

Major Creative Work:

Anatomy of the Upper Body

Exegesis:

**‘Desire and its Disastrous Results’: Re-examining
Representations of Feminine Masochism in Women’s
Writing**

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Abstract

The exegesis portion of my thesis examines representations of feminine masochism in 20th-century literature by women with respect to the ways in which feminist literary analysts have critiqued these novels in an often moral fashion. In my re-readings of three such texts, via an exploration of conflicts in contemporary feminism, I question whether the feminist critique of literature should necessarily presume or seek an affirmative feminist narrative in female-authored works. The creative texts I examine include Susanna Moore's *In the Cut*, several works by Marguerite Duras, and Anne Carson's verse narrative, *The Beauty of the Husband*. My dissertation provides an example of other, more expansive ways in which these texts might be read that extends into a contribution to the debate between the aesthetic and the moral appraisal of creative arts, and a questioning of whether morality has a place in literature at all. In this way, I not only provide alternative ways of reading these narratives, but also present a reading practice that is relevant to an understanding of my own creative work.

My discussion draws from a broad range of theoretical writings on the ethics of reading and the expression of masochism, from Roland Barthes, to Georges Bataille, Gilles Deleuze, Mikhail Bakhtin and Milan Kundera, to Maurice Blanchot, Leo Bersani and Derek Attridge as well as psychoanalytic propositions put forth by Lacan and Freud. Inevitably, my research also engages with the depth of feminist writing on sexuality and violence, including that by Teresa de Lauretis, Jane Gallop, Jessica Benjamin, Maria Marcus, Renata Salacle and Linda Ruth Williams.

My creative work takes the form of a novella, *Anatomy of the Upper Body*. It is a psychological thriller set in contemporary Melbourne that centres contemporary women's negotiations of heterosexual desire as its topic. My protagonist, Nina, is at once informed, vulnerable, and ambivalent in her expressions of heterosexuality. In the masochistic temptations she experiences, she is a character who is representative of those transgressive literary femininities that occupy an uneasy third position between the worlds of fiction and theoretical inquiry. The interrelatedness of theory and fiction in the novel itself is an attempt to interrupt and interrogate prevailing modes of literary interpretation, just as the depiction of a confoundingly contradictory female character may be seen as a challenge to notions of condoned femininity.

The overarching aim of this dissertation is to provide an investigation of the function of morality in literature, and to support readings of transgressive fiction by female writers, not as true representations of the feminine psyche or ‘what women want’, but as imagined spaces that allow the reader to explore a myriad of subject positions, those that exist outside of social reality, those that may differ from our own.

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Declaration

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I. Reading and Writing, Desire and Danger: An Introduction

If you look up the etymology of the word “danger”, you will see that exactly the same ambiguity exists from the beginning in French: “danger” was originally “dominiarium”, domination [...] in effect, when we are in another’s power, we are in great danger.

Jacques Lacan¹

Some time ago I came across a thought that I had noted down in the margin of James Salter’s *A Sport and a Pastime*: ‘A seemingly sadistic act, the subsequent acquiescence of the other – is acceptable when, and because, we sense there is somewhere love at its heart? Like a cold day in February - beautiful in its opposition to what is expected, and tantalising even, because it still hums with the knowledge of a future heat beneath it?’

I still desire to escape at times into the lust and reverie of Dean and Anne-Marie’s hotel room trysts, the sullen streets and sleepy cafes of that passionate, violent romance. An American man and a French girl, lost in an intoxicating sexual exploration, in which the tears and blood that flow from their transgressions foreshadow their eventual separation by Dean’s tragic death. I can’t recall the reading of which passage exactly made me write the note, but I know some part of me was hesitating, seeking to justify my enjoyment of Salter’s story that, as it may be argued, portrays women as a collection of erogenous parts, existing solely for the sexual satisfaction of men. Indeed, the intensity of Anne-Marie’s physical objectification has inspired anger in many: “Anne-Marie is objectified in such a way that would make any good collegiate feminist cringe. She’s woman defined as sexual vessel” (Faulkner 2008). Yet, I do not wish to linger on a discussion of Salter’s book, for such questions and objections have too often and expectedly been raised in relation to the writing of female sexuality by male authors. What are of greater intrigue to me are reactions to writing by women that present

¹ Lacan *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 103

analogous accounts of femininity to Anne Marie's. What hesitations then, do women have with these texts? What heightened degree of ambivalence might women, as writers and readers, experience?

More recently, I re-read a past note in my journal that may yet become a story. It tells of how: *I photographed the bruises you left on my body. A mud brown hand circling my leg. Fingers splayed to grip, their day old prints still bleeding the earthed purple of bulbs. The flash of light leant three dimensions to my skin, your traces deep as claw tracks in wet sand. Later, I open up the photo album on my computer and find the pictures there. The strange still life of my pale leg. I want to adjust the contrast, balance and saturation, boost colour, increase sharpness, spotlight and darken edges - anything that might bring back the mark of you.* Should the narrator be identified as female, the lover male, this passage, too, may inspire a similar state of questioning and moral ambivalence. Is it dangerous for a woman to write into fiction such an image of femininity?

During a conversation with the writer, Susanna Moore, I began to speak about the seduction by violence of the character, Frannie, in her book, later made into the film, *In the Cut*. There has been, she says, in many readers and critics, a fundamental misunderstanding: "Her behaviour is less motivated by masochism than by her refusal to be afraid."² Frannie's practiced submission, Moore claims, is no more than a pleasurable "part of the dance that can occur between a man and a woman [...] the woman's resistance is erotic, it gives her power [...] it is a kind of play-acting, a replication of the relationship between men and women that is going on every second of the day." I wanted to agree wholeheartedly, but again I could not resist some sense of internal division. What level of responsibility do we have to women and to feminism in our writing and understanding of femininity in fiction? Must we always necessarily experience a sense of conflict? As stated by Merri Lisa Johnson, "the familiar connection of sex and violence provokes in me two responses: there's the proper feminist critique (violence is bad,

² This is not an isolated example of the tendency for representations of transgressive female sexuality to be misunderstood. For example French theorist and fiction writer, Alina Reyes, titles a chapter on feminism in *The Politics of Love*, "Feminism?" The rhetoric here hints at Reyes' view that the necessity of the movement is inevitably in question and perhaps has no place in a discussion of women's literary characterisations. She later comments despairingly that "literature and art try to reflect human truth as faithfully as possible, but they too have become another source of anguish", reflecting on the manner in which her own creative work has been critiqued according to a so-called feminist morality (105).

connecting sex and death devalues the erotic, condones and fetishises the brutalized female body) and then there's my real response[...]"³

These three episodes I have recounted are not, of course, isolated incidents of questioning and hesitation confined to my own experience of writing and reading. In my investigation of the representation and critique of female sexuality and sexual suffering in 20th-century literature by women, I found that two words were constantly arising. Alongside *masochism* and *feminism*, *morality* and *ambivalence* frequently appear. The recurrent presence of each of these, in my own reading, writing and research is the *raison d'être* for this thesis. It is around the latter two terms that I structure my investigation of the former. However, the concepts of *morality* and *ambivalence* have themselves been assigned various meanings that often differ according to the context in which they appear. It is for this reason that I will provide definitions for my own employment of each term, as they relate to the questions that my research topic raises. I do not hope to compile an exhaustive classification, but simply present a delineation of *morality* and *ambivalence* as they are used within the parameters of this particular project. In this thesis, by *morality* I mean to refer to the particular thoughts, pleasures or behaviours that have been considered right and proper for women within an orthodox feminist context. By *ambivalence*, I mean to refer to the varied and contradictory guilts and emotions that women have experienced in response to what has thus been considered moral and immoral behaviour. My use of the terms *morality* and *ambivalence* must also be approached from a perspective of intertextuality, to encapsulate an awareness that many of the arguments and questions that I present here are housed within each word, and that all of these are present in our minds in some way whenever we read or write.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines *ambivalence* as the simultaneous existence of conflicting ideas, attitudes or emotions, or, a feeling of uncertainty about something due to a mental conflict.⁴ Perhaps no political or theoretical movement has been more engendering of this form of conflict in women than feminism. Writing in the late 1970s, not long after the popularisation of feminist thought in academia and popular culture,

³ "Being a proper and good feminist in this case means believing women always want what's best for us. We don't. [and this] cannot be explained away by [...] the idea that we eroticise the conditions of our own oppression" (42-3).

⁴ Oxford English Dictionary, accessed at <<http://www.oed.com>> April 11, 2010

Maria Marcus identified how Second Wave feminism's call for women to align their personal practice with their political attitudes engenders a great deal of fear and contradictory emotions because, it "involves us so much on a purely personal level [and] because we realise its political significance and so are afraid of undertaking things that might damage it" (258).⁵ If that sense of ambivalence was present in 1978, then it is a view that is apparent even more so today, when the critical appraisal of cultural products such as art and literature often focuses on the appropriateness of images of femininity that they choose to portray. The question of whether women's experience of such ambivalence has a necessary place within creative arts leads into my connected discussion of the relationship between literature and morality, and a consideration of how close a relationship this should be.

In *Discontented Discourses*, Helena Michie identifies aspects of 'otherness' within feminism; the ambivalences present in women due to the movement's overwhelming "polyphony of feminist voices and enterprises" (Barr & Feldstein 19). What she highlights, ten years after Marcus, are the dangers inherent in a critical theory that has often claimed to be "moving with ease from the personal to the academic to the political and refusing to see any rupture between them" (Barr & Feldstein 20). One of the greatest sources for women's ambivalence toward feminism has perhaps been this failure, at times, to adequately separate women's real experience from their fictional representations and political ideals. It is important to note here that I do not make the assumption of a standard feminist position on representations of sexuality and violence, or underestimate the complexity of feminist debate on this issue: "there may be no single feminist program; there are feminisms rather than a single feminist position" (Lever 133) and, of course, as many variations on these positions as there are women. What interests me are the sites of ambivalence that exist in the spaces between these and the common 'orthodox' feminist response: that romance plots involving masochistic female characters are damaging to women and the feminist project because they encourage women to respond erotically to the conditions of their own oppression.

⁵ See also see Teresa de Lauretis: "the internal divisions of the movement over the issue of separatism or mainstreaming, both in the academy and in other institutional contexts [has led to] an expanded, extremely flexible, and ultimately unsatisfactory redefinition of the notion of 'feminist theory' itself" (264).

To begin with a simple definition, the dictionary identifies *morality* as the rightness or wrongness of something as judged by moral standards or standards of conduct that are accepted as right or proper.⁶ This, in itself, immediately poses questions – whose notion of rightness and wrongness? Who is the judge of our conduct? The answer of course is not simple, for the idea of morality differs in gravity and explanation according to the context of its use.⁷ It is contradictory, often fluid and unfixed, and might even lead to an anticipatory ambivalence regarding whether one’s conduct will be accepted as ‘right or proper’. As suggested by Joyce Carol Oates, the question in aesthetic and artistic productions is of course “Whose ethics? Whose morality?” for, “art is fundamentally indefinable, unsayable” (George 240). Oates argues that the presence of a certain “sacredness” functions in the creation and appreciation of art, that is, the *aesthetic* experience, which assumes the place of the artist’s moral obligations (George 240).

In *Conflicts in Feminism*, Nancy K. Miller raises a similar question in relation to cultural representations of femininity: “What’s the right feminist position? Who decides what’s wrong or right?” (Hirsch & Keller 350). Miller’s questions, although recurrently pondered throughout the multi-authored essay collection, remain largely unanswered, aside from Teresa De Lauretis’ tentative conclusion that, for many women, feminism will always contain “the tension of a twofold pull in contrary directions: the critical negativity of its theory and the affirmative positivity of its politics”.⁸ In this way, both Miller and De Lauretis move toward Marcus’ earlier suggestion that what instils ambivalence in women regarding feminism is the movement’s sometime appeal for the utopian ideal of all women being united by a “specific ‘we’, a shared faith” (258) that was characteristic

⁶ Oxford English Dictionary, accessed at <<http://www.oed.com>> April 11, 2010

⁷ It is important to note here that, while often mistakenly used loosely and interchangeably, the terms morality and ethics do not, of course, mean the same thing. As outlined above, morality refers to the very standards of conduct themselves that are accepted as right or proper, whereas ethics refers to a system of moral principles governing the appropriate conduct for an individual or group and the study of moral standards and how they affect our conduct. Ethics is also known as Moral Philosophy, which often takes the themes of literature as its topic (for example in the writings of Maurice Blanchot, Michele Bakhtin, and Derek Attridge, as well as many others later to be discussed.)

⁸ “The history of feminism in relation to both ‘external’ and ‘internal’ events, discourses, and practices suggests that two concurrent drives, impulses or mechanisms, are at work in the production of its self-representation: (1) an erotic, narcissistic drive that enhances images of feminism as difference, rebellion, daring, excess, subversion, disloyalty, agency, empowerment, victimization, subjection, acquiescence, passivity, conformism, femininity; and (2) an ethical drive that works toward community, accountability, entrustment, sisterhood, bonding, belonging to a common world of women sharing. [These two strands are] often in mutual contradiction.” (De Lauretis. *Upping the Anti in Feminist Theory*. 255-266)

of feminism's Second Wave.⁹ Such a call is not always liberatory in all areas of women's self-expression:

With any political movement which comes out of *real* oppression... [there is also] a tendency to [...] polarize morality [...] that is, women who slept with men were sleeping with the enemy... women who wore high heels and make-up were instantly suspect [...] Such oversimplifications may be necessary to some phases of political movements. But they are usually problematic for novelists (Atwood 5).

I find myself located between the Second Wave's politicisation of personal experience and behaviour, and the Third Wave's more liberal feminisms and, further more, I find myself feeling ambivalence most keenly in the literary context, positioned as I am as a feminist, creative writer, reader and critic. As Margaret Atwood continues to assert in the above quote, the female novelist "feels restricted in her choices for heroines by feminism" – are "all heroines to be essentially spotless of soul – struggling against [...] male oppression?" (5).

For the scope of this project I am interested in several intersecting sites of moral ambivalence in literature. Firstly, I am interested in the areas of ambivalence that arise for women within feminist political thought, as a moral awareness interacts with their own subjective experience. More specifically, I am interested in feminism's interaction, and some times interruption, of women's pleasure in reading and writing sexually transgressive femininities.

This leads, secondly, to my consideration of the ongoing conflict between 'moral' and 'aesthetic' approaches to literary criticism and calls into question whether subscription to a particular moral position, in my case that of feminism, has a place in our enjoyment of literature at all. I do not hope to close this ongoing discussion either, but instead set out to investigate, within one specific element of women's representation, that of sexuality, the degree to which readers and writers of these works are, and should be, subject to experiences of moral ambivalence.

⁹ See for example, the 1981 manifesto on heterosexuality published by the Leeds Revolutionary Feminists: "Heterosexual women are collaborators with the enemy [...] Being a heterosexual feminist is like being in the resistance in Nazi-occupied Europe where in the daytime you blow up a bridge, in the evening you rush to repair it [...] Every woman who lives with or fucks a man helps to maintain the oppression of her sisters and hinders our struggle" (7).

The questions that return to me most persistently are these: Why should the feminist critique of literature posit a feminist utopia as its cause or presume and seek an affirmative feminist narrative in female-authored texts? What is morally and psychologically at stake for readers, writers, and literary theorists in works of literature? Can literature ever be simply reduced to its moral meaning – and what elements of a work of literature (structural, thematic and aesthetic) might interrupt this? Finally, what might be a literary work that refuses to do so, and how have such works been critiqued and comprehended?

My dissertation could have simply focussed on arguments surrounding the place of morality in literature, or, for example, instead been structured around the representation of race and presence of racism in contemporary literature, but I have chosen to enter a dialogue with feminism because it relates specifically to some of the most deeply experienced sites of moral ambivalence in my own practice of reading and writing fiction. The place of feminine masochism in women's writing is an important and relevant contextualisation for the broader discussion of art and morality. As Lauren Rosewarne writes in 2009's *Cheating on the Sisterhood*, in the same way that women have allegedly internalised patriarchal values, "feminists have similarly internalised *feminist* values [...] feminist experience is marked by the struggle between internalised feminist values and external pressures" (106). Feminism in its moral aspect is particularly problematic for women writing about sexual matters, for "morality is a concept inextricably linked to virtuousness [...] here lies the central problem: establishing a universal definition of *moral* sexual behaviour would be impossible" (25).

