (229).

In several of the entries in which he describes the visits of Pichot and other white men to the cell, he makes it clear that he understands their role in his oppression. He realizes that Paul is in a difficult position in trying to befriend him and also play his official role in front of the other white men: "paul trying to be hod when he aint . . . he is the only one rond yer kno how to talk like a youman to people." He goes on to contrast the other white men who visit him: "i know you paul and i kno ole clark and i know you too shef guiry and you mr picho and mr morgan and all the

rest of yall i jus never say non of this befor but i know yall ever las one of yall"

(230). His knowledge indicts those who have imprisoned him, and who, ironically, even as they visit and ask about him, are betting that he will die like a hog. On the eve of the execution, Guidry pays a visit and Jefferson's narrative reveals that the Sheriff's major concern is vanity, the maintenance of his image:

he ax me what all i been ritin an i tol him jus things and he say
aint he done tret me rite and i tol him yesir . . . and he say is
you gon put that in yo tablet and i say yesir an he say put that
down in yo tabet i tret you good all the time you been yer (233).

Ironically, Guidry says that he will leave the light on all night so that Jefferson can continue to write. This is doubly symbolic. Here is the sheriff who has helped to negate the presence of a black man in the world and who now wants to illuminate the darkness of his last night on earth.

The theme of identity emerges in the final entries of the diary. Writing on the day before the execution, Jefferson reveals how close he feels to Grant Wiggins and his sorrow when he learns that he will never see his teacher again: "im sory i cry mr wigin im sory i cry when you say you aint comin back tomoro . . . i cry cause you been so good to me mr wigin and nobody aint never been that good to me an make me think im somebody" (232). In many places in the diary Jefferson's language sings in its poetry, particularly in his repeated structures. The simple rhythm of his affirmation of manhood is a good example: "when i was a litle boy i was a waterboy an rode the cart but now i got to be a man an set in a cher" (234).

The diary ends in a farewell to his teacher that sings in its springtime imagery:

day breakin
sun comin up
the bird in the tre soun like a blu bird
sky blu blu mr wigin
good by mir wigin tell them im strong tell them im a man
good by mr wigin im gon ax paul if he can bring you this
sincely jefferson (234)

The image of the bird foreshadows a final image of flight at the end of the novel.

The chapter following the diary (Chapter 30) narrates nine vignettes, each a scene reported later to Grant Wiggins, scenes from which he pieces together the preparations for the execution in the final hours of Jefferson's life.

In the final chapter of the novel, I read the sentence that allows me to interpret *A Lesson Before Dying* as a contemporary double slave narrative. At noon Grant instructs his students to kneel in prayer by their desks, and he reflects on what is occurring in Bayonne. He wonders what Jefferson is doing: "Was he crying?" Has Jefferson broken down: "Was he on his knees, begging for one more minute of life?" Or has he maintained his dignity as a man?: "Was he standing?" Then he questions himself: "Why wasn't I there? Why wasn't I standing beside him?" (250). His anguish leads him to question his faith: "Don't tell me to believe in the same God or laws that men believe in who commit these murders" (251). Then he declares his own identity and locates himself in the history of his race: "I know what it means to be a slave. I am a slave" (251). *A Lesson Before Dying* is also his revision of the slave narrative, an autobiographical performance, a final realization that he, like

Jefferson, has allowed himself to be constructed by white men, by their language and by their expectations of what an educated black man can do.

Grant's reflection reaches a climax in a sign, and he is able to interpret it as the end of Jefferson's life. As he awaits the news that the execution is over, a yellow butterfly lights near him: "Yes, I told myself. It is finally over." The butterfly is, perhaps, a triple signifier. First, it figures Jefferson's metamorphosis, his transformation from an ugly hog to a beautiful man. Second, it figures the flight of the soul after death, often represented in the Christian symbology of a butterfly. Third, the butterfly may be yet another example of Gaines' structural signification, this time on the image of flight from the oppressive Overseer in the black folktale "The People Could Fly" (Hamilton 166-173). The butterfly symbolizes Jefferson's soul, now free, and his body, also free, like the characters in the folktale who "rose on the air" to fly away: "They flew in a flock that was black against the heavenly blue. Black crows or black shadows. It didn't matter, they went so high. Way above the plantation, way over the slavery land. Say they flew away to Free-dom" (Hamilton 171). In Hamilton's retelling of the tale, that "heavenly blue" sky recalls Jefferson's words: "sky blu blu mr wigin" (234).

In the final scene of the novel, Paul Bonin comes with the news that the execution is over, and he ties together many of the threads of the narrative. "You're one great teacher," he tells Grant Wiggins, and, reiterating the symbolism of the butterfly, he says, "I saw the transformation. I'm a witness to that." (254). His

word witness carries us all the way back to the first page of the novel. Now its meaning is transformed as it connotes Jefferson's power and not his weakness. In the larger context of American history witness signifies on the slaves' membership in a religious community. In a complex signification, Paul, whose name also refers to one of the disciples who bore witness of Christ, becomes part of the spiritual community which black slaves joined. They were "initiated through the spiritual potency of personal testimony" such as the testimony to Jefferson's manhood that Paul offers to Grant. Among the "explicit principles of character and right living" that slave communities demanded of each other was this one: "for the 'soul' to be a witness for my lord'" (Dixon 301-02). If we take Jefferson to be a figure of Christ, then Paul, a white man, joins the fellowship of the black community as he bears witness to his friend.

Paul suggests the multiple lessons of the novel when he asks a symbolic question: "School is just about ready to end, huh?" (255). The school term is ending, and so is the novel. Many people have learned lessons before dying. Both Jefferson and Grant have learned a lesson, and both have been the teacher. Now Paul Bonin becomes the teacher: "Allow me to be your friend," he tells Grant, in a request that echoes Grant's own proffer of friendship to Jefferson months earlier. They shake hands in the same gesture that sealed Jefferson and Grant's connection. And we realize that the friendship between Paul and Grant, born out of their shared respect for Jefferson, may be the hope for the future of the rural Louisiana world they inhabit. Paul wants

to communicate what he has learned about Jefferson: "Tell them he was the bravest man in that room today. I'm a witness, Grant Wiggins. Tell them so." After he leaves, the emotional impact of Paul's lesson sweeps over Grant, and he faces his class unmasked: "I was crying" (256). These are the double tears of sorrow and brotherhood with which Gaines ends his novel.

Reading in the African American Tradition: Reading Backwards

Much of the Afro-American literary tradition can, in a real sense, be read as successive attempts to create a new narrative space for representing the recurring referent of Afro-American literature—the so-called black experience.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

Gates' remarks in the epigraph "(The Blackness of Blackness" (296), reflect what he refers to as the freedom of critics of black literature "to read in critical time machines, to read backwards." He makes his remarks in relation to specific black writers, but his explanation of how these writers (Ishmael Reed and Zora Neale Hurston) work, offers me a useful way of tying up the threads that I have traced in Ernest Gaines' novel.

Playing the Tradition

In explaining what reading backwards means, Gates says that while some writers "seem to relish the play of the tradition," others "play on the tradition." The first

play seems to indicate a fascination with how the tradition works, the second, an active elaboration of elements in the tradition. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, I see Gaines' relishing the play of the tradition in his use of signifyin(g) practices in the speech and behavior of his characters. He plays on the tradition, I believe, in the ways in which certain forms in his narrative signify other forms that are historically embedded in the black experience—the spiritual and the slave narrative, and, perhaps, the black folk tale.

Intertextuality

These black narrative forms define another way of reading backwards because they occur as intertextualities in the contemporary text. Such intertexts "draw upon black sacred and secular mythic discourse as metaphorical and metaphysical systems." In this respect, Gaines' fictive world metaphorically represents some elements of the black experience in America. His novel also presents world views, or metaphysical ways of interpreting the universe and the place of black people in it.

Self-Reflexive Narratives

Next, reading backwards gives us a unique perspective on the author's writing practice when, as Gaines' does, that practice produces a "self-reflexive" text that "comments upon the nature of writing itself." The novel is itself, I think, Gaines' own self-reflexive text as he lets Grant Wiggins tell the story of their people. Jefferson's

diary is doubly reflexive. First, although it does not exhibit the mastery of standard English characteristic of traditional slave narratives, it does represent Jefferson's achievement of constructing himself as a man in language. Second, it is reflexive of the historical struggle of African Americans to be literate, to write themselves into being and then to write their literature into the national tradition of their country.

Narrative Frames. Lastly, texts that allow us to read backwards are often framed texts that "bracket their narratives-within-a narrative." In *A Lesson* the narrative is a double autobiographical performance framed in a trial metaphor. The opening frame is created in an actual courtroom where Jefferson is literally on trial. The final frame is constructed out of a metaphorical classroom/courtroom in which Grant Wiggins has also been on trial to prove that "You the teacher." The truth of the verdict evolves from the language of a witness to a real execution, that execution constituting the most important trial of a man's life—his ability to stand, to die like a man. As readers we come to understand that the old Grant Wiggins must also die, must be reborn in the figure of a man who can bear witness to and of his people, a man who can stand for them in the classroom and in the world.

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CHAPTER TEN

Constructing World Views: Cultural Studies and *Night Kites*

An Introduction to Cultural Studies

Cultural studies is the most contemporary field of literary theory and criticism, having emerged in the 1980s much in the same way that other theoretical innovations emerged before it—as a reaction to the dominant theories of the day. It is, however, unique because its basic concepts grow out of previous theories, particularly poststructuralism, and its ways of reading are interdisciplinary and broadly inclusive. Cultural studies is neither a movement nor a school; it "simply cannot be easily pinned down" (Berlin viii). A recurring metaphor that theorists and practitioners use to describe cultural studies is that it is an act of border crossing, that it makes the boundaries of texts problematic (Bathrick 320), that it dissolves the boundaries of the concept of literature (Belsey 409), locating it in a complex web of contexts and intertexts that formerly have been thought to have little to do with literary analysis.

History and Points of Origin

A brief look at the emergence of cultural studies places it in the familiar contexts of theoretical and critical frameworks which I have presented in previous chapters. This way of looking at the world and its attendant ways of working with texts has resulted from several important efforts. In the field of education, these efforts have worked to include the culture of social constituencies that have formerly been excluded or marginalized. Such efforts have been motivated by challenges to traditional educational and cultural values raised in response to "issues of political, social, racial, and sexual difference and identity" (Bathrick 321). The preceding chapters on feminism and black literary theory are both concerned with cultural studies issues, and they illustrate the nature of the border crossings that cultural studies necessitates as well as cultural studies' concern with marginalized constituencies.

In terms of other theories in this book, cultural studies represents a reaction to certain concepts and threads which run through the development of critical traditions. For example, cultural studies challenges the formalistic (see Chapter 3) notion that there can ever be one correct reading of a work: it replaces the concept of a "work of art" as something sacred, coherent and unified with a "complex of mediating secondary cultural phenomena" through which it interrogates the whole notion of how knowledge is made and organized (Bathrick 320). Similarly, it challenges the archetypal approach (see Chapter 4) which says that a work is located in a large web

of other literatures which together constitute a unified world literature structure. Where do such challenges come from? The answer to my question also provides the best point of entry into cultural studies work, and the word that opens the door is culture. One critic defines culture as "an ambiguous term: a problem shared, perhaps, by all concepts which are concerned with totality: ideology, history, society, myth" (Watkins 173). Another definition goes like this: "Like 'ideology' (to which, as a concept, it is closely allied), 'culture' is a term that is repeatedly used without meaning much of anything at all" (Greenblatt 225). One of the first tasks of this chapter is to offer working definitions of culture and ideology that will inform my reading of M. E. Kerr's *Night Kites*, a novel in which I shall analyze the culture and ideology of a family, a community, and by implication, a nation responding to the social construction of disease. A final definition of culture points to the way in which I shall trace the weave of this text using the methods of cultural studies: "'Culture' is not a practice; nor is it simply the descriptive sum of the 'mores and folkways' of societies. . . . It is threaded through all social practices, and is the sum of their inter-relationship" (Hall 612).

Culture: Definitions

In offering "a provisional definition" as the basis for using cultural studies in the classroom, James Berlin and Michael Vivion (vii-xvi) trace the historical changes in the meaning of the word. Since the eighteenth century, culture has designated spheres

of human behavior which were separate in some respects from the concepts of economics and politics. Subsequently, orthodox Marxism reshaped the definition to mean "a reflex of economic behavior" that is a "totally determined and mechanically predictable sphere of independent activity" (Berlin viii). This definition, of course, seeks to define the word in the sense of a totality, quite different from the looser definition of the previous century.

In Britain and the United States, culture came to mean specifically "an autonomous category of experience manifested in an exclusive set of canonical literary texts and particular ways of reading them." Both texts and the ways of reading them are, in contrast to the Marxist concept, "regarded as completely free and independent of economic and even political activity" (viii). In the 1950s, one of the leaders in cultural criticism, Raymond Williams, revised the definition of culture to mean "the entire lived experience of human agents in response to their historical conditions"; his definition made the concept more complex than the simpler formulation of culture as something that reflected only economic and political behaviors. Williams' formulation is a good example of how cultural studies operates on the borders because it breaks down barriers between two separate categories of texts: the canonical and the cultural (Berlin viii).

