

THE LANGUAGE OF REASSURANCE

THESIS

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By

Karen Royall, B.A.

San Marcos, Texas

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Now in November (1934) by Josephine Johnson, The Keepers of the House (1964) by Shirley Ann Grau and Housekeeping (1980) by Marilynne Robinson are fictional works that share several commonalities. Women wrote these three novels; the twentieth century produced them; the first two books won the Pulitzer Prize, and the last one received the National Book Award; all employ a first-person female narrator. However, these similar attributes reveal nothing exceptional. Only through a close, detailed analysis of the language used by the first-person female narrators will one find an unusual phenomenon. I call this phenomenon, which is a uniquely female manner of narration, the language of reassurance. The purpose of my thesis, then, is to illustrate how this language of reassurance works, to establish how studying it offers a new understanding of women's modes of narration, and to show why the language of reassurance should be considered a rare occurrence in twentieth-century fiction by women.

The reader knows from the very first line in all three novels that the narrative voice deserves her position. None of the other characters in these novels, whether dominant male, conventional female or anyone else, is worthy, or is capable of telling the story as well as the self-proclaimed first-person female narrator. In all three works, the

narrator uses the language of reassurance to undercut the other characters. Moreover, the first-person female narrator often betrays her own voice in one instance in order to affirm it in the next, which indicates another feature of language of reassurance. I will answer the following questions in my thesis: How exactly does this work, and why is it effective given a woman's usual position in fictional storytelling? Do these narrative voices painstakingly reassure themselves throughout their narration because some opposing, invisible or historically weighted force questions their ability? Is it invalid to assume that a female first-person narrator might be more aware of a reader's needs, which would make her a better storyteller, as in the "woman as nurturer" myth? Do these narrators, then, subvert gender-specific myths about themselves in order to manipulate? How does the second-person "you" facilitate the language of reassurance? Can narrative theory offer some insight into the reason behind this specifically female language? Can feminist theory also provide some answers? Does the rhetorical strength inherent in the language of reassurance champion the female? Why does the word "*reassurance*" describe the language better than the words "*assurance*" or "*validation*"? In the following chapter of my thesis, I will explore both feminist and narrative theory for possible clues as to why the language of reassurance exists in first-person female narration.

Theory

Although nothing specific about the language of reassurance has been written, some literary theory explains why this peculiarity occurs in fiction. For instance, because the language of reassurance involves both the way narrators convey the narrative and the consequent implications, I researched articles on narratology for one source of insight. Feminist/gender theory also gives valuable perspectives on why the need to reassure surfaces in female narrators' language. Finally, articles that combine the two theoretical approaches, referred to by Susan Snaider Lanser as "feminist narratology," contribute to my goal of establishing the language of reassurance as an important study in fiction.

Before I report on articles written about language and gender in fiction, which are pertinent issues to my thesis, I need to establish a definition of narratology and its feminist counterpart. Gerald Prince defines narratology in a way that best fits my definition of it. In an article entitled "Narratology, Narratological Criticism, and Gender," Prince writes that "the narratologist pays little or no attention to the story, the narrated, the 'what' that is represented, and concentrates instead on the discourse, the narrating, the 'way' in which the 'what' is represented" (160). In his Dictionary of Narratology, Prince adds that narratology "studies the nature, form, and functioning of narrative regardless of medium of representation" in order to delineate narrative competence (65). Moreover, it focuses on "what all and only narratives have in common as well as what enables them to be different from one another, and it attempts to account for the ability to produce and

understand them” (65). Narrative theory, then, will certainly account for some of the questions that surround the language of reassurance; however, its scope is limited in that the language of reassurance involves both the “way” and the “what” of narration and both the functioning of narrative and its medium of representation.