In Chapter One, I focus my reading of Susanna Moore's *In the Cut* around a discussion of the shifting conceptions of the literary space that is entered by readers of contemporary fiction and the ways in which women's interactions with representations of feminine sexuality within the realm of literature may have changed post-feminism. As Margaret Atwood writes: "Part of the history we've had recently is the history of the women's movement, and the women's movement has influenced how people read and therefore what you can get away with, in art" (4). Arguing against moralistic readings of transgressive female characters, I draw from writings on genre and narrative structure by

Tzvetan Todorov and Michele Bakhtin to suggest that Moore's rendering of the complexity of female desire and subjectivity is both informed and freed by its literary debt to post-modernist narrative strategies. Moore's playful, at times almost satirical, subversion of the conventions of the detective and romance genres highlights the constructedness of the novel as a work of fiction, thus distancing the reader's own subjectivity from the violent interactions of her characters.

In *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction*, Barbara Freeman proposes that many misreadings of novels such as Moore's have occurred because critics view what might be considered masochistic female protagonists "as either exclusively passive, as society's victim, or as an accomplice of the economy that excludes her" (6), without considering the ways in which these characters might in fact shift and expand our understanding of the nature of literary agency through their very confrontation with the limits of the representable. Invoking the various understandings of masochism, eroticism, death and sensuality that are provided by Leo Bersani, Georges Bataille and Gilles Deleuze, I argue that the analysis of literature needs to become more expansive, in order to understand these characters as perhaps "subjects who exert will, even at the cost of self-destruction, and thus not merely as victims who are acted upon" (Freeman 6). Cynthia Burack claims that this is unfortunately not always the case, suggesting that feminist literary theorists have sometimes been "particularly ambivalent about women's passions" with the result that an "analytic gap has emerged in feminist theory" through which less supposedly 'moral' emotions such as aggression and masochism fall (1). Fiction such as Moore's, that explores these transgressive states, thus risks being rejected, condemned or ignored. In an attempt to re-address this, and in response to the question of whether the feminist critique of literature should posit a feminist utopia as its cause or presume and seek an affirmative feminist narrative in female-authored texts, I propose that potentially disturbing representations of femininity are not 'dangerous' as such or a purported threat to the achievements of feminism, precisely because of their literary nature. They are instead opportunities to explore and inhabit fleetingly, alternative subjectivities, those that differ from our own. An essential element of the pleasure of reading comes from the very recognition of the distance and difference between our own world, and the spaces of literature.

Leading into Chapter Two's discussion of the limits of moral literary interpretation, I turn my discussion toward notions raised by Maurice Blanchot's *The Space of Literature*, in which he argues against the reduction of novels to a moral message since the form of fiction differs so vastly to that of criticism. Literature genuinely "is not a conversation; it does not discuss, it does not question" (196).¹⁰ In other words, it is limiting to approach literature with the sole goal of gaining moral insight since the levels of self-referential symbolism, mimesis and intertextual complexity it naturally contains can never be adequately comprehended or appreciated by such a formal approach. This "extraordinary sensitivity to the immense plurality of experience" necessary for a more expansive analysis of literature is also present in Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia in fiction (*The Dialogical Imagination* 263). Bakhtin has been a particularly useful scholar for feminist literary theorists, and for the general analysis of more transgressive texts, due to this master trope of *heteroglossia* that incorporates an appreciation of the inherent tensions in literary novels as a concentrated microcosm of the oppositions and struggles in all forms of social communication.¹¹ I return to further discussion of the usefulness of Bakhtin and Blanchot's writings with regard to exploring sites of literary ambivalence and arguing against moral modes of interpretation in Chapter Three's analysis of the poetry of Anne Carson.

Chapter Two examines what is morally and psychologically at risk for readers, writers, and literary theorists in works of literature. In my analysis of Marguerite Duras' short stories (*Ten Thirty on a Summer Night*, *Moderato Cantabile*) and novel (*The Ravishment of Lol V. Stein*), I move toward an identification of what elements in works of literature, those of structure, theme and style, might serve to inspire moral interpretation. Like Jane Winston, I believe that because feminist accounts have dominated our

¹⁰ His theory on the practice of 'reading' is continued to the conclusion that "even if it demands of the reader that he (sic) enter a zone where he (sic) can scarcely breathe and where the ground slips from under his (sic) feet – and even if, leaving aside these stormy approaches, reading still seems to be participation in that open violence, the work – nonetheless, in itself it is tranquil and silent presence, the calm centre of measureless excess, the silent yes at the eye of every storm." (196)

¹¹ As defined in the introduction to *The Dialogical Imagination*, Heteroglossia is a concept referring "to the peculiar interaction between the two fundamentals of all communication [...] a sense of opposition and struggle. A ceaseless battle between centrifugal forces that seek to keep things apart, and centripetal forces that strive to make things cohere [...] is present in culture, as well as nature and the specificity of individual consciousness [...] the most complete and complex reflection of these forces is found in human language, and the best transcription of language so understood is the novel" (263).

understanding of Duras, other important contextual considerations may have been lost: “all creative work can be properly understood only when considered in relation to the contexts from which it emerges, the questions to which it responds, and the contradictions with which it wrestles” (*Postcolonial Duras* 1). In my analysis of Duras’ narratives, I note, therefore, that her style of writing, in its repetitions, its elliptical, fantastical elements and its poetic inconclusiveness, reflects the overflowing of feminine sensuality associated with the particular Parisian atmosphere of pleasure and excess in which she was working.

My reading proposes that Duras’ fiction has often inspired critics to confine the ambivalent pleasure of her texts within accepted methods of theoretical appraisal (such as moral or feminist) because her stories seek the “very limits of the representable [which] presents the subject with an unrecoverable excess of excess” (Freeman 11). Drawing on the work of Milan Kundera, I propose then, through my observations of previous responses to Duras’ work, that moral approaches perhaps arise most often in relation to literature that presents some account of inarticulate experience or transgressive excess.

In her exploration of “the treacherous nature of morality”, Jennifer Rutherford isolates the manner in which Lacan posits psychoanalysis as a site of excess, a process of coming to terms with the immorality, and at times, perversity of desires: “Lacan points out that everything that psychoanalysis recognises as desire is situated...outside the field of morality” (11). Similarly, in *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, Slavoj Žižek explores the emancipatory role of psychoanalysis in its freeing of the subject from troubling symptoms that are a result of conflict between presumably ‘immoral’ desires and public expectations, in which such illicit desires have been repressed, relegated to the realm of the unconscious:

Psychoanalytic interpretation unearths the idiosyncratic link between the fragments of public text [the exhibited symptoms] and the symbols of illicit libidinal motivations. [...] The final stage of the psychoanalytic cure is reached when the subject recognizes himself, his own motivations in the censured chapters of his self-expression, and is able to narrate the totality of his [*sic*] life story (25).

I propose that psychoanalytic literary theory, with its basis in the emancipation and acknowledgment of sites of illicit desire and excess, may serve as one method that offers more flexible interpretation and analysis of fiction, particularly that of Duras', who grapples with both Freud and Lacan's writings on feminine masochism in her transgressive representations of female sexuality. Further, extending my introduction of Blanchot's *Space of Literature* in Chapter One, I argue that it is the very crucial difference between the aesthetic approach to a literary appraisal of Duras, and the more literal approach of a moral feminist analysis of her writing, that renders the tone of her novels and the behaviour of her characters beguiling rather than disturbing.

In Chapter Three I extend some possible answers to what might be a literary work that successfully evades moral interpretation, and examine how such works have been critiqued and comprehended. In my analysis of Anne Carson's verse novel, *The Beauty of the Husband*, I draw on the writings of Renata Salecl regarding the relationship between writing and desire, to propose that modernist poetry, in its particular bricolage of literary aesthetics, is one of the forms of writing most able to fully represent states of conflict and ambivalence. Manipulations of language and form through aural and visual word play are used to evoke the vacillations of desire and the perpetual interchange of power in human relationships where, for example, in Carson's story, bruises are the postmarks of love. The unique stylistic tools employed by Carson, such as non-literal juxtaposition of words and imagery, attention to rhythm and experimentation with the mutability of language, are more available in poetry than in narrative fiction, enabling a vivid presentation of conflicted emotional states.

Carson's poetic form is one that builds multiple levels of self-reflexivity. Carson blends theoretical inquiry with poetry and quotation, thus arming not only the ambivalences in her own text, but also the painful experiences of her fictional character, with a critical awareness. Carson's writing is located outside of the boundary between fiction and poetry, at a juncture of tension not only in the volatility of its themes but in its stylistic location beyond commonly accepted literary forms. My approach to the reading of Carson's work aims to move toward an understanding of the ingenuity and the uniqueness of her writing, as well as an acceptance of its moral ambiguities and my own

ambivalent responses to it. All of these elements importantly contribute to what Derek Attridge has termed “the crucial role of that experience of bewilderment” that is literature’s achievement as a work of art (x-xii). I locate in Carson’s writing the elusive element that is captured by poetry’s particular manipulations of language, rhythm and metaphor, allowing it to render most honestly contemporary womens’ contradictory experiences of love relationships, while also resisting moral interpretation.

In her discussion of the problems of orthodox feminist literary analysis, Nancy K. Miller recognises the importance of the presence of such ambivalence and ambiguity in women’s writing, concluding: “to establish Reading Lists [for women] that reflect orthodox feminist positions, and to call for the production of literature with [only] positive role models [...] does not tell the whole story” (114). Miller states that the moral appraisal of literary works is dangerous because such an approach “threatens to erase the ambiguities of the feminist project” (117). It is through an acknowledgment of these ambivalences, such as that achieved in Carson’s poetry, that we may in fact come to understand much more about women’s fraught relationship to men, to patriarchy and to feminism. To return to Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia, in order to gain an appropriate understanding of a work of literature we must first accept that language is based on a state of fundamental ambivalence – “any utterance [is] contradiction-ridden, tension-filled” (*The Dialogic Imagination* 272) – and realise that this tension is not only one of the defining characteristics of literature, but also one of its main pleasures for the reader. In Carson’s work we are invited into a literary space that is charged with the magnetic conflict between, as Blanchot says, “the open violence” of the work and its “tranquil and silent presence, the calm centre of measureless excess” (196).

In his writings on the novels of JM Coetzee, Attridge presents resistant readings of what have previously been considered morally problematic works of literature, works that move beyond the boundaries of the acceptably representable and into accounts of provocative transgression – for example, Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, which explores the dubious morality of a relationship between David Lurie, a fifty-two-year-old academic, and a much younger woman who is his former student. Like Attridge’s, my readings attempt to

represent fully my complex response to each of the texts that I examine, finding as he did that, while each of them “undeniably gave immense pleasure, [they] seemed to [...] call for a fresh thinking through of significant aesthetic, ethical, and political issues. Often the pleasure was mixed with a feeling of dismay [of] risks, and ignored sensibilities” (x-xii).

My response to the novels I examine is inevitably intensely ambivalent for, although I identify as a feminist and fully comprehend the political importance of feminism, I have also come to see that women’s’ desire to predominantly promote fictions that present orthodox feminist values also seems to reveal a certain element of narcissism in the feminist literary project. As suggested by Karla Kaplan in *The Erotics of Talk*, “there is a danger...in any recuperative reading [...] that we will merely read [...] to have ‘our own image reflected back to us’.”¹² This of course can lead to shallow understandings of fiction, particularly in those novels that are most often taken to mirror the practice of feminist criticism itself, and perhaps unwarranted criticism of those that are not. In approaching literature from a political standpoint, and with a narcissistic aim, readers risk failing to fully explore the particularly crafted imaginary worlds that fiction offers. Might these conflicts within feminism be termed, to borrow Freud’s phrase, ‘narcissism in respect of minor differences’? Just as Freud argues for an identification of this particular ridicule of each other by closely related cultures (*Civilization and its Discontents* 90), we might observe that a similar ‘narcissism in respect of minor differences’ exists between closely related social and political discourses (in relation to this project specifically, strands of feminism and the kind of ambivalence and antagonistic moral questioning that ensues between them).

These tendencies are, in part, what I set out to re-address through my exploration of literary representations of contentious feminine sexuality. I do not wish to claim that moral views have no presence in literature, but rather seek to provide more expansive re-readings of these novels, to examine the stylistic techniques utilised in each, and the

¹² Kaplan later extends on the hazards of reading women’s writing from the stand-point of a narcissistic feminism, asserting that to seek and assume affirmative images of ideal feminine sexuality from these fictions is an unrealistic, and dangerously uninclusive, project: “More than any other political movement, feminism has politicised the values to the intimate sphere [...] Feminist criticism has often looked to women’s writing to mirror feminist criticism itself, wanting to see its own project of discovering lost female voices affirmed but [...] this drive to establish a relation to women’s literature that is ‘intimate’, ‘dialogic’, or ‘empathic’, to establish that the feminist critic is the ideal listener the text has been waiting for, to prove, as Roland Barthes puts it, that the text ‘desires me’, may provide an outlet for a female erotics that is otherwise repressed, but it may also lead to identifications with narrators or authors which cannot be borne out, which are based on false assumptions or unrealistic hopes” (12-13).

particular aesthetic that has been created by the artistic transformation of elements of reality into the space of the novel. It is more flexible readings of fictional femininity such as these that might extend our understanding of desire and agency, allowing us to enter ambivalent sites of erotic excess and danger - an understanding of which are equally as essential to women's writing and analysis of literature as are the literary projects of feminism.

II. "Desire and its Disastrous Results"¹³: From Theory to Praxis

In reading literature [...] we are [at one remove] acquiring experience, and dwelling in the imaginary worlds that literature creates, expanding our emotional as well as our intellectual horizons.

Richard Posner¹⁴

The focus for the exegesis portion of this dissertation arose, in part, from my need to investigate the themes of my own fiction. My creative work is undeniably concerned with women's precarious negotiations of desire and morality; these are some of the topics that have always inspired my writing. In *Becoming a Heroine*, Rachel Brownstein writes, "I have read feminist criticism with interest and profit [...] but I make no attempt to articulate a theory or to follow a particular method of feminist criticism" (xvii), an outlook that I share at times, most manifestly in the context of creative representations.

In *Anatomy of the Upper Body*, my protagonist, Nina, is at once informed, vulnerable, and ambivalent in her expressions of heterosexuality. In the masochistic temptations she experiences, she is a character representative of those transgressive literary femininities that occupy an uneasy third position between the worlds of fiction and theoretical inquiry.

¹³ Girard 182

¹⁴ "Literature offers a vast choice of friendships. Many of them are with evil, dangerous, or irresponsible people – awful role models. To befriend them is to risk being led astray, just as by other evil companions. It is not a big risk; but neither is the opposite – the likelihood that we will become better people by imaginatively befriend the 'good' implied author and his 'good' characters" (George 72).

Marguerite Duras often spoke in interviews about her fascination with the theme of ‘the woman who wanted to be killed by her lover’ (Eisinger 515) and certainly many of her narratives set out to investigate what pathological state of obsession might lead to such a desire. In part, Duras’ creative investigation is also my own. I wanted to write a narrative that explored femininity, masochism and the attraction to pain.

In its most extreme cases, it has been suggested that severe pain, both physical and psychological, can result in the sufferer ceasing to value his or her life. She or he would rather die than endure it: “The sadist wants the other to *want* death. And even if he is not of this extreme type, he relishes the diminution of value the victim attaches to life” (McGinn 77). What I aim to depict, over the course of the narrative, is the dual development of Nina’s will to enact her obsession with the darker side of her desire, and of a gradual decline in the value that she attaches to her life, as a result of the events and experiences that befall her during this time.

In *In the Name of Love*, Michelle Massé writes extensively on women’s apparently addictive complicity with their own emotional injury: “behaviours that first seem masochistically passive display a startling amount of initiative on the part of women” (42). This element of ambiguity is present in Nina’s actions, too. So, what I also set out to explore in Nina’s story, is Massé’s claim that there are ways in which women “use masochism as a strategy to create and maintain identity – not solely as a sad acknowledgment of absence” (44).

Being familiar with many of the common critical responses to representations of feminine masochism in literature by women, including those exemplified in analyses I had read of Anne Carson, Marguerite Duras, and Susanna Moore’s writing, I was aware of what reactions I might receive to this story. What I had observed was the tendency for women’s writing to be misunderstood or narrowly experienced when interpreted according to a feminist approach. In an attempt to readdress this, I have chosen to re-explore a series of representations of feminine masochism and sexual ambivalence by these three female authors, to present readings of literature that move beyond traditional methods, thus proposing a reading practice that is relevant and necessary to the reception and appreciation of my own writing.

The overarching aim of this dissertation is to provide an investigation of the function of morality in literature, and to support readings of transgressive fiction by female writers, not as true representations of the feminine psyche or ‘what women want’, but as imagined spaces that allow the reader to explore a myriad of subject positions, those that exist outside of social reality, those that differ from their own.