Berlin and Vivion's provisional definition emerges from recent reconceptualizations of culture. For example, in structuralist thought (see Chapter 5) culture came to mean a set of signifying practices, "representations with language"

that mediate and shape all our experience. From the British notion of "culture as lived experience" and the structuralists' signifying practices, Berlin and Vivion fashion a two-pronged definition: (1) "the signifying practices that represent experience in language, myth, and literature," and (2) the "relatively autonomous responses of human agents to concrete historical conditions" (viii-ix).

Here they cut across the borders of earlier theories. The making of meaning in formal, archetypal, structuralist, and poststructuralist theories can be broadly included in the first prong of their definition. The second includes opportunities for more reader-oriented responses to literary texts in a broad cultural context. Cultural studies, then, threads together the principal ways of reading that I have discussed in the preceding chapters. It is little wonder, then, that the field is so broad, its methods are so diverse, and that its ways of reading are so provocative and challenging.

A World View: Textualities

Cultural studies complicates the definition of a text, and when Berlin and Vivion explain how their provisional definition of culture constitutes texts, they also provide a world view. They follow "the poststructuralist textual turn" in which persons (referred to as "subjects") are "multiple social constructions, the effects of signifying practices." I will demonstrate this concept in my reading of *Night Kites* as I explore the ways that characters are constructed as a consequence of the historical moment in which they live and the people they encounter. There is, simply, no given in terms of

what a person is or becomes. From the perspective of cultural studies, reality is also a social construction, and the signifying practices from which people make themselves and their world are "the central activity of culture" (ix). Finally, Berlin and Vivion weave the concept of ideology into their construction of culture studies: "The most important consideration in the entire process is ideological: it is enmeshed in economic, social, and political valuations that are always historically specific." To conclude, they designate some of the historical formations that shape subjectivities. These include family, school, work place, peer group, the arts, media, and other modes of "production and consumption" in a society (ix). "Production and consumption" refer to the making and using of the materials within a social structure. In *Night Kites* I focus my analyses of the social construction of reality and subject around family and its location in an ideology, school, and peer group.

Ideology: Definitions

I am primarily interested in ideology as a concept in relation to literary analysis and cultural studies. Echoing Watkins' definition of culture as a shared problem, Kenneth Kavanagh defines ideology as "a term that embodies all the problems associated with the cultural complexity of language: it has a rich history, during which it has taken on various, sometimes, contradictory, meanings" (306). Ideology is, of course, related to issues of class, but he provides a broader definition for the use of the term in literary and cultural studies. This definition depends on the

concept of society and links ideology to the world view that Berlin and Vivion construct in their definition of culture. Kavanagh quotes Karl Manneheim's description of a society: "A society is possible in the last analysis because the individuals in it carry around in their heads some sort of picture of that society" to which Kavanagh adds "and their place in it." He characterizes Manneheim's statement as a "fair introduction to current ideology theory" and explains what cultural ideology does. It "tries to understand the complex ways through which modern societies offer reciprocally reinforcing versions of 'reality,' 'society,' and 'self' to social subjects" (309). He elaborates on this world view by explaining that social reality and the social self are constructed in a particular way, that is, "within more than one system of differences." These differences include sex, race, religion, education, ethnicity, and class. His list of the "constantly changing variety of social apparatuses which have heavily ideological functions" repeats and elaborates on Berlin and Vivion's list: "the family (in crisis), churches (now multiple and quasi-competitive), schools, sports, network TV, public TV, cable TV, Hollywood (mass-audience) films" as well as various literary genres in the popular culture, among them comic books, romance novels, science fiction, and westerns (312-13).

Textualities

What does all of this mean in terms of the ways in which we read? We read by crossing borders and breaking down boundaries, not only in terms of the

interdisciplinary fields into we which journey in the cultural studies landscape, but also in terms of what the word text means. All of the "social apparatuses" in Kavanagh's list become texts. Cultural studies is defined by its interdisciplinarity and its intertextuality, but a great deal depends on the perspective of the investigator. "Literature-centered people" see "literature as master in the house of cultural discourse" (Bathrick 324), that is, cultural studies emanates out of literary studies. In contrast, people who live in other disciplinary houses decenter literature so that it is one of many reading and writing activities which are contending with one another. Consequently, the word literature expands to include nonliterary materials. I shall illustrate this with *Night Kites* as I inform my reading with texts from philosophy, political activist movements, and anthropology.

How might we go about constructing a cultural studies reading? Renaissance scholar and cultural critic Stephen Greenblatt describes what a full cultural analysis of *King Lear* would look like:

A nuanced cultural analysis will be concerned with the various matrices from which Shakespeare derives his material, and hence will be drawn outside the formal boundaries of the play—toward the legal arrangements, for example, that elderly parents in the Renaissance made with their children, or toward child-rearing practices in the period, or toward political debates about when, if ever, disobeying a legitimate ruler was justified, or toward predictions of the imminent end of the world. (230)

So that is it: Everything from birth to death to apocalypse. The whole world is the text of cultural studies.

The World Picture

If the Elizabethans believed in an ideal order animating earthly order, they were terrified lest it should be upset, and appalled by the visible tokens of disorder that suggested its upsetting. They were obsessed by the fear of chaos and the fact of mutability; and the obsession was as powerful in proportion as their faith in the cosmic order was strong. (Tillyard 16)

The Elizabethans would not, obviously, appreciate the uncertainties of cultural studies.

In chapter one I explained how I first began my journey into the landscape of literary theory back in the William and Mary days when I discovered the glorious certainties of E. M. W. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture* from which I take my epigraph for this section. Cultural studies, however, reverses the world that Tillyard constructed (Belsey 400, 409). A text is not a comfortable place where we find a balanced and orderly world view, but a "field of operations which brings together literature, history and politics in crucial ways" that challenge "the category of literature" (406). Belsey challenges some of the major concepts of almost all the ways of reading I have discussed in the previous chapters. She debunks the universality of formalism: "meaning is never single, eternally inscribed in the words on the page." And post-structuralism: "readings do not spring unilaterally out of the subjectivities (or ideologies) of readers." And some theories of reader-response: "The text is not an empty space, filled with meaning from outside itself" (406-07). Reading, she says, is a "quest" for the "subject in its meanings," and these meanings

are not located centrally in texts. They are often located on the margins. Meaning, then, in the antithesis of formalist doctrine, is disunified, discontinuous, and plural, as the poststructuralists contend (408).

What kind of a text are we dealing with, given Belsey's and other cultural critics' perspectives? Linking literature, politics, and history in her cultural studies focus, Belsey describes the text as a construction, a creation: "the text as it never was . . . dispersed, fragmented, produced, politicized" (408). She, too, uses the language of eroding boundaries as she describes the consequences of the cultural studies enterprise in which "the autonomy of literature begins to dissolve, its boundaries to waver as the enterprise unfolds." As the text is constructed, she says, the traditional canon of literature disappears. Fiction is no longer the object of mystery, "aesthetic satisfaction and mortal enrichment": "fiction is put to work for substantial political ends" (409). Berlin and Vivion agree with her and position themselves in the classroom where English teachers are "cultural workers" (viii) engaged in a cultural politics in which the power of students as citizens in the democratic public sphere is at stake" (xii).

Cultural Studies and Ways of Reading

Having established that the materials of cultural studies are everywhere available, how do we proceed to read from this critical perspective? Berlin and Vivion tell us

that cultural studies involves a variety of methods for making meaning and exploring the ways in which meaning is constructed but that the methods "cannot simply be fixed and formalized" in the manner of academic disciplines. Instead, cultural studies operates in an open-ended approach that is constantly subject to change, "positioning itself for revision and reshaping." They believe that students do not "learn about cultural studies; they can only learn to do cultural studies" (xii-xiv).

Given this basis for operating procedures, I present two ways of working in cultural studies, the first Catherine Belsey's panoramic view of methodology, the second Tony Watkins' more specific categories of investigation. In my reading of *Night Kites*, I shall frame my discussion out of one of Belsey's "projects," and I shall organize my strategies using some of Watkins' categories.

Belsey describes two reading procedures for linking literature, history, and politics in a cultural studies approach. The first is a "synchronic analysis of the historical moment" which need not necessarily start with literary texts. A synchronic project investigates events happening at the same time. Her second project involves a "diachronic analysis of specific discontinuities" that may begin with texts that represent diverse genre such as fiction, poetry, and autobiography. These, simply put, may be the texts that appear on the syllabus for a course, but they are not, as in the traditional course, both the beginning and the end of inquiry. "Enquiry," Belsey explains, "inevitably transgresses the boundaries of the existing discipline" (409). Diachronic here refers to changes which occur over a period of time. In my

investigation of Kerr's novel, I shall work out of Belsey's second project, beginning with a contemporary novel and locating some of its issues in a discussion of history covering a wide spectrum of space and time.

In his essay "Cultural Studies, New Historicism, and Children's Literature," Tony Watkins considers how recent developments in cultural studies may be applied to the reading of children's literature, a field, like young adult literature, not much theorized until recently. His list of five fundamental concepts serves here as the border between my theoretical presentation and my analysis of the novel as well as a good review of the concepts I have discussed here: (1) The social construction of reality: "a belief that reality can only be made sense of through language or other cultural systems which are embedded in history"; (2) "the conceptualization of society as characterized by the struggle for social power" in constituencies of difference based on gender, race, class, and age; (3) the subject is theorized as "a sociocultural construction" that is always open to change, always being reconstructed; (4) all acts of communication, including reading processes, are social practices; reading is a "process of negotiation"; (5) ideology is a central concept, modified from the Marxist sense (175-77). This modification results in a "neutral conception" of ideology as a "social cement, binding the members of a society together by providing them with collectively shared values and norms" (Thompson qtd in Watkins 177).

Reading *Night Kites*

An Introduction to the Novel

Difference

The metaphor of its title announces the subject of M. E. Kerr's novel *Night Kites*: difference. The novel interweaves story strands that deal with peer group relationships (young romance), the struggle for personal identity, and a family in crisis. The thread that ties the whole novel together is AIDS and the ways in which difference conditions response to the deadly killer. The central conflict revolves around characters who want to construct and inhabit a world of ease and who find themselves confronting dis-ease.

Kerr explores difference as it is created out of sexual orientation in the figure of Peter Rudd, a twenty-seven-year gay man dying with AIDS. His father is the epitome of the patriarchal family head who lives in a world where heterosexuality is the norm, "the way it is supposed to be." Peter's mother is the complement to her husband in her hatred of the disease, but both of them try to deal with this knowledge that threatens to destroy the world that they have made. Erick, the central figure in the novel, undergoes a crisis in identity that parallels his brother's crisis, and he learns what it is to be a loner, different, outside the mainstream of his peer group.

Night Kites also investigates difference created out of disparities in economic and social class. Erick's family lives in Seaville, New York, and belongs to The

Hadefield Club. They are well-to-do, the result of both his mother's wealth and his father's position on Wall Street, although his father constantly reminds the family that he has come from poorer roots. Family tension and conflict emerge from this marital situation and also from Peter's failure to complete an advanced education and secure a position that his father can be proud of. Peter is a writer of science fiction stories, and his father does not value this kind of work because it offers no status or financial security.

Another example of class difference arises from the juxtaposition of Erick's lifestyle and the lifestyle of Nicki Marr, a girl with whom he has a romantic encounter, a girl who is on the margins and who contrasts sharply with Erick's former girlfriend, the quiet and traditional Dill. The class conflict which the Erick/Nicki relationship explores is between a world view based on the Rudds' conservatism and materialism and an opposite world view based on Nicki's spiritualism and mysticism. Erick's father is the opposite of Nicki's father Cap, who enjoys a flagrant, nontraditional lifestyle in his bar and motel, The Kingdom by the Sea, a world constructed out of the images of Edgar Allan Poe's poem "Annabel Lee."

Erick's best friend Jack appears throughout the novel, and their friendship is jeopardized by Erick's romantic entanglement with Nicki, who, at the beginning of the novel, is Jack's girlfriend. Although it never becomes a class issue, Jack is the son of a local electrician in contrast to Erick's father's prestigious position.

Another group of characters who represent difference play a smaller role in the novel; these are Peter's gay friends who enter and exit the novel, usually in support of him in his illness, but also anxious to move on and construct other worlds for themselves. These characters include Jim Stanley, Pete's most recent serious relationship. Within the group of characters who have homosexual orientations, Kerr includes Charlie Gilhooley, a stereotypical "fairy" who often frequents Nicki's father's bar and motel, gets drunk, and is typically beaten up by "straight" men.

These characters all play roles in the three major story strands of the novel: the ways in which the family copes with Pete's gay lifestyle and AIDS; the knowledge that Erick gains about his brother and about himself as he tries to handle Pete's illness and certain death; the romantic involvement of Erick and Nicki with the attendant damage to Erick's friendship with Dill and Jack. Other stories are threaded throughout these major ones: Nicki's glamorous image of herself and her involvement with strong macho types; Peter's gay lifestyle; Peter's fascination with Star Trek and his career as a science fiction writer"; Peter's high school years when he dated Belle Michelle, a girl in a wheelchair; a trip that Erick, Dill, Jack and Nicki engineer to New York to see a Bruce Springsteen concert and spend the night together in Peter's apartment. I shall not trace the weave of these narrative strands in *Night Kites*, but I shall work out of the tensions and resolutions that inform them.