In regards to feminist narratology, its definition is ever-evolving. Studies in narratology often fail to include gender as influential on narrative. Lanser, though, attempts to articulate the task of a feminist narratologist; I find this articulation helpful in regards to my thesis. Lanser seeks to prove that “feminist criticism, and particularly the study of narratives by women, might benefit from the methods and insights of narratology” (611). Precisely what these benefits are remain to be determined. She writes in a later article, “Sexing the Narrative: Propriety, Desire, and the Engendering of Narratology,” that because a narrator’s sex and/or gender could influence how a reader decides the meaning of a narrative, then feminist and gender issues should be included in narratological discussions. She cites very compelling literary examples to support her argument. Lanser stresses in “Towards a Feminist Narratology” that for a woman to write and publish a novel “is implicitly a quest for discursive authority: a quest to be heard, respected, and believed, a hope of influence” (186). Indeed, this goal of the author manifests itself in the first-person female narrator, who uses strategies such as the language of reassurance to achieve her quest. Indeed, a study of the language she or any woman uses to reach this goal could be useful for other women with similar goals.

Rachel Blau Duplessis demonstrates how feminism and narratology compliment each other in studies of fiction. In her article, “Breaking the Sentence; Breaking the Sequence,” Duplessis discusses a “woman’s sentence,” a term borrowed from Virginia

Woolf. A “woman’s sentence” illustrates writing that is not frightened of the issue of gender. In other words, a woman writer writes as a woman, because she is a woman, but one who is not really aware or concerned about her womanhood as definitive. Duplessis writes that “forgetting woman is a significant maneuver, claiming freedom from a ‘tyranny of sex’ that is nonetheless palpable and dominant, both negated and affirmed” (282). This sentiment is reminiscent of the paradox inherent in the language of reassurance, which I will illustrate in later chapters. However, I do not see that the first-person female narrators maneuver language on every occasion in order to “free” themselves from the “tyranny of sex.” It seems as if these female narrators use their sex, since it is inevitable, and prove themselves as better narrators because of their gendered status.

Duplessis also cites W.E.B. DuBois’ idea of “double consciousness” in order to further explain the above point:

The concept of ‘double consciousness’ that comes from one’s oscillation between a main and a muted position . . . offers a way of seeing the identity of any group that is at least partially excluded from or marginal to the historically current system of meaning, value, and power. (292)

DuBois includes women as members of this overall group. Thus, female narrators exemplify this “double consciousness” in that they reflect the “main” position because they are the main, central source of “meaning” to the text as first-person narrators. They are also “muted” or “marginal” because of their status as female narrator in a world ruled, albeit conjecturally, by the male narrator and his style. Their duality metaphorically reflects this “double consciousness.” Moreover, to have a “double consciousness,” even if

it comes by default, can only enrich a first-person female's prowess in narration. From both a historical and a current state, a male narrator more often than not experienced life in only a "main" position, not a "marginal" position.

Indeed, DuBois' odd juxtaposition of "historically current" makes sense when considered in conjunction with ideology. Catherine Belsey explores this issue in her article, "Constructing the Subject/ Deconstructing the Text." For the purposes of my thesis, I will focus only on the first part of the article. Just by virtue of the title, I find this article relevant to the language of reassurance. For instance, Belsey does not use the passive voice, "The Subject Constructed," for her title; this in itself is thought-provoking. "Constructing the Subject" implies many different meanings. The first-person female narrator both constructs herself, her subject matter, and most importantly, her audience as subject. This title also encompasses the idea that something had to come before an actual "subject" could be created, whether it lies in ideology or history or something else. What matters, as relative to the language of reassurance, is that the one constructing has taken control, regardless of the formative ideology; the subject as narrator is perhaps not constructed. The first-person female narrator uses the language of reassurance to "construct," to build for herself her own world.

Belsey begins her discussion of "the subject in ideology" with an argument made by Jacques Lacan. According to Lacan, language plays an extremely important role in the construction of the subject. Belsey takes this tenet, then, and attaches it to literature. Because literature is a way of utilizing language to represent "real social relationships" (592) that originate in ideology, then "it becomes apparent that literature as one of the most persuasive uses of language may have an important influence on the ways in which

people grasp themselves and their relation to the real relations in which they live” (598).