I would like to think that my own creative work, as well as that by other writers, will be appreciated outside of the presumption that female authors should necessarily seek to present positive role-models for women in their narratives. Similarly, I hope that female writers cease to feel it is a necessity to accompany the apparently passive or masochistic behaviour of women in their novels with some form of criticism, comment or moral reflection.

The interrelatedness of theory and fiction in the novel itself is an attempt to interrupt and interrogate prevailing modes of literary interpretation, just as the depiction of a confoundingly contradictory female character may be seen as a challenge to notions of condoned femininity. The acknowledgement and inclusion of aspects of feminism in my creative work have never prevented me from depicting potentially problematic feminine states of being – from desiring passivity to seeking completion in romantic union –these are all valid and important stories for me as a woman, and as a feminist, to tell.

Chapter 1: “Between the conscience and the unconscious”¹: Masochism and Morality in Susanna Moore’s *In The Cut*

No doubt there is an untheorizable element in literature...

Tzvetan Todorov²

The closing scene of Susanna Moore’s *In The Cut* remains one of the most shocking and powerfully written episodes of sexual violence by a contemporary female author. As her breasts are sliced from her body, Frannie Avery watches: “the nipple resting on the edge of the blade, the razor cutting smoothly, easily, through the taut cloth, through the skin, the delicate blue skein of netted veins in flood, the dark blood running like the dark river, the Indian river, the sycamore, my body so vivid” (261). This violent description later shifts from first to second, to third person, transporting the reader from literal descriptions of bodily pain to a disengaged poetic consciousness in which Frannie’s narration dissolves into quotation:

My skirt was heavy with blood, pooled between my thighs [...] it tickled when it dripped onto my skin, into my pubic hair, over the labia. I was not wearing any underwear. You remember [...] I am bleeding. I am bleeding to death. And I will be lucky if I die [...] Give me my Scallop shell of quiet (265-267).

What we also find in Frannie’s voice is an example of a female character speaking from, what Barbara Freeman identifies as, “a domain of experience that resists categorization, in which the subject enters into a relation with an otherness – social, aesthetic, political, ethical, erotic – that is excessive and unrepresentable” (2-3). Moore’s juxtaposition of meditative description with an account of dismemberment importantly prioritises this aesthetic aspect of the narrative. The juxtaposition also renders the scene more pleasurable, and therefore more troubling.

¹ Moore, cited by Thometz 2010.

² Todorov *Poetics of Prose* 246.

Frannie's dying voice, both in its femininity and its erotic otherness, embodies all that is often unrepresented in fiction by women that takes female sexuality as its topic. In its disturbing allure, this closing scene simultaneously opens a questioning of all that has been found problematic by literary theorists who have argued for some level of feminist responsibility in novels by and about women. As one response to Moore's text exemplifies, how can presumed feminists justify producing an "erotic story involving the matter-of-fact mutilation of women"? (Fuller & Francke 16). In response, I question whether the feminist critique of literature should necessarily posit a feminist utopia as its cause or indeed presume and seek an affirmative feminist narrative in female-authored texts.

From its opening pages, *In The Cut* is undeniably a novel about women, sexuality and violence. Frannie Avery is a divorcee living in New York, a creative writing teacher and literature professor who is researching a book on regional slang expressions. Because of her occupation, Frannie's frequent musings on the mutability of words, and her articulate reflections on modern women's sexual expression, find an appropriate context. The novel recollects a few months in the life of Frannie and her close friend, Pauline, a flighty artistic designer, as they are drawn into the investigation of a serial killer who is terrorizing the women of their neighbourhood. In this version of hardboiled detective fiction, Frannie is placed at the centre of the murder investigation. There she must enter the troubled domain of women's relationship to aggression, and negotiate the boundaries between what is sexual and what is violent from her vacillating perspective as fascinated investigator and eventual victim. Moore assembles an array of suspects: Frannie's student, Cornelius, who is obsessed with serial killer John Wayne Gacy, her disgruntled ex-boyfriend, Curtis, and the smouldering Detective Malloy with whom Frannie becomes drawn into a volatile sexual liaison. Each of these men are suspected as offenders by Frannie and connected to her by ties of unrequited lust and brute carnality – yet none are the killer. Following Pauline's murder, Frannie discovers, too late, that the real killer is Malloy's diminutive partner, Detective Rodriguez. In the conclusion already described, she too becomes his dismembered victim. Her throat and arms are gashed. Her nipples, severed from her breasts, are taken as his sinister souvenir.

“A dangerous combination for me. Language and passion,” Frannie states, as if acknowledging the tension inherent in her story (30). Certainly, responses to Moore’s foregrounding of violent eroticism within a romantic paradigm seems to bear testimony to the claim that a narrative centring on these dual themes is “troubling not only to women at large but [particularly] to feminists” (Radner 86). As Catherine Benoit reflects, Frannie’s apparent seeking of her own death in the affair with Malloy disturbed reviewers and critics because they saw the novel as an earnest examination of Woman’s inner instincts and desires (*Sex and Violence as Phantasm*, 2006). The dust jacket reviews exemplify this too: “Sex and savagery all the more disturbing for being rendered in stylish prose” (*New York Times*), “Extremes of sexuality and abuse” (*Miami Herald*), “Sex and violence [...] written by a woman” (*Washington Post*). These responses suggest that the detached nihilism of Frannie’s narration, coupled with the author’s female identity, doubles the disturbing and ‘dangerous’ nature of the novel’s graphic content.³

Certainly *In the Cut* does confront us with the subject of women’s relationship to violence. In *Ordinary Heroines*, Nadya Aisenberg claims that ‘new romance’ and crime novels such as Moore’s provide thought-provoking sites of identification for women because, whether victim, perpetrator or investigator, these female characters, as well as their readers, are forced to reflect on and negotiate the boundaries of what is appropriate in terms of their sexual behaviour (150). Crime fiction by women, in which a female character, such as Frannie, is placed at the centre of the plot and investigation, challenges readers’ expectations because it is engaged in an active process of “borrowing familiar features of detective fiction in order to turn them upside down and inside out” (154). However, Aisenberg makes a seemingly moral assumption in her interpretations. What she finds problematic is that these female characters “provide vicarious satisfaction” for female readers – a satisfaction that is dangerous because “they are hardly transformative messengers [...] like Erica Jong’s characters in *Fear of Flying*, they adopt the role of their

³ As stated in my introduction, I do not make the assumption of a standard feminist position on narrative representations of sexuality and violence, however, for the scope of this project I am forced to limit my discussion to the spaces of ambivalence that exist between these narratives and the common ‘orthodox’ feminist response: that romance plots involving masochistic female characters are damaging to women and the feminist project because they encourage women to respond erotically to the conditions of their own oppression.

male counterparts but in all other ways leave society as they find it” (154). Aisenberg’s response is one of disillusion and frustration, a reaction commonly expressed by feminist literary theorists in relation to texts such as Moore’s or Jong’s. Yet, should literature always, or ever, be expected to perform a positively transformative social function?

In her review of Jane Campion’s 2003 film adaptation of Moore’s novel, Linda Ruth William’s bemoans *In the Cut*’s “promotion as a feminist film, a female film”, suggesting that critics’ tendency to want to interpret the film according to gendered politics actually supplants its more important contribution to the erotic thriller genre (*Critical Desire* 420). In one such analysis, Lizzie Francke analyses the film adaptation almost exclusively as “a vehicle for feminist or post-feminist inquiry” (16). Francke argues for Frannie’s status as a masochistic feminine identity by quoting Freud’s 1932 lecture: “the suppression of women’s aggressiveness [...] favours the development of powerful masochistic impulses which succeed in binding erotically the destructive trends which have been diverted inwards.”⁴ Although the changes that were made to the narrative in the film adaptation⁵ do leave it more open to such psychoanalytic and feminist interpretations, the voice of Frannie in Moore’s book seems to refuse being reduced to this. Frannie is aware, she anticipates, and speaks back: “I know that. The difference between male and female perversion. The action of the man is directed toward a symbol, not himself. The woman acts against herself”, she states, as if replying directly to Francke’s Freudian critique, but “I am not a masochist” she refutes, “I know this” (118).

Attempts to read the narrative in search of a feminist subtext also risk failing to do justice to the literary irony and aesthetic precision of Moore’s novel. Liz Watkins, for example, identifies parallels between Frannie’s ‘stream of consciousness’ and Luce Irigaray’s notion of a specifically feminine relation to language. This relation to

⁴ The full quote reads: “The regressive Frannie’s sadistic matricidal dream – connected to her terror of abandonment and triggered by her fear of being castrated for having masturbatory fantasies, and by Pauline’s killing is over-determined, as are most dreams: Frannie’s mother in the dream is a projection of Frannie herself, suffering at the hands of her father, the seducer in her oedipal fantasy, who symbolises Malloy in the present” (16-19).

⁵ Pauline and Frannie are presented as half-sisters and are given a past history involving the unfaithfulness of their father and episodes of childhood abandonment. Susanna Moore has commented on this, stating: “Jane Campion gave Frannie a past in the movie, but I only in the vaguest way mention her childhood in the book. I did not want to justify her behaviour with psychological explanations or by an examination of her adolescence and young womanhood. The reader, I hope, will accept Frannie without amelioration, or elucidation, or justification. She’s not neurotic. I’m asking you to trust me on this [...] which in the end may be asking too much” (Personal interview, University of Adelaide, Australia, July 15 2009).

language, Irigaray suggests, rather than existing in binary opposition to phallic modes, reads “through a multiplicity of eroticised zones” (Watkins 204). Watkins identifies an analogous project in Moore’s development of Frannie’s ‘unconscious’ voice, yet, this reading seems an idealised understanding of Frannie’s story. Moore’s text does not necessarily set out to reject “the dominant form of discourse” (Watkins 206). In fact, in the sadomasochistic aspects of the relationship that ensues between Malloy and Frannie, there is a greater correlation between Moore’s novel and popular romance genres. Although Moore extends the element of male sexual violence to a plain beyond what might be expected in traditional romance, the plot of a woman’s fatal attraction to the malevolent male is a perennial one. According to Hilary Radner, taking pleasure in these pseudo masochistic plots poses a very real danger for female readers: “The reader, in her identification with the heroine, is led to misread the hero’s abuse as a sign of love [...] The woman as reader is silenced in much the same way [...] through her pleasure in a fantasy of misreading” (170-72). Radner concludes with the grievance that, although the idea that ‘romance’ rationalizes women’s suppression is central to feminine and feminist concerns, very few re-writings of the genre, such as Moore’s, adequately reflect this feminist awareness (175). Again, Radner’s conclusions imply that the behaviour of fictional characters afford a real danger to readers, and that the role of literature need be to perform a positive, socially transformative function. As I will later propose, it is these suggestions that I find more damaging to our enjoyment and understanding of literature than its failure to present a sanitised moral or political position.

When I interviewed Susanna Moore in 2009, I asked her to respond to arguments such as Radner’s which caution against the psychological damage that sadomasochistic romance plots might incur on female readers. In her own words, *In the Cut* intentionally presents an account of feminine experience that is violent, unhappy and “disturbing, it is meant to be.” In response to critics who have found Frannie’s seemingly masochistic behaviour troubling, Moore asserts that “her behaviour is less motivated by masochism than by her refusal to be afraid”. Subsequent misinterpretations of Frannie’s ‘bravery’ as self-destruction were similarly unintended: “I do not think that Frannie is a woman who seeks her own death, although I came to see that her death was inevitable, given her

refusal to compromise.”

In his examination of the interchangeability of sadism and masochism, Gilles Deleuze suggests that the “purified, self-conscious” (37) intelligence of sensual masochism, like that suggested in Frannie’s eloquent and reflective narration, has often served to nullify its perversion. Whether or not Moore’s literary style of storytelling was chosen to reflect this aim, to make poetic what is potentially disturbing, *In the Cut* does, above all, assert itself as a work of *literary* fiction.

What also emerges in the narrative is an exploration of the state of relations between men and woman as a sadomasochistic game in which the balance of power is interchangeable. Frannie’s practiced submission, Moore claims, is no more than a pleasurable “part of the dance that can occur between a man and a woman [...] a kind of play-acting, a replication of the relationship between men and women that is going on every second of the day.” Moore’s subversion of the detective genre is also the result of a definite aim, to “take the typical noir form, traditionally written by men, and mess with it”. Similarly, Moore commented that the concentration on stark sexual episodes in the novel was a deliberate resistance to being characterised as a ‘woman’s writer’:

which meant that I wrote poignantly about children and flowers and mothers [so] I spent two years reading all of the erotica and pornography I could find [...] and I decided to write about sex simply. Not describing feelings and thoughts, but the act itself in a straightforward, unembellished way.

Her version of ‘their eyes first met’ occurs in the gritty basement of a bar when Frannie stumbles upon the man she later presumes to have been Detective Malloy receiving fellatio from a prostitute: “he lifted his head slowly and saw me standing in the doorway, my hands crossed across my chest as if I was about to be crucified” (20). As Moore comments: “I wanted to show in *In The Cut* the subtle and constant violence that is displayed everywhere in the culture [...] I inserted, wherever I could, words about death and killing.” It is also, according to Moore, the particular words used by Malloy, such as ‘disarticulated’, that are the basis of Frannie’s initial interest in him, or at least what she lets herself believe in order to mask what in fact is an increasing sexual attraction:

‘How was she killed?’
‘Her throat was cut’, he paused ‘And then she was disarticulated.’
What a good word, I thought. Disarticulated (35).

Sue Thornham proposes that such passages serve as “a reminder of the ambiguities of words and (phallic) symbols, and of the difficulties for women in finding both a space and a voice. To be ‘disarticulated’ can also mean to be deconstructed or silenced” (38). Moore, however, contests this, suggesting that Frannie’s fascination with Malloy’s language is not intended to possess a political resonance, but initially serves a more base narrative role:

I wanted her to have a reason to be interested in the police officer that was not just sexual - interested in him in a way that allowed her to disguise from herself her sexual desire. She thinks at the beginning that it is about language - he uses such strange language, “disarticulated”, for example. But [of course the attraction *is* sexual and] she’s deluding herself, in the way that we all do.

For Susanna Moore, our relationship to language is a complex, self-reflexive and sometimes self-deceiving one. Reading too is an experience during which one is suspended in a fictional “free-space”, a non-reality “between the conscience and the unconscious... transported” (Thometz 2010). Frannie inhabits this ‘free-space’, roaming the fictional streets of Moore’s New York in evanescent reveries, collecting words and phrases to fuel her ambivalent fascination with their variable meanings. In this way, we might see Frannie as “the quintessential ‘flâneur’ [...] She experiences things around her profoundly, but momentarily” (Bickerton 2003). Throughout the novel, Frannie is seen to pick and choose from an unsettling vocabulary. She peruses a multiplicity of brutal and erogenous terminology like a vagrant in a city built of literary detritus, detailing her experiences in a tone of voice that shifts between detached nihilism and lyrical poeticism. Moore suggests that the use of this latter stream-of-consciousness at certain points in the narrative, such as the scene of Frannie’s murder, was a deliberate literary strategy: “Frannie is thinking – and then she’s *thinking* [...] in a looser, more fluid way, employed when she’s in trouble, when she’s drifting into a state occasioned by fear or pain” (personal interview).

Each time Moore returns to a stream-of-consciousness style, it is in the context of scenes which peak the highest points of what might be seen as transgressive sexuality. Just as Frannie recognises that what makes Malloy fatally enticing is his subscription to “the principle of deferral [...] the deferral of consciousness [...] the deferral of meaning”

(135), so Moore's text is attractive because of its ironic deferment of moral sense, its untheorizable nature. Although Moore subscribes to the form of the detective story, in which the opening scene of the crime gives way to the story of the investigation, and in which the characters move toward literal insight regarding the crime coupled with an inward learning about themselves, she periodically disobeys one of the fundamental generic elements. This is "that *style* in this type of literature must be perfectly transparent, imperceptible" (Todorov *Poetics of Prose* 46). Violent sexual encounters between Frannie and Malloy are often told in deeply lyrical passages blended with childhood memories, which render the images both brutal and unnervingly beautiful (See Moore, *In the Cut*, pages 129-13, 240-41). In a scene in which Malloy has anal intercourse with a semi-resistant Frannie, her internal monologue is strikingly poetic and resigned:

It was as if I had to pretend that I did not know what he was about to do to me. Opening what was closed. Insisting. Fixing me. Unsealing me. At last. I who did not wish to belong to one man. I who did not want to be fixed, to be held down, the closed opened, the heart broken (181).