The Title and the Metaphor

Kerr frames her novel with references to night kites as signs of difference. Erick is the narrator of the novel, and he explains the meaning of the phrase by telling a story that happened twelve years ago when he was five and Peter was fifteen. Pete made him a diamond-shaped kite and equipped it with small lights so he could fly it at night although, as he explains, most kites fly during the day. When Erick expresses his concern that the kite might be scared of the dark, his brother explains that such kites "are different," that they "go up alone, on their own." He makes the analogy between kites and people, a little lesson lost on his five-year-old brother but learned years later in the AIDS crisis: Night kites are "not afraid to be different. Some people are different, too" (12). Later the image returns when Erick asks his brother if he is a night kite or a day kite, to which Pete replies "Oh, I'm a night kite." Erick distinguishes his difference from his brother in the kite image: "I figured myself for the regular day kind" (16). In a dinner scene at the end of the novel when Pete's gay friend Jim Stanley is having dinner with them, Erick remembers the sight of the kite "that took off in the darkness, blinking out over the ocean, its phosphorescent tail glowing under the stars" (209). At this point in the novel the night kite comes to signify not only Peter's sexual difference, but perhaps it also foreshadows his death as his free spirit floats high into the air.

A Cultural Studies Perspective

The Social Construction of Meaning

Erick's father tries to construct the world in which he wants himself and his family to live. It is a world in which Erick realizes "how badly Dad always wanted to fit in," a world where "Dad always says our family is first" (15). Dad works to create the perfect family which will never experience the trauma of divorce, for example. Erick thinks, "I liked the feeling nothing like that would ever happen to us." Dad constructs a patriarchal world in which he instructs his sons: "'You boys sow a lot of wild oats before you marry . . . because Rudds marry forever!'" (16). The boys register the difference in their parents: "Count on Mom's heart. Count on Dad's head" (16). This is the familiar split between the power of male reason and the tenderness of female feeling. In his instructions to the boys their father perpetuates the sexual stereotype of the male free to experiment sexually before he marries the chaste virgin who will provide him with children and with whom he will live happily ever after—because he ordains it.

Another way that Dad attempts to construct meaning in his family's life is in his prescription for success in the world. In a conversation in which Erick challenges Mr. Rudd's disdain for Pete's writing and reminds him that he refused to support Pete through the completion of a Ph.D. program, he explains his world view about how a man makes it: "I paid for my own M.B.A. I took any part-time work I could get." Erick is familiar with his father's philosophy: "Pete and I called this rap Rap #2, the

Pull Yourself Up by Your Own Bootstraps rap, twin to Rap #3, the Learn the Value of a Dollar rap. Rap #1 was "The Family Is First" (40). In cultural studies terms, what Mr. Rudd is espousing here is the philosophy that you can construct your own world, that it is not out there waiting for you, preexistent and preordained. This philosophy, of course, is part of the American Dream and represents Dad's dominant American ideology.

When Dad learns that Pete has AIDS, he sees the disease as a threat to the world that he has carefully constructed; and so his major efforts are subsequently devoted to protecting that world. The principal tactic is silence and secrecy, as he tells Erick: "You're not to talk about this with Jack, or Dill, or that other one. You're not to discuss this with anyone! Is that clear?" Erick notices that "it took him a long time to say. 'AIDS I think you know what AIDS is?'" (87). Not naming something is a way of denying its existence. AIDS has the power to destroy Dad's conception of himself, his family, and his world, and he is hesitant to name it.

He is not alone in his perspective, however. Erick's mother also constructs an ideal world in which she refers to the family as "the Waltons, or the Lawrences on Family" (93). Both television families, the Waltons and the Lawrences, exhibit qualities that Mom wants her family to have. The Waltons exhibited virtues of a struggling farm family while the Lawrences were a solidly upper middle class urban family. Both families were always, in every episode, able to survive the most trying situations. Pete recalls that The Waltons, for example, were able to wrap up "every

problem from adultery to abortion in sixty minutes flat, with time out for commercials" (93). But neither family had to deal with AIDS. And they were only constructions of language, people scripted into being. From the perspective of cultural studies, these television programs are intertexts through which we can investigate images of the American family.

Mom is as secretive about Peter's illness as his father is, and when she instructs Erick to read a pamphlet about AIDS that is distributed by Gay Inquiry, she tells him to hide it so that the housekeeper Mrs. Tompkins will not see it. Eventually, however, Mrs. Tompkins learns that Peter has AIDS, and in her fear she serves him on disposable plates, her behavior finally resulting in her departure.

Erick's father grows more nervous as the situation worsens and part of his construction of their reality is that he wants to isolate them: "We're not going to take anyone into our confidence. Not anyone!" Typical of the way he sees the world in financial terms, he constructs an analogy of their dilemma: "Another person's secret is like another person's money: You're not so careful with it as you are your own" (133). As tension escalates in a conversation between Erick and his father and mother, Dad's belief that he can control everything emerges: "But maybe if we'd paid a little more attention to what Pete was doing when he was Erick's age, we wouldn't be in this situation" (134). What he fails to realize is that he cannot construct reality alone: Reality is a complex web of social relations in which we find ourselves but which we cannot control from some central position. We have to

negotiate meaning out of the cultural matrices that define our position in history. In this conversation Dad also makes a gender blunder when he tells his wife: "'The only way that Pete runs true to type is that he's always been a mama's boy'" (134). The problematic terms in his language are the words true and type. The first assumes that a truth exists and the second assumes that people are classifiable into simple categories. One of the lessons of poststructuralist thought is that truth in this sense is not knowable, and one of the lessons of cultural studies is that difference is enriching, not stigmatizing.

Word of Peter's illness gradually leaks out, and Erick registers frustration as his parents' quarrel: "We were coming apart at the seams" (185). What his father has experienced is the powerlessness of one individual to construct a reality outside the other cultural events in human life. Disease is also a part of human life. People do not always live up to their parents' dreams. Sexual orientation is not a matter of choice. Despite his vision of a perfect world for his family, Mr. Rudd cannot control the complexities of a mysterious disease that invades the sanctity of his carefully constructed existence.

Class Issues: Ideology, Power, and Marginalization

This site of cultural inquiry overlaps with a number of concerns in the social construction of reality, but here I want to explore one particular example of marginalization in the novel, and this is the character of Annabel Lee Marr.

Nicki's world, *The Kingdom by the Sea*, represents the diametric opposite of the upper class world of Wall Street that Erick's father inhabits. It was constructed by her mother who believed that she was a reincarnation of Edgar Allan Poe. Nicki lives in "the Dream Within a Dream suite" with its plaque which reads "All that we see or seem Is but a dream within a dream." Other rooms are named for other Poe poems, as she tells Erick on his first visit there: "'Bells, Bells, Bells is down the hall,' she said, 'and The Raven is next to that'" (137). These poems and all of Poe's work are appropriate sites for cultural exploration, as are the signs of the contemporary world that share Poe's space in the world—posters of David Lee Roth, and "U2, David Byrne, Sting, Duran, Duran, Wham!, Bruce Springsteen" (138). Nicki constructs her world from artistic cultural artifacts in contrast to the traditional conservatism of Erick's home.

The building also houses Annabel's Resale Shop, which is at the center of a tragic story in the novel—the death of Nicki's mother. This story illustrates the cultural studies' focus on relations of power between the dominant and the marginalized elements of society. *Kingdom by the Sea* is literally on the margins of Seaville, but it is also a metaphor for a world view that is outside successful mainstream America. The family's last name suggests its relationship to the more cultured people in the town: They mar them, are a blemish on the image of the perfect world of the upper class.

Dill, Erick's girlfriend, tells the story of financial misfortune in her friend Jeannie Gaelen's family which led her mother to sell some of her wardrobe to Annabel Marr: "They needed money desperately. A lot of women get money selling their clothes to Annabel's Resale Shop. They don't admit it, but I could name names'" (71-72). This is another version of Mr. Rudd's secrecy, a secrecy that preserves social position and the power that attends it. The socially prominent did not want to be seen in her shop ("It's a dead giveaway that you're hard up'" 72), so, Annabel picked up the clothes at their estates. A "sickly type," she suffered a heart attack at the Gaelens. Fearful that "it would get around that she was doing business with Mrs. Marr," Mrs. Gaelen did not call an ambulance but called Cap Marr instead. He arrived an hour later, and his wife died on the way to the hospital. She was as much the victim of an image, an economic and social construction, as she was of a heart condition.

Another example of relations of power occurs in terms of The Hadeffield Club. The family minister, Reverend Shorr, has resigned from the Club because it discriminates against "everyone but rich WASPS" and because it will not even allow Jews to visit the Club in the company of members. Pete and Mr. Rudd argue about the Club and why Shorr has resigned. Rudd complains that Shorr has made an issue of some of the Club's traditions, to which Pete responds, "Like the tradition of being rich, and privileged, and prejudiced?" His father constructs the situation differently: "There's nothing wrong with being rich and privileged and selective'"

(127), reminding Pete that the Club is private. Pete captures the point of his social criticism of the Club's view of the world in a shirt he gives to his father, a gift that makes Mr. Rudd really angry. The back of the shirt reads

WHOEVER HAS THE MOST THINGS

WHEN HE DIES, WINS. (128)

This message is coded in terms of power relations in the culture. First, "HAS THE MOST THINGS" indicts the materialism of the wealthy. Second, "HE" identifies the source of power in patriarchy. Third, "WINS" inscribes the ideology of the survival and dominance of the fittest. Life is constructed in this sentence as a good-ole-boys game in which the only thing that matters is who wins.

Mr. Rudd's position as the dominant figure in his world is explored elsewhere in the novel. Once when Jim Stanley is visiting in Seville and they discuss Erick's interest in attending film school, they anticipate his father's reaction. Pete doubts that his father will approve of this idea, and Jim Stanley responds, "'Ah, yes . . . there's Himself to contend with,'" his contend suggesting the power struggle between competing world views. When his mother tells them that Mr. Rudd is "'always open to suggestions,'" Pete reinforces the image of dominance with "'Just like the Pope is'" (158) aligning his father with the omnipotence of religious hierarchy. Although his remark may be in jest, it is an appropriate manifestation of the control and power that we see Mr. Rudd try to wield in *Night Kites*.

In contrast to the world of power that his father has constructed and in which he lives, Pete has constructed an alternate world in his short story "On the Skids," which is the subject of a number of conversations in the novel, mostly conversations in which Peter's father reminds him that he has failed to develop the story or produce anything else of equal or superior worth. "On the Skids" is a story in which sexual difference does not marginalize its characters. The story has appeared in *Fantasy* magazine. Peter enjoys writing science fiction, and he is a loyal fan of *Star Trek*. These are perhaps both indications of his desire to exist outside the restrictions of the "real" world in which he lacks the power to construct himself as he wishes.

"On the Skids" takes place in the world of Farfire where the Farflicks live; they are distinguished by their ability to self-fertilize. Almost all of the inhabitants are androgynous, "both male and female except these characters called Skids" who are either male or female and who need each other in order to reproduce. The conflict revolves around two Skids who fall in love and are being hunted because they have made love, or skidded, which is against the law. In his story Pete constructs a world that reverses the world as he knows it. It is a construction of his sexual world view in which he feels that he has been punished because he is sexually different. In his story heterosexuality, not homosexuality, is an aberration, and to engage in heterosexual intercourse is to break the law of the culture.

The Social Construction of Self

The character who changes in the novel is Erick, and the change occurs because he has to deal with the effects of being located in two worlds. Both are worlds that define themselves by difference. The first is the world of class difference represented by the contrast in his father's conservative, traditional upper class world and Nicki's flamboyant imaginary, nontraditional world. The second is the world of sexual difference represented by the contrast between homosexuality and heterosexuality.

When he becomes Nicki's boyfriend, Erick begins to separate himself from his peer group at school. Aside from her mother's Kingdom by the Sea, Nicki constructs herself in the novel by the clothes she wears. They may be read semiotically as signs of her difference. For example, when she agrees, against her wishes, to accompany Erick to his ring dance, she dresses exotically, constructing herself in the image of the popular culture icon Madonna:

She was wearing the dalmation-dotted stockings with black high heels, some kind of black off-the shoulder corset dress, with beads and crosses and chains, her crucifix earrings in her right ear, and black lace fingerless gloves. She had on the rhinestone ankle bracelet, and over her shoulder the jacket with the traffic accident on the back. (185)

Despite the novelty of her appearance, Nicki is a static character in the novel. She moves in and out of cultural systems, but she does not change.