Although the notion that literature should be both didactic and entertaining may seem like an archaic concept, it at least demonstrates how the language of reassurance could influence a reworking of prevailing ideologies.

The issue of subjectivity holds an equal amount of importance in an article by Sara Cobb. The title, “Transcribing the Body and Materializing the Subject: Women’s Victim Narratives in Penalty Phase Testimony,” explicitly states the overall focus of the article. By studying the courtroom narratives of rape victims who are trying to help convict the men who raped them, Cobb shows that feminist-advocated subjectivity is extremely problematic, “if not dangerous” for women (196). It begins with the feminist criticism of courtroom objectification (viewed here to be in exact opposition to subjectivity) wherein women become, in the words of their lawyers, “objects of violence, dismembered body parts,” thus re-victimized and unable to pattern their own way of telling the details of their trauma (195). In this critique, then, subjectivity is made valiant; however, “as data shows, rape victims are regularly navigating to forestall their construction as subjects, which inevitably functions to lay the groundwork for their culpability as agents in their own victimization” (196). If a woman is not an object, then she is not a victim. If she is a subject, then she is in control.

This suggests that objectivity and subjectivity maintain an equal presence in discourse, even in the single discourse of the “I,” which Mikhail Bakhtin refers to as “dialogic narrative.” (Bakhtin differentiates this from monologic discourse which is “a narrative expressed through a single voice without any sense of pressure from an audience” [Richter 328].) I find this aspect of narrative voice a reassuring duality because

the audience will embrace objectivity in one instance and subjectivity in another, and oscillate between the two. As the language of reassurance will illustrate, the ultimate result will be the acknowledgment that the first-person female narrator is forever “constructing,” to use Belsey’s term. This language secures her subjectivity, even if objectivity often becomes the vehicle, which furthermore works positively for narrative and feminist theory and women writers.

Perhaps I should have begun this chapter with Bakhtin, whom many narratologists consider to be the “godfather” of narratology. Bakhtin established many of the narratological ideas embraced today, ones used to justify the language of reassurance. For example, in his seminal essay “Discourse in the Novel,” he imparts the existence of what he terms “heteroglossia.” Heteroglossia refers to the “interaction between different dialects and linguistic levels within a single utterance” (327). Even though Bakhtin limits his discussion to the English comic novel written by men, his findings transcend literary and gender boundaries. Thus, Bakhtin teaches how to untangle literary language/discourse in order to unveil what social or historical or cultural entity or entities pervade that voice. This revelation becomes important to narrative in that it charges the voice telling the story with intensity, complexity, richness and unforeseen meaning.

Bakhtin uses excerpts from Charles Dickens’ novel Little Dorrit in order to make his points about heteroglossia in the novel and other related narrative discoveries. One point in particular relates, albeit indirectly, to the discourse of a first-person female narrator. It is what Bakhtin refers to as “*pseudo-objective motivation*,” or a form for hiding another’s speech within a single utterance. Bakhtin cites the following sentence by Dickens in order to explain specifically what he means by this term: “ ‘But Mr. Tite

Barnacle was a buttoned-up man, and *consequently* a weighty one.' [Book 2, Ch. 12]."

Bakhtin explains that this example shows how the author's discourse (or in some instances, the narrator's), if read closely, intermingles with the discourse of the common view. Moreover, no formal grammatical markers separate these utterances, which suggests that the author concedes to it; "in actual fact, the motivation lies within the subjective belief system of his characters or of general opinion" (179). Bakhtin attributes these hybrid constructions of language as purely stylistic and artistic endeavors inherent in the comic novel written by men. The language of reassurance metaphorically reflects these similar motivations but for the woman writer/narrator. Reassuring a reader, especially for a female narrator in our society, often involves superficial concessions to her reader's opinions.