Earlier, Frannie has reflected on the poetic effect of words that are mispronounced, misunderstood: "words that are incorrectly rendered have an onomatopoeic logic, as well as a kind of poetry, that is more appealing, sometimes even more accurate, than the correct usage" (47). In the opening pages of the novel, Frannie recalls explaining the process of stream of consciousness writing to her students: "Stream of consciousness, which some of them thought at first was stream of *conscienceness*" (47). Moore's extensive use of Frannie's first person interior monologue evokes a mindscape in which imagery is freely associated, in which a sense of conscience is often overpowered. Frannie's internal subjectivity is increasingly evoked through images of threat and disorientation: "nonsensically inappropriate pieces of information stream through my head, as if my unconscious were bombarding me with words and phrases [...] an enemy agent subverting radio broadcast" (220). Importantly, stream of consciousness, the central technique of modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, is a literary device most often associated with fiction. Moore's use of this stylistic tool might be read as a deliberate decision to highlight the literary nature of the text. The term 'stream-of-consciousness' made its transition into literary terminology in 1890 when psychologist and philosopher, William James, introduced the idea in his book *The Principles of*

Psychology (239). William's brother, the novelist Henry James is also invoked when Frannie refers to "the Henry James side of Washington Square" (22), evoking an image of a fictionalised New York that is built for the reader as a storehouse of literary mythology. Many times, Frannie's stream of musings on language, the instability of the meanings of words, and the meaning of dreams and memories, blend into one: "I think memories are like dreams" she says, "Not reliable proof of anything. I can't prove a memory any more than I can prove a dream" (170). In this way, Moore's novel is tinged with the intertextuality, self-consciousness and paranoia characteristic of many postmodernist narratives. Her rendering of the complexity of female desire seems both informed and freed by its literary debt to post-modernist narrative strategies. Sue Thornham's claim that Frannie "performs the acts of 'dispersion and fragmentation', the 'theft' of language which Barthes sees as essential to the rupturing of dominant modes of writing and reading" identifies an effective postmodernist aesthetic within both the film and written text (33-46).

Moore's self-reflexivity and deferral to the mechanisms of fiction-making effectively question a moral or psychological interpretation of the narrative. There are many instances of reflection on the process of writing and story telling in conversations between Frannie and Malloy: 'How do you know I'm a writer?' I asked. 'I can tell,' he said. 'You're making shit up in your head all the time'" (44). In this way, *In the Cut* becomes a literary text that "demands a self-consciousness from the reader [...] a consciousness of the mechanism of language itself as structure [...] and analysis in the act of reading" (Radner 79). These are functions that Hilary Radner identifies as criteria for distinguishing 'literary' fiction from 'popular' fiction, arguing that the "distinction between the high art text and the popular text depends not on content or concept but on the [...] text having a 'double semiotic nature'", both in its manipulations of language and genre and the presence of symbolic sub-strata that enhance the function of the text as an autonomous sign (79). What Radner does not consider, however, is whether or not the inevitable self-consciousness and analytic reading that such novels require, might successfully avow what she has earlier identified as a danger to readers' moral and or psychological integrity. It could be argued that, as a work of elaborately written fiction, *In the Cut* takes us to a literary space where questions of moral responsibility are eclipsed

by the distancing effects of the texts aesthetic successes. But is an artful play with language and form ever enough to truly serve this function?

Certainly, Moore's experimentation also occurs on the level of genre. The genre in which Moore's text falls is asserted via an informal literature review (Woolf, Naipaul and Hemingway are referenced in the opening pages). When Frannie explains the considerations of each text that she has or has not included for her students in the creative writing course she teaches, she comments: "I wondered if they would like Graham Greene. *Brighton Rock* perhaps. But I had forgotten, I don't know how, the dream in which the murderer, straight razor in hand, says only two words: 'such tits'" (12). This works powerfully as a prolepsis of Frannie's murder – as does the excerpt given at this point from *The Passionate Man's Pilgrimage* by Walter Raleigh ("Give me my scallop shell of quiet"), later recalled by Frannie's dying voice. In another of the opening passages, Frannie comments on the difficulties of explaining the concept of postmodernist 'irony' to her students, noting how "Cornelius said he preferred realism to irony because irony turned conceived wisdom on its head". She isn't sure if he means "conventional" or "perceived" wisdom instead, but is too "distracted by an image of wisdom being turned on its head" to clarify his sentence (13). Just as Frannie is fascinated by the idea of an ironic inversion of tradition, so Moore's text sets out to enact such transformations by replacing the traditional male hero at the centre of detective fiction with a female writer. Moore prepares us for the forthcoming novel by placing it in a generic context that she will in part 'turn on its head'.

Several more direct repetitions and inversions occur in *In the Cut* at the level of narrative events, too. For example, when Frannie handcuffs Malloy to her kitchen chair and makes love to him toward the close of the novel ("I lifted his handcuffs from his waistband [...] I felt such desire for him, such murderous and vengeful desire, that I was trembling" (249)), what we see is a direct reversal of that earlier scene in which Malloy had played out a dominating role with Frannie, placing her 'under arrest' before having anal intercourse with her in an office of the police station. Again the sense made of this reprisal may be a statement concerning the interchange of power in relations between men and woman, as simply a pleasurable 'part of the dance'. As Deleuze suggests, "A sadist is always at the same time a masochist" (43) and the most common formula for

explaining masochism, whether psychologically true or not, is “sadism turned on its head” (106).

Frannie’s attraction to Malloy, who she presumes, until very late in the story, is the murderer, might also be enlightened by writings on eroticism by Bataille in which the domain of eroticism is envisaged as housing “the domain of violence” (*Eroticism* 13). In Bataille’s writings “death is vertiginous, death is hypnotizing [...] this fascination is the dominant element in eroticism”, for both women and men (12-13). Leo Bersani, in *Intimacies*, alludes to a similar, yet more contemporary identification of the relationship between death and sexuality where, writing of the practice of ‘bare-backing’ by HIV positive males, he suggests “the potentially fatal fuck is a powerful aphrodisiac” (38-39). Throughout the narrative, described by Catherine Benoit as a “clever ‘battle’ between Eros and Thanatos”, the boundaries between sex and death become indiscrete. In a passage in which Detective Malloy describes his method for solving a homicide he says: “You begin to put it together. Slowly. You take a flashlight and you go over every inch of the body [...] Your whole world at that moment comes down to that body.” “Like sex” Frannie says (225). Earlier, Frannie has exemplified her own acknowledgment of the interchangeability of the two: “I have new words for the dictionary [...] *to do*, v., to fuck, *to do*, v., to kill” (149).

To return to my earlier questioning, are expositions of language, and experimentations with genre, no matter how clever, ever enough to successfully avert the problematic moral possibilities of this violent plot? In the words of Bersani, can we successfully “forestall the agitations of violence by admiring violence as a finished aesthetic product”? (*The Forms of Violence* 64). In truth, experimentations with form and style have been ongoing since the advent of the fiction form and have, alone, largely done little to achieve an aim such as this. While both Moore’s novel and Campion’s film adaptation have been either praised or vilified according to their contribution toward a feminist consciousness or conscience (see Fuller & Francke, Hopgood, and Konow), perhaps neither the film (in giving Frannie a gun and thus letting her overpower her

killer)⁶ or the book (in which she succumbs to a bloody death), are truly understood when we view them as narratives concerned with addressing feminism and its discontents.

Similarly, perhaps both the critical feminist questioning of the novel's politics, as well as Moore's or my defences of it, are unnecessary practices that continue to privilege the wrong elements of the text. According to Derek Attridge's writing on the ethics of fiction, these modes of interpretation may do damage to the novel as a work of literature. By reading literature in this way, he suggests, we may not have missed something of the novel, we may have missed *everything* (36). Moore's is not a story that necessarily seeks to present a definitive statement or solution to the problem of post-feminist heterosexual relationships. In trying to define a political position from the narrative, the more subtle nuances of emotion in the plot may be lost. For what the text does do is evocatively render the bleak unhappiness of Frannie and Pauline as they acknowledge the brutality of their relationships, yet still attempt to salvage what they can of the idea of romance.

Jane Campion has commented that the real threat in *In The Cut* is not the murderer but the woman's belief in the notion of eternal love: "the dream of finding a soul mate is the most dangerous – it's not that relationships don't matter, but it's dangerous to have such extraordinary hopes" (Fuller & Francke 18). Perhaps the most powerful recurring symbol of this notion is Pauline's deceased Aunt's charm bracelet given to Frannie. In the initial scene of the bracelet being given and received, we share Frannie's growing horror as she notes the odd array of dangling charms:

There was a tiny baby carriage. A cocktail shaker. A telegram [...] there was a gold toilet, and a tiny utensil that looked like it might be a poultry bulb-baster. 'What's this?' I asked [...] She gave me a slightly sinister smile. 'Open the cocktail shaker.' I did. Inside was a little gold baby. I tipped it into my palm. I stared at her, not understanding. But beginning to understand. Shocked. 'A lover gave her this?' (51).

The bracelet presents an inversion of the courtship narrative. The baby is not in the carriage, but is an aborted foetus encased in the cocktail shaker, side by side with a toilet and the implicitly violent bulb-baster. These are charms for the termination of pregnancy rather than romance and marriage. This is one example of how Moore's novel presents

⁶ The altered ending of the screenplay can be viewed as an example of an auteur succumbing to the persistent Hollywood yearning for optimistic narrative resolution that Campion delivers via a recuperation of the relationship between Frannie and Malloy, albeit a transgressive union which suitably concludes a violently disturbed courtship.

images of the expression of female desire “beyond, and in spite of, the sadomasochistic ‘courtship fantasy’” (Thornham 40), in which Frannie’s relationship with Molloy is just one possible example of post-feminist heterosexual desire.

Unlike the heroines earlier discussed by Radner, who are subject to a relationship in which their romantic satisfaction depends upon a “willingness to relinquish her control of language”, in which “her sexual desires must align themselves with a desire to regress to a prelinguistic state” (75), Frannie is actively engaged in an excavation and reclamation of language. Frannie revels in the masculine brutality of slang, acknowledging the sexism but not rejecting it, accepting words for the stories and histories that they contain, she says: “words themselves – in their wit, exuberance, mistakenness and violence – are thrilling to me: *virginia*, n., vagina (as in ‘he penetrated her Virginia with a hammer’)” (85). Frannie is an example of, as Bakhtin suggests, the manner in which “novelistic images, profoundly double-voiced and double-linguaged, are born” through an author’s struggle with external perspectives and theoretical discourses (348). The text itself represents an exploration of the fluidity of language and consciousness, dream and memory. As an elusive experience, more than a testimony to the author’s political stance, fiction is, as Frannie says of dreams, “not reliable proof of anything” (170). It is a kaleidoscope view of the world in which fragments of experience are haphazardly arranged, beautifully magnified – sometimes distorted and curiously emphasized.

Just as Moore’s novel is a pertinent example of the shifting literary spaces of contemporary fiction, her critics’ responses exemplify the ways in which expectations of women’s writing of female sexuality may have changed post-feminism. It is Moore’s fluid transgressions of genre, and of the feminist expectations of a female-authored work, that arouse debate, as well as make *In the Cut* a valuable and innovative text according to Todorov’s notion that “every great book establishes the existence of two genres [...] that of the genre it transgresses [...] and that of the genre it creates” (*Poetics of Prose* 43). My reading moves beyond a moral appraisal, into an understanding of transgressive fiction by female writers as an imaginative artform. Moore’s representations of femininity are not psychologically ‘dangerous’ to the female reader as such, or a purported threat to the

achievements of feminism. They are opportunities to explore and inhabit fleeting and alternative subjectivities, pleasurable because they differ from the reader's own. As Moore herself stated during my interview, "I don't think that books should be polemical. The role of the writer is to render the world, not alter it." An essential element of the pleasure of reading comes from the very recognition of the distance and difference between our own world, and the untheorizable spaces of literature.

Chapter 2: “Another way of Loving”¹: Morality and Ambivalence in the Fiction of Marguerite Duras

The text is always the transformation of another transformation.

Tzvetan Todorov²

It might be said that each of Marguerite Duras' novels tells the same basic tale of love and suffering, each of them, ascending to the extreme in their open-ended exploration of these dual themes. In *Moderato Cantabile*, *Ten Thirty on a Summer Night*, and *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*, sex and death, romance and violence, are strongly intertwined. In each of these three narratives, Duras explores women's ambivalent complicity with their suffering in relationships with men, and their subsequent descents toward madness and death. It is the psychological confusion and ambiguous morality of love, “the latent man-woman-you-love-me-therefore-I-don't-desire-you conflict” (Adler 187), that recurrently interests Duras.

Ten Thirty on a Summer Night tells the story of Maria, her husband Pierre and their friend, Claire, alongside that of Rodrigo Paestra, his unnamed wife and her lover. During one claustrophobic summer night, both parties are brought together in the hotel of a town where Paestra is hiding-out after murdering his adulterous wife. While Paestra resignedly awaits the dawn and his imminent capture and execution, Maria is trapped in sleepless despair as she observes the growing desire between Pierre and Claire. She too waits in fear of the new day that will bring the consummation of that affair. Maria makes an attempt to assist Paestra's escape but it is futile. Neither can evade their imminent fates. Maria, exiled by the new pairing of Claire and Pierre, sees the death of her marriage reflected in the violent murder committed by Rodrigo Paestra.

Duras' short story *Moderato Cantabile* similarly tells of Anne Desbaresdes and Chauvin's fixation on a woman murdered by her husband. The pair meets incidentally in a café following the violent public crime in which a man first stabs, then kisses and

¹ Adler 279

² Todorov *Poetics of Prose* 244

caresses his dead wife. During a series of meetings that form the core of the narrative, Anne and Chauvin discuss their fascination with the murderer's motivations. It is revealed that not only is Chauvin a former employee of Anne's wealthy husband, but that their nascent desire for each other is also increasing. The pair's macabre determination to piece together the destructive nature of that other relationship, which concluded in murder, brings them closer and precipitates Anne's 'fall', her own symbolic death in the eyes of her social set.

Finally, in *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*, Duras details the progressive breakdown of the eponymous character. The key event of the novel occurs when Lol is abandoned by her fiancé, Michael Richardson, who leaves her for another woman during a society ball. Following this, Lol sinks into a deep depression, alienating herself from others and from the very idea of love. Years later, in a non-satisfactory marriage, Lol is awakened from her somnambulistic state by a chance sighting of her childhood friend, Tatiana, who was her companion during the original ballroom episode. She renews her friendship with the also married Tatiana and initiates a complex sexual liaison between herself, Tatiana and Tatiana's lover, Jacques Hold. Lol revels in her secret observations of the couple's trysts as the narrative progresses toward her eventual return to the site of the ball. It is a pilgrimage that she completes with Jacques, and one that ultimately returns her to madness and despair.

Tzevatan Todorov's notion that "different texts by an author appear as so many variations of each other [...] comment upon and enlighten each other" (*Poetics of Prose* 244) is highly relevant to Duras' narratives. Western critics have noted that the nature of desire is invariably represented in her fiction as, "on the part of men, a certain brutality and a degree of voyeurism; on the part of women, the desire to be looked at" which advances toward "the desire to be beaten, perhaps to death, by their lovers" (Selous 210). The forthright representation of this narrative progression in Duras' oeuvre has understandably aroused critical debate. As Leslie Hill reflects, concern has surrounded "the extent to which readers, particularly women readers, should – or should not – subscribe to what, for many readings of the novel, is claimed to be a fundamental – or perversely essentialised – truth about female desire" (Lechte 144).

In response, I continue my dialogue with feminist literary studies to propose possible reasons why critics may be impelled to employ a moral interpretation to some fictions more than others, and how this may limit our understanding of them as works of literature. In the case of writing such as that of Duras, for which an atmosphere of moral ambiguity and desirous excess is an essential element of its aesthetic effect, perhaps there are other reading methods that more insightfully contextualise her representations of femininity, methods that may still apply theoretical ideas, yet in a manner that is illuminating rather than reductive.

Feminist literary theorists have often argued that authors, in particular female authors, have a moral responsibility for the psychological effects the text may have on the reader and on the achievements of feminism in general.³ This is a view supported by Carla Kaplan's statement that, even in fictional narratives, "idealising the gap between a contestatory and a collaborative aesthetic can jeopardize feminist literary history" (32). From this standpoint, narratives such as Duras', which do not contest passive or masochistic femininities, are identified as not only complicating, but also perhaps damaging, the feminist literary project regardless of their fictional nature. For example, Ellen Friedman and Miriam Fuchs argue that Duras' texts are "risky" in relation to feminism as she presents a series of seemingly undefined female characters whose narcissism and vanity delude them into seeking self-discovery through romantic devotion and passive abandonment. According to them, Duras' fiction presents a hazardous image of femininity by "linking the traditional metaphor in the women's literature of self-realisation – sexual discovery as self-discovery – with the failure to define a female subject" (292).