Erick is the character who most registers the constructions of reality going on around him and who changes in response to them. For example, at the Springsteen concert, he thinks, "there was something lacking in me, that I ought to change. I

couldn't seem to leave myself behind, even for Springsteen" (77). After he breaks up with Dill and becomes an item with Nicki, he senses the differences in himself, the wild fluctuations: "So it was back and forth, and I was down so low sometimes I felt like a complete stranger to myself, then *up*, soaring, lost somewhere with her, too high to care about the rest of it" (151). As he loses contact with the comfortable world he has inhabited with his school friends, he begins to connect to Pete: "I was getting a small taste of that, living in my own private little world" (176-77). His new sexual experiences with Nicki continue to isolate him until he feels that there is "just Nicki and me in our own cocoon" (183). The cocoon is a symbol of Erick's impending metamorphosis as a consequence of his experiences in worlds of difference. When Nicki breaks off their relationship, he senses that "finally I was completely on my own" (215). In terms of the notion of the social construction of identity, this awareness means that he can locate himself in the world, and that while he will be constructed by the forces that swirl around him, he also has some power to become a person of his own design.

The Social Construction of AIDS

Night Kites appeared in 1985 and was one of the first young adult novels to address the issue of AIDS. Kerr subtly works details about the disease into her story, its symptoms, for example: amoebic dysentery (26), diarrhea (33), swollen lymph

nodes and purple bruises (98), and Kaposi sarcoma lesions (129, 175). In addition, she mentions the legal ramifications of AIDS as we learn that Pete's AIDS has caused tensions at his job and that although he could not legally be fired from the job, he has negotiated medical benefits and taken a leave of absence in return for leaving the job immediately (155). We also learn about the social stigma associated with the disease as Pete tells us that he has told a "friend" who lives near him about his illness and she has subsequently circulated a petition to get him out of his apartment. He feels, he says, "a little like a leper" (155-56). The misinformation about the ways in which AIDS can be transmitted appears in the novel in Nicki's response to Erick's silence about the disease and his swimming in the pool at the Kingdom by the Sea: "Daddy doesn't want you here," she tells him. "He says you never should have gone in the pool with something like that in your family'" (205).

More than the details of the disease and the social stigmatization, Kerr's novel describes the silences that attend the disease, most notably illustrated in Mr. Rudd's pact of loyalty and silence within his family. Following Catherine Belsey's project of extending the boundaries of the text, I want to explore the ways in which American culture contemporary with the publication of *Night Kites* was constructing the disease in its language practices.

Crossing the Borders of *Night Kites*

Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.

Susan Sontag
"Illness as Metaphor"

The epigraph is the opening paragraph of Susan Sontag's essay in which she describes her struggle with cancer, her passing from the kingdom of the well to the kingdom of the ill. Her metaphor of the night-side of life recalls Erick's memory of his brother's lesson on night kites and what it means to be different. Her kingdoms remind me of the two "kingdoms" of *Night Kites*: the literal and metaphorical Kingdom by the Sea and the "kingdom" ruled by Mr. Rudd, its perfection preserved by social status, economic security, and the image of propriety. Sontag's language turns Kerr's novel into a passport with which we travel into the land of the sick. Her essays on illness and AIDS are the first interdisciplinary and intertextual border crossings that I make in my cultural studies approach to *Night Kites*.

AIDS Metaphors

Sontag traces the "dual metaphoric genealogy" ("AIDS" 105) of AIDS. A military metaphor of invasion has developed to describe the contraction of the disease

while a pollution metaphor of plague has also developed to describe the transmission of the disease.

Military

In an example of the military metaphor, which she quotes from an article in the June 7, 1988 *New York Times*, the virus is a tiny "invader," a "foreigner," whose presence in the body is sensed by "scouts," cells of the body's immune system. These scouts "alert" the system which "mobilizes" antidotes to "defend" against the threat of invasion. This metaphor, Sontag suggests, is made of "the language of political paranoia, with its characteristic distrust of a pluralistic world" (106). In *Night Kites* this metaphor of invasion can be extended beyond the body as a representation of the way that Mr. Rudd seems to understand the effect of AIDS on his family and the body politic of his world. AIDS invades his carefully constructed social reality, and he sets out to mobilize his family against the invader. His weapon: silence.

Another version of the military metaphor that Sontag discusses connects directly to Peter and his interests in science fiction. Peter is a Star Wars fan, a Trekkie, and Sontag develops the AIDS metaphor in terms of images related to this popular television show and film series. Quoting from a *Time* magazine article that appeared in late 1986, she observes that AIDS is "an ideally comprehensible illness" when the infection is described as "high tech warfare": The virus drops into a "receptor," "docking" like an "alien" on the cell's surface where it produces more AIDS viruses

("alien products") in the "cellular machinery" (106-07). This is the mechanistic world of high technology, a technology, ironically, that on its medical fronts has been unable to find a cure for AIDS.

In a very different kind of intertext, Paul Monette also uses the military metaphor to describe what happens when a person fears that he might have AIDS. *In Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir* (1988) Monette, a gay writer, chronicles the death of his best friend and companion from AIDS. His shifting imagery mirrors the changing impact of the disease on him. "It comes like a slowly dawning horror," he writes, and "At first you are equipped with a hundred different amulets to keep it far away." His word amulet captures that first unreality of AIDS, an unreality that might be warded off with a magic charm. Then, however, when someone near you is hospitalized with the disease, your attitude changes, and Monette changes his metaphor appropriately: "suddenly you are at high noon in full battle gear." His military metaphor extends Sontag's: When the invader comes, the invaded fight back. It is not a fair war: "They have neglected to tell you that you will be issued no weapons of any sort." What you do, then, is to "cobble together a weapon out of anything that lies at hand." Monette's weapon is literal; you fashion it "like a prisoner honing a spoon handle into a stiletto" (qtd in Maasik 662). Peter in *Night Kites* has something else "at hand"; he fights with language and storytelling, and he is passive in contrast to Monette's aggressive "You fight tough, you fight dirty, but you cannot fight dirtier than it" (662). Peter fights by writing a story of acceptance, a

story that appears only in fragmentary form in the novel. Entitled "The Sweet Perfume of Goodbye," it's about a utopian world without murder or illness, and without fragrance, except an "exquisite perfume" associated with death. Death is not a catastrophic event, but "the great change" (175-76) that comes randomly to the inhabitants of this world. The perfume appears one year before a death and one year afterwards. Pete's perfume is a metaphor for appreciating life and death, and it is, I think, a wish that his own life may not ruin the world of his family, that he will leave behind a sweet memory in the delicate fragrance of death. At the end of the novel he is at work on the story, and he tells Erick, "I am bound to change" (216).

Plague

In *Night Kites*, Peter tells Erick, "I'm a little like a leper" (156), locating himself in the context of world history. In developing her plague metaphor, Sontag traces diseases through history. She discusses leprosy as plague (1050- 1350) as well as syphilis (the end of the fifteenth century). She notes that writers such as Erasmus (1529) described the repulsiveness of syphilis. She also discusses Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), written as if its narrator were an eyewitness, in 1665, to the bubonic plague in London. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842) is based on a ball held during the 1832 cholera epidemic in Paris (132-42). The story becomes a metaphor in which one of its most pervasive symbols, the clock,

strikes the death knell for all who attend the ball. Both the Defoe and Poe texts may serve as intertexts for Kerr's contemporary story.

AIDS: Other Intertexts

Stigma

Michael Quam offers an anthropological intertext for AIDS. He defines stigma in two ways: first, in its origin in Greek where it means "bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier," and second, in its contemporary usage, where it refers "more to the disgrace itself than to the bodily evidence of it" (Goffman qtd in Quam 679). Both meanings of stigma apply to Peter in *Night Kites*. His body literally bears his stigma in the purple bruise under his arm and the Kaposi sarcoma lesions on his legs and feet. His father feels the disgrace of these stigmata more than Peter does. Quam tells us that the "extreme stigmatization of AIDS derives in part from its associations with deviant behaviors" (680). Throughout the novel Mr. Rudd casts himself as the figure of "normal" behavior; Peter tells us, "Dad can't stand the word 'gay'" (90), and he encourages Erick to "Say AIDS Mom and Dad are calling it a thing, a bug, everything but AIDS" (98). The point is clear: They refuse to name it because of the blemish that it places on their perfect world. Peter's deviation from the social norm threatens Mr. Rudd, threatens what Quam calls "social security and personal identity" (686).

Pink Triangle

In *Night Kites*, Nicki Marr mentions a logo that has become a symbol of gay activism when she is talking about one of her favorite rock groups, Bronski Beat: "They're this Scottish trio who're gay. They all wear pink triangles like the ones homosexuals were forced to wear by the Nazis" (153). Her reference to the pink triangle extends the boundaries of Kerr's text into the field of political activism, especially the work of the group ACT NOW, the AIDS Coalition to Network, Organize, and Win. Their major target is the United States government as the "central culprit in our problems" (Crimp and Rolston 708). Douglas Crimp is the editor of *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, and Rolston is a conceptual artist interested in the demographics of AIDS and the popular culture. Their explanation of how the pink triangle came to be a symbol for AIDS activism illuminates the single reference to it in Kerr's novel.

The logo of AIDS activists is the equation SILENCE = DEATH printed in white underneath a pink triangle, all of this set against a black background. Nicki's reference to the Nazis is part of the historical knowledge that is necessary to understand the logos. The pink triangle, turned upside down, stigmatized gay men in Nazi concentration camps. The gay movement appropriated the triangle as a symbol of oppression, but they reversed its direction to symbolize that the silence surrounding AIDS must be broken. Silence is Mr. Rudd's principal weapon, but ironically, he thinks that silence will keep his image alive, that the knowledge of Peter's AIDS will

destroy his position in the world. Crimp and Rolston contend that the logo is so striking that it demands the inquiry, "What does that mean?" The answers to that question, they contend, will open up the borders between those who are "normal" and those who are marked by difference.

Silence

The political dimension of silence about AIDS in the United States is explored thoroughly by Rangy Shilts in his triumph of journalistic reporting, *And the Band Played On*. He indicts the Reagan administration and its budgetary practices for refusing to adequately fund AIDS research as the number of deaths mounted steadily across the nation. This book is not fiction, Shilts says. His carefully designed structure juxtaposes times, dates, and places all over the world as the virus was discovered and spread to epidemic proportions. Both Shilts' book and the film that resulted from it make splendid intertexts for the theme of silence in *Night Kites*. Mr. Rudd represents the politically and financially well-placed class of people who made the decisions that affected the health of a nation as disease invaded its borders and killed its citizens. Another film, *Philadelphia*, also makes a poignant intertext for the novel because it deals with the dramatic changes that occurred in the life of a promising young lawyer who contracted AIDS. The story of how he lost his job recalls Peter's story of his own job loss and the loss of his apartment. In *Philadelphia*, the young lawyer fights the system; and in his last days, he beats it.

The Academy Award winning title song and the music video of it are also powerful intertexts for several reasons. First, the singer is Bruce Springsteen, the star that Erick, Jack, Nicki, and Dill go to hear in a New York concert. Second, the song lyric and the music video introduce new texts to read, texts which can be approached from learned strategies that investigate nonliterary texts and that help to dissolve the boundaries of the novel, as do the films.

Given these rich textual worlds in which to explore *Night Kites*, I conclude with a definition of social reality that redefines the term narrative and leaves open many more worlds to explore: "Social reality is a vast network of narratives that we use to make sense of experience, to understand the present, the past, and the future" (Watkins 183). We are, in short, entangled in more threads than we know, but from them we weave the fabric of ourselves. We, too, are texts, written and rewritten.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Gates' Prism: Shining the Light Through *Jacob Have I Loved*

Literary theory functioned in my education as a prism, which I could turn to refract different spectral patterns of language use in a text, as one does daylight. Turn the prism this way, and one pattern emerges; turn it that way, and another pattern configures.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
Figures in Black

Literary Theory and English Education

In this chapter I am interested in how literary theory functions in our lifelong education as teachers and in the ways we teach our students. What is its relationship to how we teach ways of reading? "Ways of reading" is not an innocent phrase when we consider the reading strategies we learn from the complex theories that I have presented in previous chapters. Now it implicates more than the words on the page; it implicates us in the intertextualities of the world. I want to explore how we help our students become better readers through our understanding and application of literary theory.

In his discussion of theorizing texts in *Becoming A Reader: The Experience of Fiction from Childhood to Adulthood*, J. A. Appleyard offers an intriguing sentence

from which I begin my inquiry. "It is remarkable," he says, "how uninterested in theory many professional students and teachers are" (146). He uses the word syncretists to describe this "uninterested" lot, and includes "most of us" in it. To syncretize means "to attempt to unite and harmonize, especially without critical examination or logical unity" (*Webster's* 1197). To call most of us syncretists, then, seems blasphemous, but I know what Appleyard is talking about in relation to literary theory. He explains that as we respond to texts we rely on our intuition, the kinds of training we have had in ways of reading, our particular interests, and our tastes (146). I agree that this is the usual state of things, but I believe that theory can help us examine our critical practice and change the ways we teach literature.

Theoretical Eclecticism

Appleyard says that after we have developed a repertoire (my term) of analytical strategies, we are not much interested in "explicating the theories behind what we read," since we are comfortable operating out of a "rich eclecticism" that suits our needs. I like his word eclecticism, but he warns that this eclectic approach might get us in trouble, might result in the perpetuation of "unexamined ideologies" that could "victimize" (146) both us and our students. I agree. I want to show that an eclecticism that includes theory will enable us to avoid such victimization. For example, cultural studies can make us and our students more aware of the ideological

structures which often attempt to create and control our world view. Our awareness may free us to construct ourselves and meaning in our world differently.

To clarify the extreme positions that theorized and untheorized readings might represent, Appleyard suggests the range of possibilities within each approach. Eclectic readings might range from the "misguided and quirky" to those that are "full of brilliant insights," most of us probably content to designate our interpretations with the latter phrase. Theorized readings may be "sterile and reductive or powerfully suggestive"; again, the latter phrase seems most attractive. Appleyard is not sure what causes these distinctly different approaches, and he wonders if it is a matter of personal choice on the one hand or a matter of the way that we have systematically studied literature on the other (147). No easy answers present themselves, but I am reminded of David Richter's analysis of the way we fall into theory. He contends that we constantly theorize in the decisions we make in everyday life, so that theorizing is not something out there, something foreign to us, or even a fundamentally new enterprise (*Falling* 8). What is foreign, of course, are the systems of theorizing which I have presented in this book. Their scope, their language, their instabilities have made them so challenging that it is little wonder that Appleyard is able to describe the "uninterested" who elect not to engage them. I contend that we must engage them because they offer so much to our teaching and to the ways we can invite our students to look at texts and the world.

Learning to Theorize

To consciously theorize or not to consciously theorize? That is the critical question. Perhaps there is no choice, as Appleyard suggests in his "cautious conclusion" that we are "driven to theory sooner or later" (147). I like Richter's idea of falling into theory better, since the word driven suggests either some prodding, perhaps painful, from an outside source or some compulsion or urgency that I do not want to contemplate. Now that I reflect on it in light of these two terms, I might describe my own entry into theory, the subject of Chapter 1, as a rather long, gradual slide.

Appleyard has an intriguing explanation for the process through which we come to theory, and he develops it in conjunction with M. H. Abram's schema for criticism with which I opened my discussion of theory in Chapter 2. At that point I was primarily interested in establishing some notions out of which I could proceed in working with theory. Consequently, I focused on the way that Abrams placed the components of critical inquiry into play with one another. Appleyard reads the schema from a different perspective, one that helps me now as I turn my attention to the relationship between critical theory and teaching.

Appleyard's book investigates becoming a reader and learning to interpret texts within the context of the reader's psychological development. He links Abram's design (Figure 1) to the maturation of the reader, to whom he refers as an "apprentice literary critic" (148). This designation reminds me of the work of Glenna Davis

Sloan in *The Child as Critic: Teaching Literature in Elementary and Middle Schools*.

Theory, she contends, should be a critical component in the early development of reading skills (35). She structures her theories and her teaching strategies, by the way, on Northrop Frye's archetypal approach in *Anatomy of Criticism*. Her book is filled with provocative diagrams and charts; it is an excellent introduction to Frye's ideas.

Most of us will agree with Appleyard's description of how we become readers. He reads Abram's diagram clockwise, starting with the world. In childhood our responses to books are spontaneous, mostly reactions to the pleasure of story. When we move into adolescence, however, we begin to investigate the world in the text. In moving around the diagram, Appleyard explains that in adolescence we construct the world from our perspective as a reader, seeing it as a representation of experience or of a world we might wish to inhabit. We are not, of course, aware that we are theorizing the text. As we become more sophisticated readers, we move beyond the world and ourselves as readers to focus on the author who created the text and the point of view from which the textual world is presented to us. In our evolution, we finally engage the language of the text specifically (147).

This more sophisticated reading, Appleyard says, focuses on what is beyond the text—the sign systems, language structures, and ideologies that surround the text. He contends that Abram's diagram does not go this far. I understand that he is referring to the historical context of the diagram which Abram's presented in *The Mirror and*

the Lamp in 1953. On the other hand, I believe that the diagram can accurately express, in its simplicity, the complexities of the contemporary text. We need only to extend the definition of text, as contemporary theorists have done, to include all of its intertextualities and interdisciplinarity. The text, then, becomes a more open structure, subject to inquiry in new and different ways; teaching students to become readers involves helping them locate themselves in relation to such complex textualities.

In his analysis of interpretation, Appleyard concludes that "the project of studying literature" may have gone far beyond practical and eclectic approaches to a "kind of reading whose object is the reconstruction of a self and a vision of a world adequate to the totality of one's lived experience" (152). He offers an exciting prospect to me. The concepts of the social construction of meaning and self, which I explored particularly in the chapters on poststructuralism and cultural studies, help us see the world as a place where we dwell in possibilities, where we are made and remade, where we write and rewrite ourselves. As English teachers, according to Berlin and Vivion in their cultural studies work, we are cultural workers in such a world rather than the passive receptacles of the received wisdom of the ages which we transmit to our waiting students in the sanctity of our classrooms.

My aim in this chapter is to dwell as an English teacher in the possibilities of a theoretical eclecticism which elaborates Appleyard's vision and which emerges from the investigation and application of a wide range of literary theories and the reading

strategies they suggest. I want to begin at the very point where Appleyard suggests that the "project of studying literature" has gone beyond the practical and the eclectic and to demonstrate the power of a continued eclecticism, one informed by and not resistant to theory.

The Prism of Theory

Such an eclecticism perceives literary theory, to use Gates's metaphor for his own education, as a prism through which light shines on the text and illuminates it. To elaborate the metaphor, various beams of light will not illuminate each text in the same way. That is, readers read differently and consequently construct different readings, even though they practice the same theory. Light refracts through the prism as a consequence of many factors, including the quality of the light and the setting in which it shines. In other words, the light that illuminates a text is the individual consciousness with all its attendant powers and limitations. We "eye" the text as a function of the "I" we are. These ways of seeing are the necessary constituencies of our ways of reading. And, from yet another refractory angle, we are reminded by Jonathan Culler that "the view that competing discourses are methods of interpretation or ways of approaching literary works takes each as a partial vision, more appropriate to some books than to others" ("Literary Theory" 225). In other words, we cannot turn our prism to include all theories, to refract all lights through one spot. The very nature of a prism is that it must be handled and turned, or we miss its brilliance. In

the sparkle of light, then, there is no single complete vision of a text, no one correct reading of it.

I want to suggest that the prism of theory becomes a brilliant jewel in the English classroom because of the colors it casts on the study of literature. I want to suggest that it can be handled and turned by students and teachers alike. And I want to demonstrate how to do this with my reading of Katherine Paterson's *Jacob Have I Loved*. Another way of explaining the way the light shines through the prism of theory is to say that it illuminates the text in multiple ways. Practically speaking, this means that we find multiple meanings in a text and that we discover multiple readings. In my approach to the novel, I will move through it in roughly chronological order, turning the prism so that you can see how different moments in the novel open themselves up to different illuminations. Here I turn the prism this way to explore the biblical archetype that governs the whole novel. There I turn it another way, shining a feminist light on the emerging character of Sara Louise Bradshaw. Or, another time, I look at the events of the novel through the lens of history, focusing my beam on the island world of the novel through cultural studies. In this way I demonstrate the overlap of theories when we apply them to texts. Having explained these theories in detail in the preceding chapters, I keep my theoretical language to a minimum here.

Reading *Jacob Have I Loved* from Multiple Perspectives

Jacob Have I Loved begins in 1941, in an isolated fishing village on Rass, an island located in the Chesapeake Bay. There, Sara Louise Bradshaw and her twin sister Caroline live with their parents, Truitt and Susan Bradshaw, and with their aging and senile grandmother. Except for McCall (Call) Purnell, Sara Louise's childhood playmate who eventually marries Caroline, the other significant characters in the novel are older inhabitants of the island. Hiram Wallace is a former resident who comes back to live on the island and restore his family's home. Trudy Braxton, another aging character, eventually marries Hiram, and her money helps Caroline realize her musical ambitions through eventually attending the Julliard School in New York.

The novel focuses on the rivalry between Sara Louise and Caroline, but it is centered on Sara Louise's struggle to achieve an identity. Caroline is beautiful, talented, and feminine. In contrast, Sara Louise feels unattractive, and she prefers men's work to her sister's musical endeavors. Against the backdrop of a real war, Paterson plays out the psychological warfare of the sisters' difference.

The novel begins when the girls are thirteen and follows them into adulthood, although most of the action occurs in the painful years of adolescent uncertainty. The plot of the novel is uncomplicated. When Hiram Wallace returns to the island, Sara Louise and Call befriend him, but Hiram marries Trudy, and they lose the

connection. As they grow up, Call joins the navy and leaves. Trudy dies, and Hiram sends Caroline to Baltimore with part of the money Trudy has left him. Finding herself alone, Sara Louise quits school to work with her father where, for the first time in her life, she feels that she has found something meaningful.

When Call returns from the navy, he and Caroline marry. Having obtained a high school diploma, Sara Louise decides to leave the island and study to become a doctor; however, returning veterans clamoring to get in medical school take up all the available openings. She becomes a nurse/midwife, settling in southwest Virginia, in Appalachia, where she meets and marries Joseph Wojtkiewicz, a widower with small children. Before the novel ends, her father, Hiram Wallace, and her grandmother die. Just as her mother is planning to come to live with her, Sara is finally able to put her Jacob and Esau relationship with her sister into perspective, and the novel ends.

Archetype I: Isaac's Sons

Paterson transforms the Genesis story of sibling rivalry between Jacob and Esau, twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah (Genesis 25:19-35:29). As the basis for her plot, she uses the outline of the ancient story, part of the family saga of the patriarch Jacob. The archetypal pattern of sibling rivalry in that story begins before the sons are born: Rebekah feels the twins struggling in her womb. When Esau is born first, Jacob is holding onto his foot, a sign of future strife. By right of first birth, Esau can claim

headship of Isaac's clan, but when the twins reach manhood, Jacob twice tricks his brother and succeeds in stealing away his birthright. In a second scheme, aided by his mother who favors him, Jacob secures his father's blessing and becomes lord over all his brothers. The passing of the birthright is an act that cannot be reversed. Esau is so filled with rage that Jacob, fearing for his life, flees. Years later, the brothers reconcile, each having become the head of a large and prosperous family.

In Paterson's transformation of the ancient text, the sons are replaced by the twin daughters: Sara Louise is Paterson's Esau, Caroline her Jacob. The central conflict of the novel is symbolized in a story, often told in the family, of the twins' births. Sara, first born and strong, receives little attention while Caroline, who almost dies at birth, is lovingly cared for by her mother. From this story Sara carries around an image of herself as a rejected child, the other, stronger twin, "washed and dressed and lying in a basket. Clean and cold and motherless" (*Jacob* 19). Throughout the novel Sara Louise deals with this sense of isolation, eventually believing that she hates her mother for favoring her twin. For all of her young life, Sara Louise lives in the shadow of Caroline.

Poststructural Intertextualities

Textual criticism accounts for situations in which authors like Paterson write over stories that already exist: "Whoever writes enters a discourse that was in progress before the production of his or her own text"; recent theory demonstrates "to an

unprecedented extent how new texts are in fact made out of old ones" (Scholes 104).

This archetypal story is one of a number of intertexts in Paterson's novel.

Paterson weaves her text out of many biblical story strands, so the novel abounds with biblical allusions: Cain and Abel (75), David, Moses, Paul (76), the Ten Commandments (86-87) Jesus at Galilee (121), Pharoah and Joseph (129), Jeremiah (190), and Armageddon (199). Paterson constructs a world view in the Bradshaws' Methodist household that is based on Biblical laws; the sin of breaking these laws is accompanied by guilt from which the sinner may escape through redemption. The novel chronicles how Sara Louise constructs her identity as she deals with the "sin" of hating her sister and the subsequent guilt that hangs over her existence.

Poststructural Feminism

Young Sara Louise works hard to construct her own identity on the island. A poststructural reading addresses such a construction, analyzing "how social and public systems of meaning constitute individual identity." Gender is a key issue in Sara's self-construction: "Poststructuralist feminists have theorized gender roles as performances, improvisations within a culturally defined system of gender-specific signs" (McLaughlin 264). At thirteen and suffering from the comparison to Caroline, Sara Louise tries to construct herself as her father's son: "He needed a son and I would have given anything to be that son, but on Rass in those days, men's work and women's work was sharply divided, and a waterman's boat was no place for a girl"

(*Jacob* 21). The roles appropriate to women are clearly defined on the island: "The women of my island were not supposed to love the water. Water was the wild untamed kingdom of our men" (43). Sara's image of the kingdom of men reminds me of Maggie Humm's feminist fairy tale with which I introduce Chapter 7. Sara Louise clarifies how this world marginalizes women:

And though water was the element in which our tiny island lived and moved and had its being, the women resisted its power over their lives as a wife might pretend to ignore the existence of her husband's mistress. (43)

The language of "lived and moved and had its being" writes over a familiar biblical phrase, and the attitude that the passage expresses locates women not only in opposition to men but in opposition to the natural power of the world. Their response to what is natural is resistance because they succumb to power that it is unnatural, power that is a social construction of their culture.