It cannot be denied that Duras' novels also often focus on women's obsession with violent crimes of passion; a theme that challenges feminist aims in a patriarchal society where "women's attraction to violent aggression cannot be unmixed with anxiety and distaste" (Cameron & Fraser 50). As a result, feminist critics of Duras' narratives have found them to be highly disturbing representations of femininity. Trista Selous, for

³For example, see Elisabeth Bronfen's *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity And The Aesthetic* and Helena Michie's *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures And Women's Bodies*.

example, perceives readers' identification with the dubious power of Duras' women as problematic: "I felt uncomfortable with the form their power took", she says, "for it arose most frequently out of their position as object of [men's] desire [...] a certain passivity and dependence [...] the woman herself seems somehow to disappear" (242). Selous concludes that masculine notions of female sexuality are disappointingly *not* subverted by the representations of femininity in Duras' texts; rather, her portrayal of women is detrimentally "consonant with established phallogentric accounts of feminine desire" (217).

Similarly, Dennis Porter confirms that Duras' is "no feminist in a programmatic and political sense", that her writing is instead imbued with the ambivalent "honour of dishonour", the "determination to go to the end of ones desire" (234) which moves her narratives in a direction unsupportive of the ideals of mainstream feminism. Porter claims that in narratives such as *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*, *Ten Thirty on a Summer Night* and, most of all, *Moderato Cantabile*, Duras' writing "overwhelms the discourse of political correctness to the point where [...] she seems to be illustrating the misogynist assertion that 'every woman loves a fascist'" (228). Her female characters are troubling to feminism in their masochistic "willingness to seek out and face down the shattering insights yielded by the experience of extreme pain/pleasure" (215). Leslie Hill also acknowledges the possibility that in *Ten Thirty on a Summer Night* and *Moderato Cantabile*, "the death of a woman at the hands of her lover, is somehow endorsing violence against women or automatically linking heterosexuality with oppression" (*Apocalyptic Desires* 63). Hill sees this tension as an unsettling, yet essential, element of the text's potency: "the disturbing intensity of Duras' text lies in its refusal to moralise sexuality or normalise the excessive nature of desire" (63).

Certainly, as Hill states, it cannot be claimed that Duras is "a feminist according to the Anglo-American prescription of a writer who presents 'positive' images of women's desire" (*French Studies* 89). Indeed, reading her narratives with the aim of locating such images will inevitably be a disappointing process. Even more disappointing, however, is that, in reading her texts in this manner, we may fail to appraise the many ways in which they function aesthetically, powerfully, as works of modern literary fiction that explore troubled sites of passion, violence and feminine ambivalence. While Duras can be seen in

some ways to reveal women's attachment to the extremes of violent passion, she can also be seen to explore successfully – through a repetitive series of female characters – the contradictory results and ambivalent experiences of love for women, which cannot unequivocally be seen as antithetical to a broader conception of feminist aims. What I will now explore in more depth, are the differences in response to her writings between Anglo-American critics and those in France, who have, like myself, largely found her stories to be less problematic. As Katherine Jensen writes, the almost polarised differences in response to Duras' writings, may be in part attributed to the fact that “the French context in which [she] spoke, wrote, published and was read [...] differs enormously not only from the context of American feminism then [...] but also from the current “post-feminist” treatment [...] of the feminine and women.” (Jensen 193).

Laure Adler makes the observation that “the character of Lol is perpetually running away; from common sense, from the definition of love, from social order, from all attempts at categorization” and this statement might just as perfectly be applied to Duras' writing in its resistance of ideological purity (249). For this reason, I detour into some other avenues of understanding Duras' particular presentation of feminine sexuality, aside from what have been the sometimes seemingly ‘moral’ feminist responses such as those outlined above. The multifaceted cultural and historical contexts of Duras' writing need also be considered and acknowledged as undoubted influences in her texts and the ideologies present in them.

Like other French writers such as Charles Baudelaire, Duras' narratives identify with a particular French aesthetic of *flânerie*. In Baudelaire's words, the flâneur exists “passionately” in the midst of “the fugitive and the infinite” as an “observer, philosopher [...] the painter of the passing moment and of all the suggestions of eternity that it contains” (Mazlish 49). In Duras' novels, the reader is invited into an experience of vivid observation, often characterised by an elevation of the criminal and the underclass with no judgemental reflection. The stories glimpsed by the flâneur focus on “the fleeting, fragmentary quality of modern urban life [...] the down and outs: the rag pickers, the semi-criminal and the deviant” (Wilson 54) such as the characters in *Ten Thirty on a Summer Night*. Another thematic comparison that may be drawn between Baudelaire and

Duras is both writers' preoccupation with depictions of an almost necrophiliac desire. As Leo Bersani reveals, to a certain extent, in *Les Fleurs Du Mal* and poems such as 'You, Whom I Worship', "necrophilia is the Baudelairian erotic ideal" (*Baudelaire and Freud* 70). Like that of Duras, Baudelaire's poetry and prose "aspires to a sexuality compatible with death [where] crime is in the service of a certain type of erotic pleasure".⁴ What both Baudelaire and Duras' narratives invite us to enter is a space where "ultimately there is perhaps only one escape from the 'hell' of insatiable desire [...] that is murder" (*Baudelaire and Freud* 69).

Laure Adler reports that Duras had a self-confessed attraction to rogues and outlaws, and moved from the Baudelairian proposition that prostitutes or 'painted ladies' be envisaged as the female embodiment of the male flâneur, to derive a new definition of love: Duras sought to "destroy the very notion of love in the name of another way of loving" (279). She interviewed dozens of prostitutes in search of a new definition of physical love. The lesson Duras learned from them was, "make love with anyone. Mating is all that counts. Availability is all that counts" (Adler 279). So too does the French practice *échangisme*⁵ for example, contextualise Duras' writing within Parisienne culture: "the whole Parisian atmosphere of pleasure and excess, both sexual and political, did create an environment in which women were able to gain certain freedoms" (Wilson 56).

Duras' Parisienne literary contemporaries from the 1960s to 1980s, such as Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Julia Kristeva, present analogous descriptions of women's experience of femininity and desire to Duras'. In France, her work was published and read in an already welcoming analytical environment. However, as Katherine Jensen argues, these French women's attempt to "mine beneath the western [...] vision of woman" was not a project that was easily translated, or necessarily meaningful in transcultural contexts: "In view of [Duras'] descriptions of woman's eroticism and passion as a mortal wound, burning fire, a desire impossible to satisfy, we might wonder to what extent women in America have historically lived erotic desire in the same way" (186).

⁴ In his essay on 'Desire and Death', Bersani argues that, in Baudelaire's literary world, there was "a pendulum-like movement in human experience between 'two infinities, heaven and hell' [...] barbarity were inevitably destined to take its place in the drama of love, and carnal pleasure led, according to an ineluctable Satanic logic, to the delights of crime" (*Baudelaire and Freud* 67-70).

⁵ Sanctioned wife-swapping.

Duras' writing appears to purposely embody paradoxes and contradictions. In order to understand Duras' creative project, we need to comprehend "what it meant to be a woman whose sense of identity and place in the world were shaped [by the] cultural and literary history of twentieth-century France" (Winston, *Postcolonial Duras 2*), a task that is difficult for critics in contemporary Anglo-American contexts and has no doubt contributed to often narrow interpretations of her work.

The differences in the reactions of critics to Duras' work might certainly be traced to their reading of the fictions in an environment alien to their place of creation, without the context and history of accompanying French culture and critical thought. It is also important to note, that, in France, Duras novels were works of popular fiction, read widely and eagerly by a broad spectrum of society, rather than promoted as avant-garde explorations of feminine desire as they have been in western translation (Jensen 193). This too, may account for the less judgmental reflection of French criticism. In an analysis that contrasts quite starkly to those of Anglo-American critics, Jacques Guicharnaud writes:

The novels of Marguerite Duras [...] are especially refreshing in that the heroines have no need to become soldiers, social workers, or lesbians in order to live or love or suffer. Even when they seem to show 'virile' courage [...] their surface exaggerated obstinacy...serves them in their very feminine quest, an unchanging quest in Marguerite Duras' work (cited by Winston *Forever Feminine* 467).

Guicharnaud's review seems to encourage the perception of Duras' novels as an ongoing exploration of a spectrum of feminine experience, rather than writings that confirm a single disturbing truth about women's' acquiescence with patriarchal society and misogynistic desires. As James Williams suggests, polarised interpretations of Duras often emerge between French and American critics, exposing the "contradictory and impassioned feelings about women that mark western culture [...] because she unsettles and remaps female subjectivity and sexuality" (*Revisiting Duras 2*) – into a different and darker continent than it has conventionally been presented in western culture and literature.

While I am unwilling to locate a feminist project in Duras' writing, it could be argued that Duras rebalances literary history with a feminine exploration of traditionally masculine libertine freedoms. Whilst the Sadean concept of the libertine has itself caused conflicts in feminism,⁶ it also champions a kind of equality in that "everyone is invited to pursue to the limit the demands of his [*sic*] lust, and to realize them" (Lacan, *Book VII* 97). Sade's texts take us to a realm of excess, much in the same way that we are transported by the violent desire of Baudelaire and Duras' writing. As Lacan claims, in a passage that might also easily be applied to an assessment of Duras, "in order to [...] open the floodgates of desire, what does Sade show us on the horizon? In essence, pain...the outer extremity of pleasure [...] unbearable to us" (98). In presenting narratives that depict women's transformative and transgressive sexual experiences, Duras too presents desire as site of ambivalence and excess.

We find examples of this in *Moderato Cantabile*, where extremes of sex and death are mimetically linked. When Anne and Chauvin kiss, it is not love and desire but fear, terror and death that absorb them; their hands meet in a "mortuary ritual" (11). The character of Anne is imbued with "obsessive sexual desire lived to the limit of annihilation" (Bree xii). Her affair with Chauvin progresses to the moment when she is metaphorically killed by actions that satisfy her adulteress passion:

Anne Desbaresdes waited a minute, then she tried to stand up. She succeeded in getting to her feet. Chauvin was not looking at her. The men still kept their eyes turned away from this adulteress. She stood there. 'I wish that you were dead,' Chauvin said.
'I am,' Anne Desbaresdes said (118).

Just as Anne's "desire seems to have been awakened by the murder of the woman" (Selous 206-207), so too does her involvement in, and fascination with, the love affair bring her own destruction.

Like Anne Desbaresdes, Maria of *Ten Thirty on a Summer Night*, is seduced by the violent death of Rodrigo Paestra's wife: "He had split her head open with one shot of his gun [...] dead at nineteen. Still naked." (123). Paestra's murder of his young wife is described by a villager as an invited punishment, the result of her sexual abandon: "He

⁶For whilst it "gives libertines complete power over all women indifferently, whether they like it or not, [it] conversely also liberates those same women from all the duties that civilized society imposes on them in their conjugal, matrimonial, and other relations" (Lacan, *Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 97).

found her with Perez. Who wouldn't have done the same [...] once she was married; she wanted every man in the village. What was there to do? Kill her" (124). Later, as Maria observes the attraction developing between Claire and Pierre, she moves closer to her own demise. Her solitary observation of their first kiss culminates in the recognition of the loss of her former love. The death of that marriage emerges from images of human desire as excessive and cannibalistic:

She could see them fully outlined against the moving sky. While Pierre kissed her, his hands touched Claire's breasts [...] there was no room that night, in that town for love. Maria lowered her eyes before this reality [...] his hand now resting on her hips, hers forever, while she, she, her hands unable to move as they clung to her shoulders, her mouth against his mouth, she was devouring him (138-140).

Duras recurses to a certain literary self-reflexivity in a following passage that identifies the end of Pierre and Maria's 'love story' or relationship, and what is also literally the conclusion of the narrative. Our enjoyment of these potentially disturbing scenes is enabled by Duras' narrative constructions that highlight the fictional nature of the story, thus distancing the reader from the events depicted and from her characters' troubling experiences:

[Pierre] felt an urgent taste for a dead love [...] there was about her [Maria] the irreplaceable perfume of his power over her, of his breach of love, of his wishing her well, there was about her the odour of their dying love [...] 'It's the end of our story,' Maria said. 'Pierre, it's all over. The end of the story' (194).

Duras draws attention to conventional narrative form (beginning, middle and end), whilst simultaneously playing with her readers' expectation for narrative clarity and finality. The narrative is, of course, characteristically inconclusive; Claire, Pierre and Maria are left in limbo. We must draw our own conclusions from the serial episodes of psychological confusion we are invited to enter. Similarly, frequent shifts between first, second and third person occur in the narration of *The Ravishing of Lol Stein* and, many times, series of scenes undergo various re-writings and re-occur in the narrative as dreamlike reprisals. In this way, Duras' writing both invites and resists interpretation, privileging instead the fleeting, fragmentary quality of life, the unassimilable confusion and ambiguity of emotion.

As David Brooks writes, the literature of excess may be defined as “literature that is *about* excess of some kind”, but “might also suggest work which treats something excessively” in its manner of presentation rather than content, for example there are “more adjectives, more commas or, alternatively, use so few that even the most apparent of their meanings blur” (45). In this way, Brooks argues that “excess can manifest itself structurally, in distortions, violations, or aberrations of conventional framework” (47). In literature, these distortions most often occur in the context of generic and stylistic conventions. To contemporary Western readers, Duras’ writing is both excessive in content and in form. The disturbing love story Duras tells and re-tells may be often subjected to moral interpretation because it is the kind of writing that Barbara Freeman suggests, “involves an encounter with a radical alterity that remains unassimilable [that] marks the very limits of the representable, for it...presents the subject with an unrecuperable excess of excess” (11). It is the subsequent urge to account for the inexplicable and disturbing elements in Duras’ writing that may have contributed to the tendency for it to be interpreted through moral methods of categorization for, perhaps critics tend to resort to fixed theoretical modes of interpreting literature when faced with texts that are unexpected, ambivalent or excessive. As suggested by Derek Attridge, the “urge to allegorise” when interpreting literature is related to our desire to retreat to the safety of utilising a “traditional trope to make sense of texts that, for one reason or another, are puzzling when taken at face value” (39).

John Lechte identifies the puzzling nature of love envisaged in Duras’ oeuvre, arguing justifiably that she specialises in depictions of “this strange way of loving” (141). If, as Duras suggested, her fiction was part of the quest toward exploring “another way of loving”, perhaps what is required are alternative methods of reading to adequately do justice to her narratives. Though there are arguably many approaches that might illuminate Duras’ depictions of transgressive femininity in a non-moral and non-reductive way, psychoanalytic literary analysis is one mode of understanding that has provided more expansive readings of Duras. Freud’s writings on feminine masochism, and Lacan’s

published conversations with Duras, have often been used to enlighten the seemingly transgressive behaviour of her characters.⁷

In *Remains to Be Seen*, Liliane Papin proposes that all of Duras' characters are irrevocably changed survivors of a psychologically destructive event following which love relationships have become for them more haunting and fluid: "they gain a new freedom, a way of being, which is no longer dictated by social conventions" (Ames 93). Papin's interpretation is based on the idea that love is related to infantile experiences of primordial separation and loss of the love object. She suggests: "Duras' heroines...accept the fact that love cannot be contained that it 'circulates' and 'starts over again' as a repetition of the primal experience of oneness and separation" where "death will always come as the ultimate experience" (Ames 85).

The Ravishing of Lol Stein is the Duras novel most commonly critiqued in psychoanalytic terms. In Freudian psychoanalysis, a desire, such as Lol's, to seek out triangular affairs is related to the early Oedipal phase of childhood development. The young child seeks to possess the attention of the parent of the opposite sex and views the same-sex parent as a potential rival and a competitor:

The Oedipal, triangular stage of development is a fertile source of later love conflicts. The rivalry and eventual defeat of the Oedipal phase may foster a pre-disposition to triangular affairs as a means to eventual triumph—or a compulsion to repeat the original trauma, reflecting a need to repeat triangular passion through competition with a rival (Bristol 2001).

Similarly, a Freudian psychoanalytic approach situates the source of Lol's masochistic compulsion in the early Oedipal and anal phases of development where the desire is found to stem from "the need to create/recreate that 'most momentous' repressed phase of masochistic feminine desire in which being beaten and being loved become one and the same" (Massé 67). Duras' texts are undeniably concerned with the 'problem' of desire; excesses of desire, love's meeting point with violence and sexuality's potential morbidity, which have also been major fields of 20th-century psychoanalytic inquiry. Just as psychoanalysis seeks to elucidate transgressions, disturbance and moral ambiguity more than any other form of psychological therapy, so too may it be one of the more

⁷ For example, see Germaine Bree's introduction to *Four Novels: The Square/Moderato Cantabile/10:30 On A Summer Night/The Afternoon Of Mr Andesmas*, as well as Susan Cohen's *Women and Discourse in the Fiction of Marguerite Duras: Love, Legends, Language*.

enlightening methods for exposition of narratives such as Duras' that are bound by an abundance of ambivalent longing.