In understanding that "there was no future for me on Rass," Sara Louise articulates herself in terms of the social reality of the island women:

How could I face a lifetime of passive waiting? Waiting for the boats to come in of an afternoon, waiting in a crab house for the crabs to shed, waiting at home for children to be born, waiting for them to grow up, waiting at last, for the Lord to take me home. (44)

This image of women's passivity defines relations of power on the island. They act, but in terms of the needs of men. They are helpers in the crab house, producers and nurturers of heirs, keepers of the house. They wait out their existences at the mercy, finally, of the patriarchal Lord who has the power to release them from their earthly

shells. The final image of death is devastating. Some men may die heroically in the struggle against natural forces of the universe, but women waste away in the enclosures men make for them, entombed in their own housekeeping. This is, at least, how Sara Louise reads it.

One way that Paterson weaves the theme of gender and identity into her text, then, is by juxtaposing Sara Louise and two images of femininity: the glamorous Caroline and the dutiful spouse. Paterson also sets her beside Call Purnell, whose maturation defines another identity option for Sara. Eventually Call drops out of school to work with Sara's father on the water, but when Caroline befriends Call, he and Sara grow apart. Sara is jealous as he matures physically, loses his childhood pudginess, grows taller and thinner, his hands "turning more and more into the rough brown bark of a waterman's":

You could sense his pride that he had come at last into a man's estate, the sole support of the women whom he had until now depended. I knew we had been growing apart since summer, but I had been able to blame that on Caroline. Now it was more painful, for the very things that made him stronger and more attractive were taking him deep into the world of men—a place I could never hope to enter. (172-173)

Sara's language tells the story. "Man's estate" connotes rank, social position, political power, property, and ownership. Call is admirable in his role as the "sole support" of the women who raised him. The image of his entrance into the depths of the man's world implies that women are somehow on the surface, shallow.

When Call joins the navy, Sara gains entrance into her father's world where, at fifteen, she does "what many regarded as a man's job" (185). Her image of men and women remains so dichotomized that she reads this social difference in the natural world:

Shedding its shell is a long and painful business for big Jimmy, but for a she-crab, turning into a sook, it seemed somehow worse. I'd watch them there in the float, knowing once they shed that last time and turned into grown-up lady crabs there was nothing left for them. . . . Males, I thought, always have a chance to live no matter how short their lives, but females, ordinary, ungifted ones, just get soft and die. (184)

Sara reads the predicament of all women in the life of a she-crab, and she clearly transposes herself into the imagery. She is the "ordinary, ungifted," defined in opposition to her sister's talents.

As Call's replacement and her father's helper, Sara Louise dresses in men's clothes, and her hands become rough and weathered; she participates in a symbolic gender shift as they work together: "We ate breakfast together, my mother serving us. No one said anything about my not being a man—maybe they'd forgotten" (187). The mother in the servant role emphasizes the distance between the genders.

Cultural Studies

From a cultural studies perspective, Sara's emerging identity is a function of her cultural milieu. On the island, work and religion mostly define that culture. Sara finds herself in work. Years later, telling and interpreting this story, she recalls that

these were the "happiest days of my life," when "I was, for the first time in my life, deeply content with what life was giving me" (187). She explains the source of this contentment: "It was the work that did this for me. I had never had work that sucked from me every breath, every thought, every trace of energy" (188), an echo of her earlier description of the Bay as the "all-consuming passion" of the men who followed the water (43). Now she locates herself in the politics and genealogy of men: "We tongers" stood perched on the washboards of our tiny boats "just as our fathers and grandfathers had before us"; providing for future generations she says, they "left the precious bottom virtually undisturbed to provide a bed for the oysters that would be harvested by our children's children" (189). She sees work as the defining element of existence, and she sees that the valuable work of sustaining life is men's work.

Feminist concerns are a natural component of cultural studies, and we see the overlap in Sara's description of herself at work. This is a spot in the novel where the light shining through the prism of theory refracts several colors:

A live oyster, a good one, when it hits the culling board, has a tightly closed shell. You throw away the open ones. They're dead already. I was a good oyster in those days. Not even the presence at Christmastime of a radiant, grown-up Caroline could get under my shell. (189-90)

The last image implies how she has closed herself off to her sister. She is not "open" for communication. There is also the implication that Caroline could not open her up were she even to try. One of the intriguing features of the novel is that we do not

hear much from Caroline. She is constructed for us by Sara's memory and within the context of Sara's interpretation of the world.

This image of the closed oyster shell recalls an earlier moment in the novel in which Sara recollects a childhood photograph of the young twins:

Caroline is tiny and exquisite, her blonde curls framing a face that is glowing with laughter, her arms outstretched to whoever is taking the picture. I am hunched there like a fat shadow, my eyes cut sideways toward Caroline, thumb in mouth, the pudgy hand covering most of my face. (20)

In addition to portraying their sharply different physical features, the details of the photograph contrast the psychological worlds the sisters inhabit. Caroline is open, reaching out, communicating, her face itself a picture of joy, her laughter framed in bright, golden curls. Sara's hand over her face is a way of erasing herself. Her hunched position prefigures the oyster inside its shell, and her sense of being a fat shadow denies her body, its substance and its shape. The eyes, averted from the camera, perhaps tell the most in their wish to be unseen. The word "cut" suggests the focus of her attention; even she is looking at the beautiful Caroline, and her thumb in her mouth makes the perfect foil for her sister's smile.

Archetype II: Dreams and Jacob's Sons

Paterson weaves another archetype of sibling rivalry into her narrative to indicate how Sara's dreams reflect her struggle to create an identity. In her "wildest daydreams" Sara takes a scene from the dreams of the biblical Joseph in which his

brothers and his parents bow down to him: "I tried to imagine Caroline bowing down to me. At first, of course, she laughingly refused, but then a giant hand descended from the sky and shoved her to her knees" (40). The image of laughter and the hand contrast ironically to the parallel images in the photograph. Here, however, the hand is not an instrument of erasure; it symbolizes both her wish to exercise power over Caroline and the affirmation that she cannot do so without the help of the intervening hand.

This wild daydream has its complement in her dreams at night, in those psychological manifestations that she cannot allow to exist in the daylight. Her dreams are unacceptable in her Christian world view where "to hate was the equivalent of murder" (74). She dreams often of the different ways in which Caroline might die: "the ferry had sunk with her and my mother aboard"; "the taxi had crashed and her lovely body had been consumed in the flames" (75). Since she feels that her mother has protected and favored Caroline, Sara includes her in the dreams of destruction. In the dream of the crashing car, flames symbolically consume Caroline out of existence.

In the most horrifying dream, Sara is a murderer, using the tools of her work to free herself from her sister's oppression:

I had killed her with my own hands. I had taken the heavy oak pole with which I guided my skiff. She had come to the shore, begging for a ride. In reply I had raised the pole and beat, beat, beat. In the dream her mouth made the shape of screaming, but no sound came out. The only sound of the dream was my own

laughter. I woke up laughing, a strange shuddering kind of laugh that turned at once into sobs. (75)

The imagery links this psychological state to both the photograph and to the Joseph dream. Sara unconsciously wishes to erase Caroline's laughing mouth, to distort it in pain, to put the laughter into her own mouth, to wield the ultimate power of life and death over the golden girl. She wants to be the smiting hand, and, above all, she wants to enjoy it. The dream connects her story to another form of the sibling rivalry archetype: "I'm a murderer. Like Cain" (75). Sara cannot imagine her life outside the patriarchal politics of power in the Christian myth. Even when she rages against God for having "pets" like David, Moses, and Paul, she succumbs to remorse: "My wickedness was unforgivable," and she asks God "to have mercy on me, a sinner" (76).

Cultural Studies: Feminism and Sexuality

Sara first acknowledges her sexual self in an encounter with Hiram Wallace, a man in his sixties. A storm devastates the island and completely obliterates the house that Hiram Wallace has been restoring with the help of Sara and Call. After the storm Sara goes in her boat to rescue him, and they set out to survey the damage. When she sympathetically embraces him, "an alarm" clangs inside her body: "I went hot all over, and I could hear my heart banging to be let out of my chest." Given the power of religious conservatism in the construction of reality on Rass, she interprets this feeling as sin: "I knew that anything that made a person feel the way I felt at that

moment had to be a deadly sin" (132). She attempts to handle her feelings by directing her attention elsewhere, to his hands, but this attempt fails: "Just looking at his hands was doing the same wild things to the secret places of my body that holding him had done" (133). She becomes "obsessed with his hands" (139), and she fears losing control: "I, who had always prided myself on keeping the deepest parts of me hidden from view" (136).

In the dilemma that results from this encounter, she feels completely alone. She cannot acknowledge her love to Hiram: "Oh, if only I could tell him that he had me—that I would never desert him. But I couldn't" (140). She cannot talk to her mother: "How could I share with my mother the wildness of my body or the desperation of my mind?" (142). Feeling that she is going crazy, she fears that he will consent to a marriage of convenience to Trudy Braxton: "I love him and cannot bear the thought of losing him to a crazy old woman, even in name only" (156). Hiram does, however, marry Trudy in a mutually satisfactory arrangement; he is homeless, and she has no one to take care of her. Later, Trudy suffers a stroke and dies. By that time Sara understands how unrealistic her secret love had been: "I realized with a sudden coldness how very old he was and felt the tears start in my own eyes" (169).

Unwittingly, however, Hiram betrays her. He uses some of the money in Trudy's legacy to finance Caroline's musical education in Baltimore. The archetypal source of the novel's title is connected to this event: When Sara learns the news of

Caroline's good fortune, her grandmother whispers to her, "'Romans nine thirteen,' she said. 'As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated'" (178). Sara interprets her grandmother's message as a reflection of the story of a father who chooses one child over the other. She has always believed that Hiram Wallace was different from the other men on the island, but now, he "had, like everyone else, chosen her over me. Since the day we were born, twins like Jacob and Esau, the younger had ruled the other. Did anyone ever say Esau and Jacob?" (180). When she looks up the passage that her grandmother has quoted, she learns that the speaker is God, and her guilt deepens. Even God seems to be against her.

Cultural Studies and History

Paterson's text is a manifestation of historical consciousness. Sara Louise constructs herself in terms of the popular culture of her day, including an advertisement for Pond's hand creme: "'She's lovely, she's engaged, she uses Pond's' the advertisement read," (142); the ad depicts two beautifully manicured hands with a diamond ring sparkling on the graceful left hand. During her infatuation with Hiram Wallace, she has imagined his hand as "the male hand in the ad reaching to put the diamond on the Pond's-caressed female hand" (133). Consequently, she reads the advertisement as a devaluation of herself: "A man with strong clean hands would never look at me in love. No man would" (142-143). One of her youthful characteristics is that she constructs life as an either/or situation. She must either be

a girl, like Caroline, or a boy, like Call. She does not see what lies between extremes.

The radio is an important cultural symbol in the novel. When the radio announcement of the attack on Pearl Harbor brings World War II to the island, Sara immediately inserts herself into history. She assumes a male role, putting herself to sleep at night "performing incredible feats of daring on behalf of my embattled country," heavily decorated "with enough metal for a tank" (60-61). She and Call play games of counterspying for which she receives the Congressional Medal of Honor from Franklin D. Roosevelt. In her dreams and in her imagination, Roosevelt is her immediate superior and friend.

In retelling her story, Sara's use of war images attests to the power of the war in the reality of the island. Remembering the response to Caroline's singing at a Christmas concert, for example, she recalls that "A sharp report of applause suddenly rattled the room like gunfire" (35). She remembers that her grandmother asked her why she was looking at her "With bullets in your eyes. Like you want to shoot me dead" (45). She recollects that during the storm that destroyed Hiram's home, the rain came down "like machine-gun fire" (120), and when Caroline tells Sara Louise that Hiram has married Trudy Braxton, the news "was exploding like shrapnel inside my stomach" (160). Hearing about D day from her mother, she contextualizes her struggle for identity in the text of the war: D day "signified only more war and

killing. Besides, it was not the European war that concerned me" (193). Her entire life has been a psychological war for selfhood.

Paterson uses the distinction between the European war and the personal war to draw her novel to its close. The first sixteen chapters deal with the years between 1941 and 1944, but she takes only four short chapters to narrate the remainder of the story. Sara Louise and Caroline finish college and settle into very different lifestyles. Caroline marries Call, becomes an opera star and lives a glamorous life. Sara Louise completes her medical studies and becomes a midwife in the Appalachian community of Truitt where she marries Joseph Wojtkiewicz, the father of three children. Away from a world that has been narrowly constructed, she finds herself reconstructed by Joseph: "Why would a woman like you, who could have anything she wanted, come to a place like this?" He places her in a context that she has never imagined: "God in heaven's been raising you for this valley from the day you were born" (236). In Joseph's words, her youthful Joseph dream, that wildest daydream, materializes, but not as she had dreamed. No one bows servilely before her. Instead, the community appreciates her for her talent and for the gifts she brings to their world.

Archetype III: The Narrative Circle

A complex web of images and symbols locates Paterson's novel in Northrop Frye's unifying cycle of world literatures. In the last event of the novel Sarah Louise serves as midwife to a young mother who delivers twins. The first, weighing nearly

six pounds, comes easily, but the second, a girl, nearly dies. Without an incubator, Sara improvises a way to keep the baby alive; she stuffs an iron pot with rags and lays the baby in it, just inside the oven door. Fearing that the child will die, the young father pleads for baptism, and since the parents have not chosen names, she baptizes the weaker child Essie Susan, uniting the names of the baby's mother and her mother. In this act she brings together her past, present, and future. When she learns that the other child is "in the basket," exactly where she lay in the story of her birth, she urges the child's grandmother to give him to his mother to nurse. She refers to Essie Susan as "my baby" and nurses her with her own mother's milk since she is also nursing her son Truitt, named for her father.

As she leaves the young couple's house late in the evening, the final moment of the novel affirms Sara's reconstruction, her sisterhood, and her location in a new culture. She remembers that years ago Caroline has sung a simple and plaintive song at a Christmas concert:

I wonder as I wander out under the sky
Why Jesus the Savior did come for to die
For poor on'ry people like you and like I
I wonder as I wander—out under the sky. (35)

At the concert Sara had described her sister's voice "like a single beam of light across the darkness" (34); the song was so beautiful, she recalls, that she tightened her arms against her sides "to keep from shaking, perhaps shattering" (35). In a mystical conclusion that suggests a symbolic reconciliation with her sister and her mother, Sara hears the song again. "I Wonder as I Wander" is an Appalachian Christmas carol, a

construction of the world view of mountain people and a link that bridges the island and the valley, the years, and the lives of the sisters. Walking out into the cold night air, Sara Louise hears a melody so "sweet and pure"; Paterson writes over her own words as Sara tells us "I had to hold myself to keep from shattering" (244). No longer in the shadow of the singer, she hears a song that belongs to the mountain world, a world in which she, finally, also belongs.

As we turn the prism of theory, we see many texts, multiple texts with multiple meanings. The power of this prism in our classrooms is that each student, with our help, many turn it and see refracted the light of his or her reading. It is a prism that may be turned again and again, text after text.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Conversations

The study of critical theory tends to raise the ultimate questions about literature and its relation to life without establishing an ultimate order, because the clash of one principle, one method, one logic with another cannot be evaded. To the extent that these opposites are genuinely understood, we are unlikely to end by resolving their differences with a tidy and harmonious chorus. We can, however, set the voices at play, engage them in contrapuntal dialogue with each other, and enter the dialogue ourselves.

David Richter
*The Critical Tradition: Classic
Texts and Contemporary Trends*

I end my travels in theory by returning to David Richter's conversation metaphor (14) because I especially like his contrapuntal image of the ways in which voices engage one another. In the two conversations which follow, I link my two major interests in this book, literary theory and the young adult novel, and the world in which I work—the English classroom. My goal is "to set the voices at play" and to encourage others to enter the dialogues of my text. These talks are informal and friendly. Having arrived at this moment after some long and complex journeys through the landscapes of theory, I am mindful of Marianne Moore's advice that "complexity is not a crime, but carry / it to the point of murkiness / and nothing is plain" ("Prismatic Color" 41). I hope that this chapter makes things plain.

I construct the first conversation with the voices of people I have met in their texts, and we talk about the role of literary theory in the literal classroom and in the larger classroom beyond it. I do not construct the second conversation. Instead, I invite you to enter the dialogue and, as Richer says, "set the voices at play." To help situate you for that, I introduce other voices that I've encountered, both through their texts and in real conversations. I have chosen the voices for Conversation II because they speak specifically about young adult literature, and I believe that they can help carry on the conversations begun in this book. These continuing conversations might be about a particular author or text, about theory and young adult fiction, or about some of the issues my chapters address, such as, for example, difference as it is manifested in race, class, and gender.

In both conversations I weave myself in and out of the voices. In the first, I am a speaker who ties the voices together. In the second, I am content to set them at play, offering introductions to the ways of reading the speakers explore.

**Conversation I:
Classrooms, Students, Teachers and Theory**

The classroom is one of the places, arguably the most important one, where the future of theory is being played out.

G. Douglas Atkins
Contemporary Literary Theory

[Note: The conversationalists speak in their own words. That is, I quote them directly. I do not use quotation marks because I want this to seem as natural as possible. I cite all their texts at the end of these conversations.]

John Moore: How important is it for us as English teachers to introduce our students to the concepts of literary theory?

Janet Emig: If we candidly remember our own intellectual, our own theoretical histories, we will acknowledge that we were not born Marxists or feminists; that we evolved often tortuously, to whatever current set of beliefs and theories we now hold. Consequently, we must not merely permit, we must actively sponsor those textual and classroom encounters that will allow our students to begin their own odysseys toward their own theoretical maturity.

Moore: I like your reference to Homer, and I have to confess that my own odyssey in theory has not been an easy one. With that in mind, I wonder what kind of classroom environment we need to construct in order to help students set out on that journey.

Peter Elbow: Not a class that pushes for a single or best reading of a text but a class that pushes for multiple and various readings of the text and that devotes some time to reflecting on how one got to these readings. This

is a call for teaching with less closure and less criticizing of bad or wrong readings and more affirmation of differences among readings.

Moore: You're talking now about the difference between traditional teacher-centered classrooms and the more contemporary emphasis on student-centered classrooms. What about the traditionalists who don't want to have anything to do with theory in the classroom?

Kathleen McCormick: We have no choice of whether or not to have theory in the classroom. Theory is always there—in us and in our undergraduates. We are all always already theorists. We have a choice only about whether or not we and our students will be self-conscious (that is to say, theoretical) about the theories that guide our perception.

Moore: Could you expand on your statement that "We are all always already theorists"?

McCormick: My contention assumes that literary theories, as part of our culture's literacy (and more general) ideology, organize our systems of belief often without our being aware of their influence on us.

Moore: So, what I hear you saying is that you are expanding the boundaries of the classroom, opening up spaces for students to think about how literature locates them in their culture. Is that correct?

McCormick: One of the exciting aspects of teaching students to theorize their own positions is helping them become aware—often for the first time—that they respond to a text or a situation in a particular way because they are influenced by some particular theory. This process relates to the wider educational practice of attempting to get students to become aware of the general ideological constraints and empowerments within which they live.

Maxine Greene: All of this holds relevance for a conception of education in what is described as our free society. It is through and by means of education, many of us believe, that individuals can be provoked to reach beyond themselves in their intersubjective space. It is through and by means of education that they may become more empowered to think about what they are doing, to become mindful, to share meanings, to conceptualize, to make varied sense of their lived worlds. It is through education that preferences may be released, languages learned, intelligences developed, perspectives opened, possibilities disclosed.

Moore: Your reference to intersubjective space intrigues me, of course, because that is one of the spaces in which we can locate ourselves in literary theory. I assume, however, that you are referring, as you do in *The Dialectic of Freedom*, to larger public spaces in which we can construct ourselves or where we feel unable to construct ourselves because of the power of the dominant ideology. In other words, we may feel powerless.

Greene: To be something other than an object, a cipher, a thing, [such] a person must reach out to create an opening; he/she must engage directly with what stands against him/her, no matter what the risk.

Moore: We are getting very involved in the concerns of cultural studies here as we break down the barriers between the English classroom and the world outside. Often students are critical about the classroom because they do not see that connection. Does any one want to comment on this idea, this connection, in terms of our conversation about theory in the classroom?

Robert Scholes: Literary theory does not exist in some pure realm of thought but in a world of institutionalized structures and political forces which means that theoreticians must theorize not only over texts themselves but over the role

of literary and linguistic study in the development of citizens who will themselves play many institutional roles in their lives, either critically aware or as insensitive dupes and victims.

Moore: I agree. I've always believed with Francis Bacon that knowledge is power, but sometimes students don't see language as power. They see it as something that English teachers understand in some kind of special way, a secret knowledge that English teachers have about how texts mean. Theory in the classroom can help us let students in on the secret, don't you think? It might be more accurate to say that theory in the classroom can help demystify the process of interpretation. Any one care to comment on that?

Scholes: We must help our students come into their own powers of textualization. We must help them see that every poem, play, and story is a text related to others, with verbal pre-texts and social sub-texts, and all manner of post-texts including their own responses, whether in speech, writing or action. The response to a text is itself always a text.

Moore: In other words, in the spirit of Maxine's comments on intersubjectivity in the world, you are talking about intertextualities in the world.

Scholes: Reading and writing are important because we read and write our world as well as our texts, and are read and written by them in turn. Texts are places where power and weakness become viable and discussable, where learning and ignorance manifest themselves, where the structures that enable and constrain our thoughts and actions become palpable.

Moore: Your word palpable appeals to me in terms of interpretive work in the English classroom. Palpable. Tangible. Touchable. In other words, our interactions with language should be things we can get our hands on, feel, play around with. It seems to me that theory is one way we can do that with texts, can help our students understand that you have to handle the text, construct it, not merely receive the knowledge of it that belongs to the English teacher.

Scholes: We have an endless web here, of growth, and change, and interaction, learning and forgetting, dialogue and dialectic. Our task as teachers is to introduce students to the web, to make it real and visible to them, insofar as we can, and to encourage them to cast their own strands of thought and text into this network so that they will feel its power and understand both how to use it and how to protect themselves from its abuses.

Moore: In other words, in tracing the complex interweaving of texts in the English classroom, they weave themselves not only into those texts but into the larger fabric of the society as well.

Finis

Conversation II: Theory and Young Adult Fiction

Theory (along with other movements) is leading to the breakdown of the established literary canon and with it the dominance of literary studies in the humanities; the acceptance of reader response and deconstruction; a questioning of the power structures of western culture; the development of new readings of history and literature (such as feminist and postcolonial), and the acceptance of new readings and new literatures as equal but different.

Peter Hunt
*Literature for Children:
Contemporary Criticism*

Young adult literature is a very new field of critical inquiry; its genres have mostly existed on the margins of the traditional Western canon that governs the education of young people in America; contemporary literary theories have existed on the same margins in America's secondary classrooms where the majority of English teachers practice variations on New Critical ways of reading (Applebee 12-19). As Hunt observes (10), not only the canon walls but the critical walls are falling down in the acceptance of modern ways of investigating literature. These investigations reflect the serious questioning of dominant ideologies which construct social reality and

declare some traditions "major" while shoving others to the borderlands of the "minor." In this book I explore the boundaries between young adult fiction and literary theory, and, by implication, the borderlands between young adult fiction and the traditional canon of the English classroom.

My readings of young adult novels demonstrate that, when theorized, they expand into new territories, and we travel in new landscapes. In the spirit of cultural studies pluralism, I see these novels as texts that can be successfully woven into the huge fabric of educational practices and that can enrich the tapestries of our reading. The most recent developments in theory do not judge young adult texts by the standards of Homer and Vergil, Shakespeare and Milton, George Eliot and Dickens, or Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison. Young adult texts are, to use Hunt's words, "new literatures" that are, in the critical landscape, "equal but different." This is an invitation to talk about that difference, to turn these texts under the prism of theory.

Talking About *M. C. Higgins, the Great*

In her book *Virginia Hamilton*, Nina Mikkelsen theorizes *M. C. Higgins, the Great* (27-40) from a different perspective than I do in Chapter 3. My formalist approach to the novel kept me confined to the words on the page, but the novel is so brilliantly constructed that I didn't mind. Mikkelsen reads the novel from several perspectives that I use in other chapters of this book. She explores, for example, the indeterminacies in the novel, using Wolfgang Iser's theory of reading the blanks or

gaps in the text which I illustrated in Chapter 7 in my reading of Budge Wilson's "The Leaving." I like Mikkelsen's treatment of the end of Hamilton's novel, and I agree with her that M. C. has an appeal far beyond the category of children's literature in which it is often placed. In her discussion of M. C.'s "cultural learning," the way he learns to "reread' his world," Mikkelsen echoes some of the concerns about developing social awareness expressed in Conversation I. She describes how M. C. develops the kind of "critically transitive consciousness" that Paulo Freire writes about in *Education for Critical Consciousness* (38).

Speaking of African American Literature

Part of Mikkelsen's reading of *M. C. Higgins, the Great* will point you in the direction of cultural studies. The novel represents our rich African American heritage in its story of Grandma Sarah's journey to freedom. Mikkelsen's essay may also, then, send you to explore the African American literary tradition as I did in my reading of Ernest Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying* in Chapter 9.

You might strike up an interesting conversation about African American literature with Pamela S. Carroll through her study of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. She considers Taylor's novel to be "the focal Southern novel for young adults" (163). That's good to know if you're just starting out to explore African American literature for young adults. Carroll is interested in both writers because their novels reflect "thematic

Southern preoccupations" (163). She approaches the novels from the transactional model of reader response theory which I discussed in Chapter 6. Her article is eminently practical, designed to help teachers approach these novels with confidence. From the theoretical perspective of the African American literary tradition, she wants students to explore what Houston Baker refers to as the sociohistorical context (see Chapter 9). She plans for students to "become aware of the history of social and physical mistreatment of African-Americans in the South" (167) as portrayed in *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. She includes segregation in churches and schools, which we also see in *A Lesson Before Dying*, and night riders, tar and featherings, and burnings. She offers an experience with anthropology as students uncover manifestations of African American traditions and folklore in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The study of both novels will lead to the development of a "position on the place of Black women writers in American literature" (168). Carroll, then, covers many of the important considerations in the black literary tradition as I discussed them in Chapter 9, from its rich oral narratives to the important role of women writers in the construction of the contemporary tradition.