Certainly, Lol's behaviour following her abandonment appears to be an example of psychological disturbance. In *Critical Desire*, Linda Ruth Williams adopts a neo-Freudian perspective regarding the interrelatedness and interdependency of pleasure and trauma in female desire. Williams states "the problem of masochism, within which the subject takes pleasure in pain culminating in the final loss of self [...] underlines the sense that there is pleasure to be had in trauma" (16). It is in this way that the observation of Michael Richardson's desire for the other woman, Anne-Marie Stretter, seems to catalyse Lol's obsessive madness and her later urgency to rebuild the love triangle from which she was originally excluded:

With lowered eyes, they moved past her. Anne-Marie Stretter began to descend the stairs, and then he, Michael Richardson. Lol's eyes followed them across the garden. When she could no longer see them, she slumped to the floor, unconscious (13).

Lol is literally 'knocked out' by betrayal in the moment when she loses sight of her lover and the other woman. Hence, Tatiana identifies Lol overtly as a masochist because her only capacity for pleasure is tied to the memory of observing that pivotal ballroom abandonment: "A real masochist," says Tatiana, "she must constantly be thinking about the same thing [...] when dawn arrives with incredible cruelty and separates her from the couple formed by Michael Richardson and Anne-Marie Stretter, forever, forever" (36).

As in *Moderato Cantabile* and *Ten Thirty on a Summer Night*, the loss of love equates with a loss of identity for the woman. The formation of the adulterous liaison catalyses Lol's symbolic erasure: "she sees herself [...] at the end, always, in the centre of a triangular construction [...] her whole being filled with a chronic, hopeless feeling of panic [...] she is no one" (35). Yet Lol's recreation of the scene, via her observation and eventual involvement in Jacques and Tatiana's adulterous trysts, transforms the pain of her exclusion into pleasure. In Lol's story, sadism-masochism and scopophilia-exhibitionism are inextricably linked. The pleasure derived from both binary states is linked to the process of reversal of content and reversal of aims: "the active aim (to torture, to look at) is replaced by the passive aim (to be tortured, to be looked at). Reversal of content is found in the single instance of the transformation of love into hate"

(Zizek & Salacl 70). At the conclusion of the novel, the two women are bonded in precisely this violent fusion of identity. Jacques's sadistic sexuality ideally compliments Tatiana's willed passivity and Lol's pursuit of her own annihilation. His fantasy involving Tatiana evolves brutally toward a murder scene in which he imagines pumping the blood from her gagged, decapitated body:

She insulted me, she hugged me, she begged me, she implored me to take her again and in the same breath to leave her alone, like a hunted animal trying to flee the room, the bed, coming back to let herself be captured, wily and knowing (179).

This is also a scene that Lol voyeuristically observes and finds ultimately rewarding because it reconstructs the triangular configuration of her original abandonment with a revision in which her female love rival is physically mutilated. She finds satisfaction in the image of "all three [...] she [...] shivered with delight to feel as excluded as she wished to be" (113). However, as Susan Cohen suggests, through "her own eviction and substitution" in the triangular affair between Jacques and Tatiana, Lol "re-establishes the triangle but at the price of the irremediable ruin of her psychic unity" (264). The reader is left uncertain if there is any chance of Lol's recuperation.

The synthesis of sexual violence, romantic love, envy and madness is an essential component of the Durassian narrative. Duras' women such as Maria, Anne and Lol differ from traditional romantic heroines in their very desire to seek out and confront the potential violence and morbidity of sexual desire. In this way they are psychologically complex characters whose notions of love, although deeply passionate and at times romantic, are fraught with spectres of destruction and betrayal. Duras' construction of femininity presents a *deconstruction* of the romantic heroine into a deeply divided subject whose desires are ambivalent and excessive. Duras' characteristic writing style, that blends poetic prose with postmodernist narrative strategies, is another necessary component of her texts – one that importantly isolates them as, like *In the Cut*, examples of literary fiction.

In *Pay Attention to the World*, an essay written shortly before her death in 2004, Susan Sontag identifies the futility of moral attempts at interpretation, arguing that such approaches are incapable of adequately comprehending the characters or events presented

in works of literature. Readers must, rather, ultimately accept, in the worlds of fiction, “the simultaneity of everything, and the incapacity of our moral understanding” (21). In his writings on the particular spaces that literature creates, Maurice Blanchot similarly argued against moral interpretations that fail to adequately acknowledge the aesthetic power of the work itself, “its anonymous presence [...] the violent, impersonal affirmation that it is” (193). Although Duras’ texts might be viewed as a perpetual re-inscription of feminine sexual suffering, in their experimental aesthetic construction they defy reduction to any definitive statement on the nature of feminine desire. Duras’ characters’ particular symptoms emerge in elusive reverie, their speech and actions are dreamy and inconclusive. In Duras’ world, characters and scenes are discontinuous, tinged with confusion and anonymity. Most of all, although Duras’ women are strongly evoked characters, they are impersonal, fictional literary figures. Their fictional nature both confounds and decentralises moral attempts at interpretation. Unlike real women, literary characters have the freedom of existing in a fantasy world where they are present often more as a representation of an idea or desire, where the political implications of their actions are not felt and do not require justification. The author can begin and end a story whenever they wish without having to consider the lives of those involved prior to, or following, whatever scenario unfolds. These are the pleasures and freedoms of literature – and also the reasons why moral interpretations are futile. As readers, we come to novels with an understanding of literature’s *unreal* nature. We don’t read because we are looking for guidelines on our interpersonal behaviour, in fact we possibly most often enjoy reading narratives that take us to a different time, place or experience that differs greatly, often violently, from the real world which we inhabit. As Terry Eagleton writes in *Sweet Violence*: “we don’t witness brutal murders everyday, and are thus intrigued to come across them even in a fictional form [...] indeed, the fact that they are fictional is the basis of one theory of tragic pleasure” (169). Fictional characters never suffer the real consequences of their actions, nor does their social and political context exist, though it may closely mirror ours. Reading is a vicarious indulgence. If we wanted to read narrative with consequences wouldn’t we choose autobiography or biography?⁸

⁸ Of course, debate also exists surrounding the arguably fictional nature of even these purportedly factual forms, famously argued in Paul De Man’s exegesis, *Autobiography as Defacement*: “Empirically as well as theoretically,

Richard Posner states that the proper criteria for evaluating literature are aesthetic rather than moral because “the world of literature is a moral anarchy” (George 63), one that we might take an uncontested pleasure in. In his subscription to an aesthetic tradition of literary criticism, Posner echoes Milan Kundera’s earlier writings on morality in literature. I see that Duras’ narratives function as novels in the manner described by Milan Kundera, “that is, a realm where moral judgment is suspended” (155), exploring, as they do, “a series of triangular love relationships and [...] an interest in the detours and slippages” (Hill, *Apocalyptic Desires* 144). Kundera makes an acknowledgment of the tendency for literary works to be misunderstood when a moral rationale is instead sought from them:

Suspending moral judgement is not the immorality of the novel; it is its *morality* [...] novelistic characters develop [...] not as a function of some pre-existent truth, as examples of good and evil, or as representations of objective laws in conflict, but as autonomous beings grounded in their own morality, in their own laws (7-8).

Although Duras’ novels unequivocally focus on feminine experience, specifically transgressive feminine desire, her works, like those lauded by Kundera, are works of fiction. It is the crucial distance between the real and the imagined, often ignored in the moral approach to analysis of Duras’ novels, which renders the behaviour of her characters beguiling rather than disturbing. Hers is writing that, rather than exploring a moral stance, challenges and “teaches the reader to be curious about others and to try to comprehend truths that differ from his [*sic*] own” (Kundera 7-8). Her novels are more concerned with the fluidity and the treachery in love between women and men than submitting to an overriding demand for ideological purity, concerns that are shared by psychoanalytic enquiry, making it an amenable mode of interpretation.

Each of Duras’ texts might be viewed as a further transformation of literary conventions in an ongoing exploration of the themes that repeatedly haunt her narratives.

autobiography lends itself poorly to generic definition; each specific instance seems to be an exception to the norm; the works themselves always seem to shade of into neighbouring or even incompatible genre [...] are we so certain that autobiography depends on reference, as a photograph depends on its subject or a (realistic) picture on its model?” (920-21). However, the exploration of this debate is beyond the scope of this thesis.

As stated by Sontag, “every writer of fiction wants to tell many stories but [...] we know we must pick one story [...] one central story [...] the art of the writer is to find as much as one can in that story” (23). The intensity of love relationships fraught with violent complications is the story that Duras’ oeuvre astutely investigates. It is a story which alludes to the inarticulate places of human relations, themes that a psychoanalytic reading might partially serve to illuminate. Like Jane Winston, I too suspect that Duras will be “most adequately understood in all of her unresolvable ambiguity when we manage to leave behind our oppositional thinking; cease and desist from seeking to make her *either* political *or* not, *either* feminist *or* Marxist, *either* revolutionary *or* reactionary” (*Postcolonial Duras* 6). Rather than being drawn toward a moral problematisation of the excesses of pleasure or danger we find in Duras’ texts, perhaps what we need to seek instead is another way of reading them.

Chapter 3: “Metaphors of war”¹: Desire, Danger and Ambivalence in Anne Carson’s Poetic Form

We often oppose love to war; however, all the vocabulary of war can equally be applied to love. Love is one of humanity’s greatest battlefields.

Alina Reyes²

In *Perversions of Love and Hate*, Renata Salecl claims that “in a poem, rhythm and form capture that ‘something more’ that makes a poem a work of art [...] an object that is at the same time both beautiful and horrifying and that sets our desire in motion” (21). Anne Carson’s choice of poetic form for many of her creative reflections on femininity might be viewed as a decision arising from the need to encapsulate most accurately women’s contradictory experiences of desire and ambivalence – those that can be both alluring and shocking. However, whilst Marguerite Duras’ and Susanna Moore’s depictions of similar experiences have often been met with distaste by feminist literary analysts, Carson’s analogous representations of femininity generally have not. As a poet and a theorist, Carson reflects on and enacts experiments with literary form in her explorations of feminine sexual passivity. By presenting a heightened combination of aesthetic qualities, through deft clarity of metaphor, layers of analogy and palimpsests of mythology, she seems to shift her readers’ and critics’ interpretations away from what might be a tempting moral standpoint.

In *The Beauty of the Husband*, a woman bears witness to her battle with ambivalent love for an unfaithful partner, shrinking from the pain of his adultery only to be reeled back in by her fatal want of him. The “fictional essay in 29 tangos”, as it is subtitled, is an account of the protracted collapse of an anguished marriage. From the book’s ‘fictional’ titling onward, Carson extends a discussion of the fluctuation between truth and lie,

¹ “Metaphors for the experience [of loss of self to desire] are metaphors of war, disease and bodily dissolution [...] in Greek lyric poetry, Eros is an experience of melting” (Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* 39).

² Reyes 7

almost as if erecting a safeguard between the text and real experience: “Fiction forms what streams in us/Naturally it is suspect”, says the voice of the wife, before questioning, as if pondering her vulnerable inability to enact this important italicised action, “what does *not wanting to desire* mean?” (75). The text becomes a poetic examination of infidelity, of the perpetual interplay of power in human relationships where bruises are the postmarks of love:

How do people get power over one another he said wonderingly as we came
out onto the street. Bruises too filled him with curiosity
I could not meet this need,
I hear she did (75).

In almost all of Carson’s texts, from *The Glass Essay*, to *Plainwater*, *Eros the Bittersweet* and *The Beauty of the Husband*, desire in heterosexual love relationships is presented in the same way. The woman in the story suffers. She is emotionally wounded through betrayal by, or loss of love from, the man upon whose beauty and sexual intensity she is, in awe, fixated. The dynamic of feminine romantic tragedy is as addictive to the reader as it is binding to the fictional character, and, to dwell in such states has been seen as potentially damaging to women’s sense of empowerment. As Martha Nussbaum claims, “our bodily and sensuous nature, our passions, our sexuality, all serve as powerful links to the world of risk and mutability [they are] sources of disruption [...] to nourish them at all is thus to expose oneself to a risk of disorder or ‘madness’” (7). Perhaps, then, Carson’s explicit titling of her text as ‘fictional’ is a wise decision since women’s writing, particularly in first person ‘confessional’ form, has so often been aligned with the author’s real experience, and with having a potentially negative effect on the reader.³ The ‘dangers’ or ‘risks’ explored in literary works are, according to Tzvetan Todorov,

³ See, for example. Deanne Bogdan’s *Re-educating the Imagination: Toward a Poetics, Politics, and Pedagogy of Literary Engagement*: Bogdan’s key premise is that our own imaginations are re-educated as we read, that the text directs the reader’s embodied response to literature, which in turn influences the reader’s decisions and feelings of power in relationships and other aspects of their social reality. “My purpose in writing this book is to make a case for reversing the logical priority of the critical response - on ontological and ethical grounds as well as psychological and pedagogical ones” (111). Giving the example of feminist readers “who have, with great pain, lived and responded to a life-text that has disenfranchised and angered them”, Bogdan argues for the powerful capacity of literary experience and literary texts to evoke deep political and social effects, a virtual experience that can influence both in positive and negative ways. As Bogdan suggests, “[if] the educated imagination positions the reader within the interpretive process of the verbal universe, the re-educated imagination makes the material reality of the reader’s subjectivity a primary condition of incarnating the Word” (208).

successfully undermined by their *fictional* nature: “the statements in a novel, in a poem, or in a drama are not literally true; they are not logical propositions’ [this] is the distinguishing trait of literature, that is, ‘fictionality’” (*Genres in Discourse* 7).

Central to the fictional nature of Carson’s work is her employment of a combination of poetry and prose that engages with emotional ambivalence in both content and form. For Carson’s women, sexual desire and self-destruction are presented as akin to an addiction “of pure contradiction”. Love and war are made interchangeable, as Carson shifts from contemplations of battle to quotations from a break-up letter:

at the heart of it all,
the lure that makes war an addiction for some people –
that hot bacon smell of pure contradiction.
I hand you my fate. But don’t take pity. And don’t come back.
This is our one chance to amaze each other (134).

From *The Beauty of the Husband*’s opening page, Carson establishes a system of metaphors for desire, love and marriage based on battle and bodily damage. In just one page, the word wound is made analogous with the word marriage, as each is linked by a complex streaming of image and allegory:

A wound gives off its own light
surgeons say.
if all the lamps in this house were turned out
you could still dress this wound
by what shines from it.
[...]
marriage I guess.
that swaying place as my husband called it.
look how the word
shines (5).

In between these two stanzas an account of the shattering of Duchamp’s sculpture, *Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors*, in transit from the Brooklyn Museum, is given, providing just the first in a series of images of the female body in a state of destruction that continue to recur, gathering violence. Similar imagery is located in Carson’s *The Glass Essay*, too, where, following the breakdown of the narrator’s love affair, her meditation fantasies transform into a series of female nudes in often disturbing states of annihilation, their clothes and their flesh torn from them.

Not only does Carson utilise metaphors of war and bodily ruin to evoke the breakdown of the relationship between husband and wife, but she follows her narrator's thoughts as they digress, drawing attention to the configuration of mythological images in the fictional letters sent by her estranged husband which contain "cosmological motifs, fire and water, placed right before talk of love, to ground it in associations of primordial eros and strife" (20). In this way, Carson builds multiple levels of self-reflexivity, arming not only the ambivalences in her own text, but also the painful experiences of her fictional character, with a critical awareness. By grounding these episodes of betrayal and suffering in a long and honourable history of astrophysical battles, they become somehow less problematic for the reader, and for the narrator, somewhat more bearable, raising her to the level of a heroine of the ancient classics.

I have earlier argued, with regard to elements of postmodernist experimentation in both Duras' and Moore's novels, that these stylistic decisions, whether intentional or not, seem to alleviate concern over the text's themes, highlighting as they do, its status as a work of literary fiction. Carson's writing might then be classed as literature that utilizes postmodernist strategies to propel the reader into sites of ambivalence. It is the kind of literature that Derek Attridge suggests "exploits the self-reflexivity characteristic of some modernist practice, staging very directly the conflict between political engagement and the exigencies of literary creation", because it is "a mode of writing that allows the attentive reader to live though the pressures and possibilities, and also the limits, of political engagement" (5). In Carson's writing, as in the other works of literature I have examined, there are many stylistic devices that serve to remind the reader of the fictionality of the text. The presence of such literary elements, Attridge proposes, performs the function of "inhibiting any straightforward drawing of moral or political conclusions" (5). Carson has commented that:

There is something about the way that Greek poets, say Aeschylus, use metaphor [...] there's a density to it [...] a kind of compacting of metaphor, without a concern for making sense [...] it's just on the edge of sense and on the edge of the way language should operate (Brocks 13).

It is through experimentation with this style of poetry, through manipulations of metaphor, analogy, rhythm and form, that Carson, it appears, is somehow an exception from moral critique. Her critics, such as Val Ross, are so enthralled by her "strong yet

delicate writing: passionately learned, playfully coded”, that deciphering references to John Keats, Emperor Hirohito and Nahum Tate’s *King Lear*, for example, takes precedence over discussion of the political correctness of an arguably masochistic representation of femininity. Others, such as Harvey Shepherd, Emma Brocks and Nadia Herman Colburn, are also refreshingly transported from a focus on sites of sexual ambivalence. Their critiques avoid the all-too common appraisal of women’s writing as contributing to, or damaging, the feminist project – an approach which does not necessarily always offer the most expansive and insightful readings.⁴

As Colburn writes, Carson manipulates “the rhythms and syncopations of the poetic line, the temporal dimension of the long or the short line – to enact the themes of presence and absence, delay and anticipation, physicality and imagination, that she shows us are the food and foundation of desire” (2002). Carson’s critics tend to revel in the intricate ambiguities of Carson’s stylistic flourishes, and the very indefinability of her work that moves fluidly between poetry, prose, theory and classical history, shifting focus from questions of moral correctness to questions of metaphor, poetics, and the fundamental nature of all human needs.

In his writings on masochism in *Literature and Evil*, Bataille suggests that sexuality can move both men and women “into an infinity which is death [...] we cannot reduce sexual desire to that which is agreeable and beneficent. There is in it an element of disorder and excess which goes as far as to endanger the life of whoever indulges in it” (120-121). For Carson, sexual relationships are infused with precisely this element of disorder and excess; they are “like a beautiful boiling dance where your partner/turns/and stabs you to death” (*Beauty of the Husband* 119). Maurice Blanchot argues that poetry, like Bataille’s notion of sexuality, demands and invites an exploration of risk and danger, going so far as to claim that “in the poem [...] the risk is more essential”, that the poem itself engages with “dangers by which, each time, the essence of language is radically

⁴ See, for example, Carla Kaplan’s *The Erotics of Talk: Women’s Writing and Feminist Paradigms*: “Feminist criticism has often looked to women’s writing to mirror feminist criticism itself, wanting to see its own project of discovering lost female voices affirmed by the texts it recuperates. This drive to establish a relation to women’s literature that is “intimate”, “dialogic”, or “empathic”, may provide [...] identifications with narrators or authors which cannot be borne out, which are based on false assumptions or unrealistic hope” (13).

placed in doubt” (238). He concludes with the assertion that risk is an essential element of creative practice, that any “work of art is linked to a risk: it is the affirmation of an extreme experience” and that this arises from “the perilous urgency, the prodigality of the risk which informs the artist’s relation to the work [...] and morality in general” (236). In Carson’s work, this element of risk and urgency is evoked, not only through imagery of suffering in the representation of feminine sexuality, but also in the nature of her poetry’s stylistic construction: its vacillations in form between prosaic paragraphs and lyrical stanzas, from the sharp brevity of dialogue to alluring literary quotation and sensual recollections in letters and diary entries.

It is not only the breakdown of the relationship that is represented in this way, however. In the narrator’s recounting of the love affair, their meeting as adolescents is described through imagery of pain and dismemberment, of unwitting conspiracy: “I *was ventured*”, she says, “by some pure gravity of existence itself [...] we were fifteen [...] for some reason I turned in my seat and there he was” (49). Their falling in love is represented as an overtaking, an unavoidable violence. She describes the moment of their meeting as if she were helpless, under the knife: “they say a Zen butcher makes one correct cut and the whole ox falls apart [...] I was not to blame, I was unshielded in the face of existence” (49). Yet even this passage is not free from a certain intertextual self-reflexivity, pre-empted as it is by the mimetic placement of a classical reference: “Make your cuts in accordance with the living joints of the form said Socrates to Phaedrus when they were dissecting a speech about love” (49). Thus Carson’s form becomes a speech that is at once poetry and prose, literary criticism and philosophical inquiry. As suggested by Ethel Pearson, “ambivalence about love has ancient and honourable roots”, it is in Plato that we encounter Socrates cautionary admonition ‘as wolves love lambs so lovers love their loves’” (Pearson 18). Carson’s poetry too, often returns to classical tales, such as that of Tristan and Isolde, to metaphorically expand depictions of relationships. In *The Beauty of The Husband*, the narrator comments “don’t think his heart had burst. He was no Tristan” (101), as if also to distance the text from the reader’s romantic expectations.

Carson’s metaphors of war continue when the figure of the husband is merged with that of a Matador, then Emperor Hirohito, and finally God (25). His effect over the wife is all-powerful. For him, we are told, the word wife “was likely to pass rapidly from wrist

to slave” (90). Yet, almost invariably Carson extends the experience of bodily domination and dissolution as a result of desire, from a personal episode affecting one woman, to humanity in general—and from the ancient classics of Homer and Socrates through to modernist theory: “The primary function of writing is to enslave human beings. Intellectual and aesthetic uses came later” she observes, “by letters the husband bound her to him” (93). Carson’s building of a continuum of violent metaphors for love increases, as her pastiche of mythological references continues to strengthen: the wife’s “voice sounded broken into [...] another arrow now from the little quiver” (61). Even before she learned of her husband’s affair, “she had seeing scars/on her eyes from trying to look hard enough”, to catch sight of him with another lover (73). To adopt a term defined in the work of Lauren Berlant, we might describe the character of the wife as existing, in a psychological state of ‘Cruel Optimism.’ She is “maintaining an attachment to a problematic object in advance of its loss”, an optimism that, throughout the narrative, descends into a state of melancholia. That is, melancholia in its appearance as a “desire to temporize an experience of the loss of an object/scene with which she has identified her ego continuity” (Berlant 26). Toward the conclusion of the narrative the wife acknowledges how unfortunate it is that a marriage *cannot* easily transform into “pure hatred”: “if a husband throws the dice of his beauty one last time, who is to blame?” (101). Her inability to relinquish him, and her susceptibility to a persistent desire for him, are linked to her destruction:

Clothed in flames and rolling through the sky is how I felt the night he told me
 he had a mistress with shy pride
 slid out a photograph
 I can’t see the face I said angrily, throwing it down. He looked at me.
 We were at a window (restaurant) high above the street,
 married a little more than a year
 Quick work I said. Are you going to be arch he said.
 I broke the glass and jumped.
 Now of course you know
 that isn’t the true story, what broke wasn’t glass, what fell to earth wasn’t body.
 But still when I recall the conversation it’s what I see – me as fighter pilot
 bailing out over the channel. Me as kill (16).

The wife’s discovery of the affair is depicted with imagery of suicidal impulse, an emotional death presented in the text as shattered bones and glass. Subsequent

recollections of the love affair and intense sexual pleasure are constituted through memories of crushing grapes for wine, which are also close to imagery of destruction. We are told throughout history that “the grape [is] analogy for the bride as uncut blossom” and “an ideal wine grape/is one that is easily crushed” (30). The wife’s body is linked to this analogy throughout the poem in which desire is presented as a bloody, stamping, popping, saturating explosion:

Crush
the grapes for wine.
You cannot imagine the feeling if you have never done it –
like hard bulbs of wet red satin exploding under your feet,
between your toes and up your legs arms face splashing everywhere-
It goes right through your clothes you know he said as we slogged up and down
in the vat.

When you take them off
you’ll have juice all over.
His eyes moved onto me then he said Let’s check.
Naked in the stone place it was true, sticky stains, skin, I lay on the hay
and he licked.
Licked it off (29).

At the relationship’s conclusion, she *is* crushed and broken. Her subsequent melancholic contemplations of his betrayal of her, and of the tenuous relationship between language, desire and truth, revolve around the question: “What really connects words and things?” From this abstract proposition we are brought back to the present of her suffering:

Not much, decided my husband
and proceeded to use language
in the way that Homer says the gods do.
[...]
My husband lied about everything (33).

At other times, Carson switches between first and third person to depict scenes more self-reflexively, distancing from personal narration by introduction of a literary perspective: “It’s like Beckett”, her narrator says. Then the moment of her abandonment is brought back to a specific corporeal experience: “There she stood a person with particular traits, a certain heart, a life beating on its way in her” (53). In this way, Carson’s form is, as she describes poetry in the text, layered and elusive: “[poets] conceal the truth beneath strata of irony because this is the look of the truth: layered and elusive” (37). However,

Carson's use of manipulations of language and form are ones that push her work outside of the boundary between fiction and poetry; beyond the binaries we have come to know, bringing to it that "something more" that Salecl talks of, "setting our desire in motion."

Although there is nothing unique about the destructive passage of love represented by Carson (suffering in love is a common theme, as noted by Colin McGinn (79) "how often do human relationships begin with persuasion, move on to seduction, and end in cruelty?"), what is singular to Carson's texts are her innovative transgressions of generic boundaries that develop novel facets on the conventional tragic love affair narrative. It is also these stylistic techniques that shift understandings of Carson's writing away from the often moral critique surrounding other images of feminine masochism and passivity such as Duras' and Moore's, and instead into discussions of post-modernist bricolage and poetic experimentalism. As Emma Brocks suggests, "her books are like collages, a combination of memoir, poetry, dissertation and drama, held together each time by an overriding theme" (13). By presenting images of both women and men, from history to present, experiencing suffering as a result of intense desire, Carson seems to divert the troubling response that repeated images of female passivity and self-destruction may effect in her readers and critics. Carson's form is driven by the necessities of matter and premise, with no apprehension and no apology, for, as she says: "You write what you want to write in the way that it has to be" (Brocks 13).

Carson's combination of language and style, is fluid, resisting its own fixing. Her poetry is, as Joyce Carol Oates says of true works of art: "fundamentally indefinable, unsayable; there is something sacred [...] something inherently mysterious in the forms it takes, no less than its contents" (George 2004). In *The Beauty of the Husband* there are also ironic musings regarding the effect of form on meaning and the ability for language to transfuse desire. Love letters, for example, are understood as an imperative tool of seduction: "in a letter both reader and writer discover an ideal image of themselves, short blinding passages are all it takes" (94). The ambivalent attraction of breaking boundaries is a theme that bleeds from the narrative of destructive love into the structure of the text itself. Just as the pain of betrayal pushes the wife's perceptions into a state of hyperreality and acute sensitivity, so too does Carson's juxtaposition of classicism and melodrama, of

lyrical prose and letters, tempt her readers: “To stay human is to break a limitation/Like it if you can. Like it if you dare”(16).

During movements to prose in the latter stages of the book, Carson extends her characters’ excavation of childhood memory, exploring the birth of masochism in that primordial foundation of the tremulous bridge between violence and tenderness, love and jealousy:

Not since I skinned rabbits with my grandfather in the old stained sink
behind the shed have I felt my perceptions so strong. Satiny red entrails.
Clear splash of blood on white porcelain. Once we found unborn young just
beneath the savage heart. Ah said Nono apples in the dark. He sliced them
out. I was jealous. Tenderness flooding his voice (129).

Todorov’s claim that passages of prose poetry “exploit the confrontation of opposites” (*Genres in Discourse* 62) suggests that a poetic form such as Carson’s is more effective in recreating states of conflict and ambiguity on the page: “the oxymoronic prose poem corresponds perfectly to the contradictions it is used to evoke” (65). Similarly, Todorov’s particular definition of ambivalence seems almost to speak directly to the themes of Carson’s text:

Ambivalence can be explained as the contrast between what things are and what they appear to be [...] the object itself has a dual aspect, in its appearance as in its essence [...] a man loves a woman and at the same time wants to kill her [...] he incarnates cruelty and at the same time aspires to beauty [...] Certain places or moments take on value from the very fact that they can embody ambiguity (63).

Writing on the poetry of Antigone Kefala, David Brooks raises some pertinent points regarding the function of poetic language that might similarly enlighten an understanding of Carson’s work. Like Carson, Kefala employs a “mixture of metaphor [...] unalloyed metaphor [...] breaking of lines at points as often of high or low ambiguity”, stylistic decisions which render a literary form that Brooks claims “seems itself a conscious embrace of ambivalence [...] as if it [the poem] did not yet tell the whole story” (71). For Carson, all forms of writing are like this, unfinished, and “suspect”. Not only the seductive flattery of letters, the fiction like blood streaming in us, or the “true lies of poetry”, but also “Myth” which in its metaphors, she says, “is an enriched pattern/a two-faced proposition/allowing its operator to say one thing and mean another, to lead a

double-life” (33). In Carson’s work, the reader is placed in a space of risk, danger and ambivalence; the text causes us to experience “in a manner at once pleasurable and disturbing, its inescapable demands” (Attridge 30). Language is on trial, poetry is like a lover offering erotic possibilities, both seductive and dangerous, that might just as soon betray us as persuade us.

“‘Theory is good,’ wrote J.M. Charcot, ‘but it doesn’t prevent things from existing’” (Brooks 3)—particularly the kinds of things which may confound and contradict it. As Carson confirms in *Eros: The Bittersweet*, erotic paradox is a problem anti-dating Eros himself. Whether named ‘Erotic Paradox’, or the more catastrophic ‘Erotic Diabolism’ envisaged by Rosemary Sullivan, women in love in Carson’s oeuvre are often possessed by a masochistic attachment: “We [women] play at the dangerous, the *diabolical* in erotic games [...] We are hooked on the drama of intensity [...] Later, though [...] the word passion too often reverts to its root meaning: suffering” (Sullivan, *Labyrinth of Desire* 122). Carson evokes a notion of love where all desires are contradictory, based on an endless cycle of “hunger and repletion”:

All our desires are contradictory, like the desire for food. I want the person I love to love me. If he is, however, totally devoted to me he does not exist any longer and I cease to love him. And as long as he is not totally devoted to me he does not love me enough (*Eros the Bittersweet* 10).

Carson’s examination of historical and mythological accounts of desire traverses varying notions of why and how female heterosexuality is so often constituted in literature through masochistic imagery. In her reflections on the poetic process, Renata Salecl too presents this Lacanian notion of desire as an almost self-destructive force, arising as it is from a persistent need, pleasurable only in a state of its non-satisfaction: “we desire things because they are unavailable; and to keep desire alive, the subject needs to prevent its fulfilment” (12). Carson returns time and time again to the conclusion, as she does in *Plainwater*, that when it comes to love, “It is easier to tell a story of how people wound one another than of what binds them together” (234). This is not a tradition that she sets out to change, seeming rather to examine the relationship of desiring in a state of destruction and passivity from a variety of angles, exposing every masochistic possibility.

In Carson's world, desire is never black and white, though it is often, if not always, dark. Almost all of her work, in particular *The Beauty of the Husband*, is concerned with the ambivalence of love and the hurt of betrayal – and a questioning of whether the wife should feel implicit shame at her helpless attraction to her husband: “My husband was no mimic” she says (referencing the imitation of poisonous species markings and colorations by non-poisonous species) the power and damage he affected over her was real:

Beauty. No great secret. Not ashamed to say I loved him for his beauty.
As I would again
if he came near. Beauty convinces. You know beauty makes sex possible.
Beauty makes sex sex (9).

Sexuality is presented as a volatile enigma, shrouded in a veil of indefinability. Not only can the wife's psychological state be understood in terms of Berlant's notion of Cruel Optimism, but Carson's representation of sexuality are analogous with Berlant's conclusion that “Sex is not a thing, it's a relation; it's a nonrelation in propinquity to some kind of a recognition [...] a threat to well-being [...] chaotic, unstable, ambivalent [...] enigmatic” (“Starved” 23). In Carson's world, sexuality and desire tempt the boundaries of our morality, all former beliefs become fluid, easily shifted, as if “written on water”:

So ingenious are the arrangements of the state of flux we call
our moral history are they not almost as neat as mathematical
propositions except written on water -
on her way to the courthouse
to file papers for divorce, a phrase like
how you tasted between your legs.
After which by means of this wholly divine faculty, the “memory of words and
things,”
one recollects
freedom (89).

In this passage, the corporeal memory of desire eclipses moral reason. The connection between “words” and “things”, so disregarded by the character of the husband, the disregard that allowed and inspired his dishonesty, is in this moment the mechanism by which moral judgement is forgotten. The answer to the wife's earlier question – what connects words and things? – in this case is desire. The desire to dwell in spaces of ambiguity, embracing the flux of attraction that is not presented as a place beyond

suffering and betrayal, but a part of the same space of ambivalence that is unequivocally rich with sensual, physical intensity.