In my structuralist approach to Bruce Brooks' *The Moves Make the Man*, the theoretical position kept me, as it did with formalism, inside the covers of the novel. Naturally, the dynamics of the African American family in *The Moves* would make a fascinating study. In my reading of the novel I focused on the language structures from a semiotic perspective, and this led me to explore the black vernacular,

particularly in reference to Dan Rose's anthropological reading of "playing black" in Philadelphia. The moves in "playing black" illustrate what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., calls "signifyin(g)."

I propose a conversation in which you put *The Moves Make the Man* in play with Gates' theoretical ideas in *Figures in Black*. Such a conversation would lead to a theorizing of Brooks' novel from the perspective of African American literary theory. The result would be a very different reading than the one I got when I turned the novel under the prism of structuralist theory.

Archetypal Talk

I like what Leila Christenbury does with Gary Paulsen's *Dogsong* in "Leaving Home to Come Home: The Hero's Quest in *Great Expectations* and Three Young Adult Novels." She begins talking about Dickens' novel, a staple of secondary school reading lists. After a critical assessment of *Great Expectations*, she comments on the challenges it offers in the contemporary classroom: its language, its length, its portrayal of female characters, and the improbable twists and turns of its plot. However much these may have delighted Victorian readers, Christenbury suggests that today's youth might find them hard to take. She pairs the young adult novels with Dickens' novel to help illuminate its mythic theme.

After she examines the archetypal journey of the hero in *Great Expectations*, she explores how Cynthia Rylant's *A Fine White Dust*, Gary Paulsen's *Dogsong*, and

Robert Lipsyte's *The Brave* complement Dicken's novel. If you're interested in an archetypal approach to these young adult novels, she provides specific questions to guide your inquiry. In this way she helps you theorize young adult fiction in terms of a traditional narrative with which you are probably quite familiar.

Let me suggest that she also sets up another provocative conversation. She has, to use my metaphor, already set these novels and their authors in conversation by pairing them up. A cultural studies approach might allow you and your students to go more deeply into the social milieu of these young adult novels, since both *Dogsong* and *The Brave* represent tribal cultures. All three novels explore what happens when a character experiences a different world view from what he has known before. For Pete in *A Fine White Dust*, it's a function of the role of religion and how it defines him and his world; for Russel in *Dogsong* and Sonny Bear in *The Contender*, it's a function of tribal customs, of keeping in touch with the old ways while negotiating life in a changing world. These novels are rich fields of inquiry for a cultural studies approach.

Speaking of Gender

In "The Mother/Daughter Relationship in Young Adult Fiction," Frances A. Nadeau gives us plenty to talk about. She includes *Jacob Have I Loved* in her helpful annotated list of books which deal with mother/daughter relationships. I deal with both positive and negative relationships in my reading of Budge Wilson's *The Leaving*

in Chapter 8. Nadeau suggests that the popularity of the film version of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* has sparked interest in the relationships of mothers and daughters. I suggest that you put *The Joy Luck Club* in conversation with some of the young adult novels Nadeau lists, including Kyoko Mori's *Shizuko's Daughter*, Suzanne Staples' *Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind*, and Cynthia Voigt's *Dacey's Song*. In my teaching I have found students, both male and female, to be fascinated by Tan's novel, and I recommend it as a way to explore another theoretical perspective: cultural studies and its concern with difference. We too often assume that students must be thoroughly prepared in cultural backgrounds before we assign them a novel from another culture. I find it very exciting to help students learn about a different culture from the way that a writer in that culture tells a story. Surely we—teachers and students—must do our cultural homework, but a novel is a cultural event in which we can participate and from which we can discover what we do not know. Nadeau offers a sociological perspective on the mother/daughter relationship; she also comments on the novels on her list. She provides a list of references that include theory, feminist approaches, and other non-literary materials that might help you get your conversation going with these books and their ideas.

Patricia P. Kelly continues this conversation on mother/daughter relationships in her essay "Gender Issues and the Young Adult Novel" where she discusses novels that present both positive and problematic mother/daughter relationships. She cites Margaret Mahy's *The Catalogue of the Universe* as an example of the former and Sue

Ellen Bridgers' *Notes for Another Life* as an example of the latter. You might put these novels in conversation with the two Budge Wilson stories that I write about in Chapter 8. This article is a good conversation piece when we're speaking of gender because it examines a number of important gender categories. For example, Kelly discusses various relationships: a girl's relationship to her body, to other girls, and to her mother and father. She offers suggestions for investigating romance novels as well as novels that deal with boy/girl and boy/boy relationships. She concludes with a discussion of Robert O'Brien's *Z for Zachariah* and Sue Ellen Bridger's *Permanent Connections* as examples of novels with good gender role models.

In "Reading from a Female Perspective: Pairing *A Doll's House* and *Permanent Connections*," Kelly's feminist approach also crosses over into cultural studies. She suggests that we expand the boundaries of the traditional canon to include literatures that have been previously marginalized, in this case young adult literature. She wants to demonstrate in her article how "some principles of feminist criticism" may be applied to the study of literature in the English classroom. She is practical in her approach to theory. She wants to theorize her texts, but she also wants to avoid getting "embroiled in a variety of personal definitions of feminism that readers might have" (127). If you're interested in how to go about theorizing a novel from the feminist perspective, Kelly offers some specific advice, and she details her approach in a series of sequential lessons. First, she contextualizes the notion of reading from a female perspective using Marge Piercy's poem "A Work of Artifice." The poem

raises feminist issues from which she opens up the world of Ibsen's play. She teaches *A Doll's House* and Sue Ellen Bridgers' *Permanent Connections* in succession, again, offering you some specific help in your theorizing.

To give students further practice in "feminist literary-critical activities" (136), she offers them opportunities to look at "feminist issues across literature" (137). Her reading suggestions are instructive for those who are new to the field of young adult literature. They include, among others, Norma Fox Mazer's *Someone to Love*, Virginia Hamilton's *A Little Love*, and Susan Terris' *Nell's Quilt*. In terms of theorizing from the feminist perspective, she makes a good suggestion that the study of a novel in which there are few female characters offers insight into the portrayal of women in a mostly men's world. Her title is Chris Crutcher's *Stotan!*, a novel which includes stereotypical female characters as well as a battered woman. One intriguing character is a man who can coach a swimming team to victory but cannot be successful in his marriage. Kelly carefully maps out her explorations in the feminist terrain, and her article should give interested readers some directions for their own travels.

Lois Stover's title "Must Boys Be Boys and Girls Be Girls? Exploring Gender Through Reading Young Adult Literature" will probably catch your attention, and you will be glad that it did because she contributes some very helpful information to the conversation on gender issues. She investigates the value of young adult literature in a society where, she says, men and women's roles are being "redefined, abandoned,

and reexamined" as we explore self, gendered self, and the relationships between self and others (94). The work she reports in her article will, she hopes, have a positive effect in combating gender stereotypes. Her references offer choices in young adult literature as well as critical studies. Specifically, she reports her work in London with *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tyler*, a novel with non-gender specific pronouns. This should encourage us to talk about how young readers construct texts when the signs they read locate them in an unusual sign system.

Cultural Studies Talk

Since I've just invited you to talk to Lois Stover, I'll engage her voice again in cultural studies terms. As Kelly does, Stover suggests that we expand the canonical boundaries to include young adult novels. Stover and Eileen Tway propose in "Cultural Diversity and the Young Adult Novel" that fiction written by "minority" writers about their cultures can enrich our teaching. For example, they pair Paulsen's *Dogsong* with Jean C. George's *Julie of the Wolves* as representations of Eskimo culture. Their article can help locate you in several landscapes. They offer a fine list of the common concerns of adolescents no matter what their culture as well as criteria for selecting young adult novels that represent diverse cultures. Then, they present pre-reading, reading, and post-reading strategies for working with these novels. Their references are a good resource for getting started with a cultural studies approach. From their list I especially recommend Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* for the way

in which it tells its fascinating story while informing us of the intricacies of Nigerian culture. In the best sense of putting novels in conversation with each other, *The Bride Price* will make a fine partner for young adult novels dealing with the coming-of-age theme and with the relationships that young girls have with their parents and maybe even with their future husbands. Stover and Tway include some novels not often seen on young adult literature lists, among them Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* and Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*. In its study of the effects of the return "home" of a young Kiowa after the Vietnam War, Momaday's novel could be set beside any number of young adult novels dealing with war. More intriguing conversations.

Discussing Differences in Sexual Orientation

This is usually a difficult topic for conversation in relation to the classroom, but Robert F. Williams suggests that adults who deal with young students should find ways to bring the books in his article to students' attention in a way that does not threaten their privacy. In "Gay and Lesbian Teenagers: A Reading Ladder for Students, Media Specialists and Parents," he includes fiction and nonfiction and both traditional and young adult literature. M. E. Kerr's *Night Kites* appears on his list of books about "Straight Teens with Gay Family Members." Williams supplies plenty of material to get you started in a cultural studies conversation, including lists of non-fiction for general readers, books on religion and homosexuality, and other

educational resources. His fiction suggestions run from extremes such as Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle*, definitely, as he says, "for older readers" (14), to Nancy Garden's sensitive portrayal of the gradual unfolding of a lesbian relationship in *Annie on My Mind*. He includes only Randy Shilts' *And the Band Played On* under the category of "The AIDS Crisis."

Alan B. Teasley's "YA Literature About Aids: Encountering the Unimaginable" picks up Williams' conversation and fills in the spaces on the AIDS crisis. Teasley opens his essay with a discussion of the national shock that occurred when Magic Johnson announced in 1991 that he was HIV positive. That event, he says, "changed profoundly the American public's view of AIDS" (18). Teasley writes out of three urgent concerns: "our teenagers are at risk; HIV infection is preventable; and, in the absence of a cure, education is the best hope of fighting the disease" (19). He believes that young adult books about AIDS should not only portray the emotional response to the disease, but that they should also provide "accurate and up-to-date information about the disease" (19). This is asking a great deal. Given the uncertainties surrounding AIDS, almost any text is soon to be outdated, or outdated even before it is published. Teasley comments that M. E. Kerr's *Night Kites* lacks such informational accuracy, but, as I contend in Chapter 10, she portrays one of the most powerful and dangerous responses to AIDS—silence. In that respect I cannot fault her text. Ten years after its publication the silence that Mr. Rudd wants to effect in Seaville is reverberating all over the country. Teasley includes young adult

novels about AIDS as well as plays and poetry in his annotated bibliography. His lists of non-fiction, biography, and other general resources could engage us all in conversations for a good long time.

Discussions in the Community

To wrap up this set of conversations, Virginia Monseau's "Students and Teachers as a Community of Readers" provides nice insight into what theorizing looks like in an English classroom. Her classroom is an interpretive community similar to the kind that I discussed in relation to some varieties of reader response theory in Chapter 7. She says that young adult literature offers an opportunity to build such interpretive communities with our students, and she engages specific theoretical perspectives which I examined in Chapter 7. She discusses Louise Rosenblatt's idea that reading as an active process improves students' social understanding, an echo of Conversation I about theory in the classroom and its ramifications in the world beyond the school. If you want to know what reader response sounds like, Monseau has transcribed classroom conversations that will enlighten you. She refers to reader-response theorist David Bleich in her discussion of criteria for selecting young adult novels, criteria that include the physical, psychological and social preoccupations of adolescents.

In this regard Monseau has done some collaborative work with psychologist Sharon Stringer who discusses the relationship between psychology and the young

adult novel in "The Psychological Changes of Adolescence." Their conversation is one you might like to listen in on. In that dialogue Monseau examines Robert Cormier's protagonists and suggests that studying their psychology might help student readers deal with the difficulties they face in the hard work of growing up. In this respect, I think, she echoes Maxine Greene's conception of education in a free society, education that empowers students "to conceptualize, to make varied sense of their lived world" ("Freedom" 12).

Monseau's theorizing of young adult literature in her community of readers also reflects the reading theory of Wolfgang Iser. She comments on his image of the text as a mirror to examine how different students see themselves reflected in the same young adult novel.

Final Words

These conversations will go on, but I must stop. In that last mirror image I reflect on the conversation that Kenneth Burke described, the one in the parlor (Chapter 2). The one where you arrive late and everyone is so busy talking that there's no time to stop and tell you what the conversation is about. That's how I felt when I entered a room where everyone was talking about, I discovered, contemporary literary theory. And it's how I felt when I walked one day innocently into the house of young adult fiction. I listened to both conversations for a while, and then, as

Burke describes it, I put in my "oar." You have the result in your hands. The hour grows late, and I must go, confident that I leave the conversation "still in progress" (Burke 95-95).

In the blank space which I leave behind me on this page, I invite you to insert yourself and continue the conversation. Then, when you leave the room, I hope that you will chart your own course in the world of the young adult novel, and I hope that, when you do, you will be traveling in the landscape of theory.

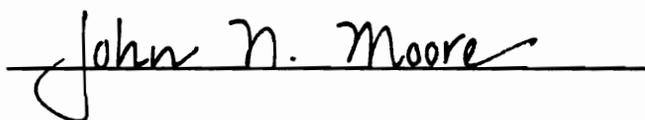
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VITA

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John N. Moore". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a solid horizontal line.