I disagree with Martha Nussbaum's claim that as writers we should question "which ethical conception we find most compelling, we should ask what way or ways of writing most appropriately express our aspiration to be humanly rational beings" (13). To claim that writing should be viewed as a tool to promote our aspirations to be moral and rational human beings is limiting to both writers and readers' enjoyment of producing and exploring literature. For Carson, "Love is, as you know, a harrowing event" (*Plainwater* 189). The theme reflected in much of her critical and poetic oeuvre, is the very *irrationality* and brutality of desire: "love knocked me over" she says, "[I was] a light thrown against a wall, paper blown flat in the ditch. I was outside my own language." Later, she comments: "Humans in love are terrible [...] prehistoric wolves [love] flares for a moment, then they smash it. The difference between them smashes the bones out" (189). Carson's use of language is unequivocally literary, but her arrangement of words and imagery is deeply connotative, that is, "rich in associations and ambiguous, it is opaque [...] it is plurifunctional" (Todorov, *Genres in Discourse* 7) and it is more powerful because of these things.

Duras' and Moore's writing still fits loosely within the genre of narrative fiction, and, in that respect, I would argue, it is anticipated to provide some meaningful allusion to social reality despite any intentional disruptions of conventional form and plot. In contrast, Carson's entirely subversive form that, though wonderfully lyrical, is not easily defined as either prose, poetry, or theory, less urgently encourages its interpretation in terms of the laws and moral beliefs that define and influence our behavior in reality. In her writing, truth is unfixed, betrayal is inevitable, and seduction by beauty is an ever-present threat. These erotic paradoxes are ones which Carson extends from women to men, from mythological times to present, in a postmodernist spree of irony, bricolage and pastiche. Poetry, quotation and notions of desire are loaned from classical history and critical theory, moving focus from questions of feminist responsibility to fascination with postmodernist poetic possibilities.

Elsewhere, Nussbaum writes:

Tragic poems, in virtue of their subject matter and their social function, are likely to confront and explore problems about human beings [...] that a philosophical text might be able to omit or avoid [...] they are unlikely to conceal from view the vulnerability of human lives [...] the mutability of our circumstances and our passions, the existence of conflicts among our commitments (13).

In combining the forms of the tragic poem and philosophical enquiry, Carson prevents the reader from ignoring the conflicts and ambiguities between different forms of thought, exposing instead the ways in which they might both enlighten and confound each other, generating new angles of understanding as well as new spaces of risk and ambivalence.

We can only conclude that in her writing “all love is uneven” and attraction is evoked as a “brow beating” desire crossed with despair (*Plainwater* 104). Carson’s allegiance is not necessarily to the moral good, but to capturing the elusive element that poetry’s particular manipulation of language, rhythm and form can achieve, rendering, as truthfully as she can, the contradictory beauty and cruelty of love relationships.

“No Language For My Ambivalence”¹: Critical Conclusion as Creative Groundwork

The novels we love exercise our sensibilities: they educate and complicate those parts of us that feel. This is what separates them from philosophical treatises or laws or newspapers [...] Both the writer and the reader must undergo an ethical expansion [...] an expansion of the heart – in order to comprehend the human otherness that fiction confronts them with.

Zadie Smith²

I begin my conclusion this exegesis with this quote on reading from Zadie Smith because of its pertinent acknowledgment that novels are valuable, not only in their educational possibilities, but also in their capacity to confront us with an otherness that *complicates* our perception of the relationship between fiction, self and social reality. In the same way, this dissertation is not only intended to provide readings of contemporary women’s writing that are un-constrained by feminist discourse, but also to embrace the depiction of complications and women’s hesitations with a politics that intersects with sexual morality and creative representations. Mine is also an exploration of how critics might approach the re-examination of women's self-representation, outside, but not necessarily devoid of, a feminist consciousness. It is about reopening the case for many different expressions of sexuality as a valid theme of women’s fictions, despite what elements of these might be confronting. It is about discovering new approaches to reading these stories and finding a language for ambivalence. It is also about giving myself a creative opening, exploring techniques and styles, and building a confidence in my writing that is sanctioned by my reading.

¹ “Afterwards I had serious second thoughts. Was I still the same person as before? Was I still a feminist? [...] I had no language for my ambivalence. I just thought ‘What have I done?’” (Johnson 131).

² *Read Better*, 2007.

In his writings on the ethics of reading, Derek Attridge states that any “demand that the production and judgement of art be governed by its immediate effectiveness in the struggle for change” inevitably limits the understanding of innovative literary forms because it promotes “a suspicion of anything appearing hermetic, self-referential, formally inventive, or otherwise distant” (1). While the inclusion of apologetic self-reflection infused with feminism following a woman’s depiction of an episode of masochism can possibly be seen to pardon the text, as I have argued in relation to Moore and Carson’s work, such additions should not be thought of as always necessary in women’s self-representation.

Similarly, though I do not wish to undermine the absolute importance and multiple achievements of social feminism and feminist literary theory, the influence of associated ideals of ‘political correctness’ should not impact on women’s fictions to the detriment of excess and otherness that, alongside ambivalence and uncertainty, can be important attributes of an engaging text. Although I have identified the capacity for more politicised self-reflection within experimental, post-modern and intertextual forms of writing, I have argued that authors who depict heterosexual romance or explorations of sexual submission, less subversively, need not be condemned. However, I also acknowledge my own deeply ambivalent reactions to these writings and suggest that they are in part due to the era and culture in which I have been born and educated: in the midst of the Third Wave of feminism when young women have taken for granted a strong sense of personal power, and in which, as Astrid Henry writes: “more than any other aspect of contemporary feminism, the so-called dominant feminist perspective on sexuality is what seems to signal regression” (100).

In an attempt to represent fully the conflicts between a myriad of revised feminisms and more traditional feminist ideals, contemporary women’s writing should be free to represent the multiple and ambiguous predicaments presented by a so-called ‘post feminist’ society—without being analysed according to an allegiance to, or movement away from, what is, in essence, a political movement rather than an artistic alliance or moral position. As Rebecca Walker wrote in 1992: “I am not a post-feminist feminist. I am the Third Wave [...] not beyond the space created by the second wave [...] not beyond feminism” (Henry 25). I find myself located similarly, between the Second Wave’s

politicisation of personal behaviour and experience and the Third Wave's more liberal feminisms. Furthermore, I find myself feeling ambivalence most keenly in the literary context, positioned as I am as a feminist, creative writer, critic and reader.

This dissertation is also an attempt to invoke and embrace one of the most contentious areas of feminism's interaction with women's sexuality—the uneasy presence of feminine masochism in women's writing. As Janice Radway writes: “it is not generally considered politically correct for women to seek out masochistic pleasures, whereas the pleasures of being nurtured and cared for are offered as the politically correct alternative” (81). ‘Desire and its Disastrous Results’—my title, taken from René Girard's writings on the self and other in literary structure—has a double meaning. I use it to refer to the sometimes volatile nature of desire, the notion that that we do not always want what is best for us, and also the disastrous results that are possible when such desires are written. That is, the critics' responses and those of other writers and readers that are feared by the woman writing: the fear of writing about states of ambivalence and of what she anticipates the response to her work to be. As Radway continues, one of the consequences of feminist literary criticism has been “the resulting preoccupation with the question of what a literary text can be taken as evidence for [...] whatever her intentions, no writer can foresee or prescribe the way her book will develop, be taken up, or read” (2). This preoccupation can present a great deal of apprehension alongside the author's desire to write; apprehension of what might be the deleterious results of releasing her story into a society aware of the still fragile achievements of feminism.

As I have evidenced throughout my discussions of Moore, Duras and Carson's novels, my response to their representations of femininity will always be in some way divided because, as Astrid Henry suggests, “women of my generation often do not experience feminism as a process – that is, something we actively choose or help to create – we have a much more ambivalent identification with it” (40). Although I identify as a feminist and applaud the political achievements of the movement, I have also come to see that the desire to present fictions that present only positive feminist plots is restrictive to authors, in the same way that understandings of their work can be limited by analyses that approach novels from this standpoint. Like Lauren Rosewarne, “I dispute

the existence of thought police, but as a feminist, I am nonetheless haunted by notions of appropriate conduct and routinely feel guilty whenever I ‘defect’” (106). In reading each of these texts from a new standpoint, one that acknowledges yet seeks to move beyond prior approaches, I hope also to have come to avow this element of guilt and move toward some answers to the questions with which I began this exploration. I also hope to have begun to propose a new mode of reading women’s fictions, a novel analytical approach to their ambivalence, in the manner that Zadie Smith proposes: “it is the critic’s job to formulate a public language that comes close to their own private understanding, and which, if it is acute enough, will find its companions in a community of like-minded readers” (*Read Better* 2007).

In the opening of this dissertation I asked why the feminist critique of literature should posit a feminist utopia as its cause or presume and seek an affirmative feminist narrative in female-authored texts. It was a tendency I had observed across a broad spectrum of critical material that dealt with 20th-century women’s writing, and one that I propose some alternatives to in my analysis of *In the Cut* by Susanna Moore. Just as Moore’s novel is a pertinent example of the shifting literary spaces of contemporary fiction, her critics’ responses have predominantly exemplified the ways in which expectations of women’s fiction has been influenced by feminism: “in many feminist debates [...] assumption exists that there are right and wrong ways of doing feminism” (Rosewarne 104). In response to this, my reading moves beyond a moral appraisal, into an understanding of Moore’s representations of femininity. I argue that they are not psychologically ‘dangerous’ to the female reader as such, or a purported threat to the achievements of feminism, but rather opportunities to explore alternative subjectivities, through a narrative that is not necessarily concerned with addressing feminism and its discontents at all. In trying to define a political position from the narrative, the more subtle nuances of the plot may be lost. The literary nature of Moore’s writing is what renders even depictions of horrifying mutilations more aesthetically pleasing than morally troubling. As Tzvetan Todorov suggests, “the second great definition of literature [...] comes under the banner of the beautiful [...] the notion of the beautiful is crystallized [...] the intransitive, noninstrumental nature of the work of art” (*Genres in*

Discourse 5). An essential element of the pleasure of reading comes from the very recognition of the distance and difference between our own world, and the spaces of literature.

I chose to answer the question of what is morally and psychologically at stake for readers, writers, and literary theorists in works of literature, via a re-reading of the often misinterpreted fictions of Marguerite Duras. Although Duras' novels certainly focus on feminine experience, specifically transgressive desire, her works, like Moore's, are works of fiction. It seems also to be the crucial distance between the real and the imagined, often ignored in the moral approach to analysis of Duras' novels, which renders the behaviour of her characters beguiling rather than disturbing. Duras' novels are more concerned with the exploration of the aesthetic limits of narrative form, as well as fluidity and treachery in love between women and men, than presenting images of ideological purity. The concerns of Duras' fiction reflect the culture in which she was writing and are themes shared by psychoanalytic enquiry, making it an amenable mode of interpretation for her narratives and one that is expansive rather than moral or reductive. Duras' stories allude to the inarticulate places of human relations; if we read them to discover a feminist subtext we will be inevitably disturbed and disappointed. Rather than being drawn toward a moral problematisation of the excesses of pleasure or danger we find in her texts, what we need to seek instead is another way of reading them. Duras' interests (such as love's meeting point with violence and the morbidity of desire) are themes that a psychoanalytic reading might more powerfully illuminate.

Finally, in relation to the poetry of Anne Carson, I questioned whether literature can ever be simply reduced to its moral meaning, and what elements of a work of literature – structural, thematic and aesthetic – might interrupt this. What might be a literary work that refuses to do so, and how have such works been critiqued and comprehended? Throughout my research, I observed that writing which presented inventive textual strategies seemed to receive less criticism than that which did not engage with an acknowledgment of the possible responses it would receive in a feminist literary analysis. While Duras and Moore's narrative fictions, being prose novels, are anticipated to provide some meaningful allusion to social reality despite disruptions of conventional

form and plot, Carson's writing is not easily defined as either prose, poetry, or theory and thus seems to discourage its interpretation in terms of everyday human existence.

The erotic paradoxes and masochistic impulses that Carson presents are extended from women to men, from mythological times to present, in a postmodernist pastiche of quotation from classical history and critical theory, moving her critics' responses from a questioning of feminist responsibility to more expansive discussions of new poetic possibilities. In combining the forms of the tragic poem *and* philosophical enquiry, Carson also importantly presents the conflicts and ambiguities between different forms of thought, exposing the ways in which they might both enlighten and confound each other, generating new angles of understanding as well as new spaces of complication in the responses of her reader. As Billy Collins has said, "poetry provides a safe home for ambiguity and ambivalence" (Brophy 41).

While I may not have arrived at conclusive answers to each of these questions, exhausted the possibilities of each text, or claimed to have closed the case on conflicts in feminism and the pluses, minuses and biases of feminist literary analysis, I have found that more expansive readings of literature can be generated when an orthodox feminist morality is set aside. As Kevin Brophy writes: "my aim as a writer in approaching [literature] is to avoid becoming stuck in extreme closeness or extreme detachment, though without losing entirely the privileges and insights each of these possibilities offer" (36). In this way, I hope too, as a writer, to have negotiated a new place in the dialogue between feminism and the sites of ambivalence that arise as women's moral awareness interacts with their own subjective experience, as well as explore my responses to the ongoing conflict between 'moral' and 'aesthetic' approaches to literary criticism.

In response to the question of whether subscription to a particular moral stance, in my case that of feminism, has a place in our enjoyment of literature at all, I could not summarize my position any more succinctly than Margaret Atwood who writes:

Novels are not political tracts [...] if the author's main design on us is to convert us to something – whether that something be Christianity [...] or feminism, we are likely to rebel [...] Characters are not all models of good behaviour – or, if they are, we probably won't read them [...] in short, novels are ambiguous and multifaceted, not because they're perverse, but because they attempt to grapple with what was once referred to as the

human condition, and they do so using a medium which is notoriously slippery – namely, language (2-3).

Atwood's statement highlights the important recognition that words are never virginal. As it passes through the processes of cultural change, language increasingly becomes tension filled, riddled with contradiction, and ambivalent. As well as building multiple levels of meaning, the myriad connotations of each word complicates our responses to literature, and each new movement, creative, social or theoretical, using language as its main form of communication, inevitably adds to this. Language cannot escape its contamination by culture and its adoption by political groups but the manipulation of language does not always equal its degradation – words and images gather greater meaning over time because of the political and cultural associations that they come to carry. Words and images unavoidably come to contain political and cultural connotations and this also enables their subversive use, which can be a powerful strategy available to writers. As we can observe in Carson's work, the juxtaposition of words to create new meaning can more fully represent states of conflict and ambivalence.

In his analysis of the work of JM Coetzee, Derek Attridge calls for what he terms a 'literal' reading practice, that takes the novel at its word, rather than seeking an allegorical meaning from it. The moral or political, as well as psychological analysis of fiction is one that he refutes: "In reading it in that way you may have missed something. You may have missed not just something, you may have missed everything" (36). It is such a more 'literal' reading practice that I have attempted to provide in my readings of the works of Moore, Duras and Carson. What I have observed in previous analyses of these texts is what Attridge terms the "urge to allegorise" when interpreting literature, which he relates to our desire to retreat to the safety of utilising a "traditional trope to make sense of texts that, for one reason or another, are puzzling when taken at face value" (39). Perhaps it is a fault in the way we are taught to think about literature, that that which pushes us beyond the boundaries of the representable must be confined in order to be understood. Perhaps too we most often resort to a fixed theoretical mode of interpreting literature when we are faced with examples that are disturbing, unexpected,

ambivalent or excessive. These are all tendencies that this dissertation has sought to re-address.

Lastly, my novel deals with feminine experience because I wanted to write about what I, as a woman, know best, but also because I wanted to use fiction to re-address some of the expectations of women's writing about women that I have encountered in my reading towards the critical portion of this thesis. In writing a novel about women's relationships with each other and with men, I have been able to challenge some of the critical perspectives concerning female-authored heroines in a time when feminism often colours the interpretation of women's creative works —namely the notion that contemporary female characters be politically enlightened, and act in a way that is affirmative of positive feminist values.

My novel became a response to questions posed by other female writers, such as Margaret Atwood, who ponder if it is not “today, somehow un-feminist to depict a woman behaving badly [...] when bad women get into literature [...] are they permissible?” (1). My female characters are fallible and immoral. They are sometimes passive in relation to men. They make mistakes and selfish choices and do things that we probably think a ‘good’ feminist woman should never do. But, humans don't always do what is best for them or for others, so I hope that in this way they are also more true.