Indeed, Bakhtin acknowledges no other fundamental motivation behind the use or existence of heteroglossia in these male-authored novels. As mentioned above, though, for both women writers and their first-person female narrators, hybrid constructions exist more as a need to reassure than as a stylistic tool. If a female narrator proves that she can successfully assume any socially constructed voice, even if that voice exists in a role that has historically been denied to woman, like that of parliamentary or court protocol or as Bakhtin mentions the "dry business language of the City, or the high epic style, or the style of the hypocritical moral sermon" (176), then she deserves her position as storyteller. This does not mean that a male narrator is incapable of enacting a woman's voice. However, if we assume that men created the historical woman's role, and that women were given no other choice in their roles, then perhaps it would be easy(ier) for men to speak in that voice. They guided it; they own it. But for a woman to speak in a

voice always and only given to men, created by them for purposes of power, her abilities, by virtue of this, must exceed the male character's abilities. The language of reassurance shows this. Moreover, these female narrators move beyond the hybrid constructions of language in their discourse into the language of gestures and nuances, not just words.

As stated above, Bakhtin does not deal with women writers or with the feminine in the novelistic language that he discusses. Being a literary critic in the first half of the twentieth century did not require one or influence one to regard women writers worthy of theory. However, in an article called "The Dilemmas of a Feminine Dialogic," Diane Price Herndl cites Wayne Booth, another literary critic, as saying that "if Bakhtin had lived today, he would have come to accept feminist criticism" (7). Acceptance aside, he would certainly have had to address feminist criticism. Because he died in 1975, which some regard as just prior to the advent of feminist criticism, Bakhtin had no chance to examine this theoretical view. Nevertheless, feminist critics continue to incorporate his methods of narratology into their own theories, or they at least try to reconcile his views with theirs. The article mentioned above by Herndl offers one example of what I referred to earlier as "feminist narratology."

Herndl relies on Bakhtin in order to raise her own questions about what she refers to as the "feminine dialogic." What Herndl sets out to answer in this article is "whose voice is dominant in feminine language: woman's 'true' voice or a voice she has learned from the novel?" (7). Herndl never directly answers this very difficult question, but she does offer several possibilities. However, what is important and what she does for establishing validity behind the language of reassurance is to simply take her question and move beyond it. For instance, if the novel is a dialogic endeavor, then of course a

female narrator will incorporate all voices into her own telling. If one writes a novel, then the issue of “true” voice is inconsequential to the actual merit of the novel. Moreover, from being on the margins of society for so long she should be better at that incorporation precisely because she has developed listening skills and talents beyond men, who have historically had the opportunity to talk without censure. Given the manner in which women writers and their female narrators use the language of reassurance to manipulate voice, I do not concede that a dilemma exists.

Part of maintaining that a dilemma does not exist, however, means granting that language, the authoritative voice, is patriarchal. Recognizing this “inevitability” gives women writers more impetus to work with it, in order to move beyond it. Dale Bauer, in his article “Gender in Bakhtin’s Carnival,” explores this issue: “My project in rereading these novels is not to look for a world elsewhere beyond patriarchal language, but to locate in language gendered voices” (672). What this entails is to put the reader, text and author in the same situation of language control. Even though Bauer thinks that language is “inherited” and that power structures and struggles inevitably surface, he believes more so that these dominant “values” can be subverted “by seeing through them and articulating that unveiling” (674). The following quotation explains this:

The feminist struggle is not one between a “conscious awakened” or natural voice *and* the voice of patriarchy “out there.” Rather, precisely because we all internalize the authoritative voice of patriarchy, we [reader, author, text, narrator] must struggle to refashion inherited social discourses into words which rearticulate intentions (here feminist ones) other than normative or disciplinary ones. (672)

Thus, once we acknowledge this as readers, we can move beyond it and locate in language gendered manifestations, such as the language of reassurance, that work to empower. “Power circulates through this participation [between reader and text],” (674) writes Bauer.

However, because Bauer chose to write about novels written in third-person, rather than first-person female narration, his strategy for reading brings results that differ from what the language of reassurance yields. Bauer’s method is to “read the woman’s voice — excluded or silenced by dominant linguistic or narrative strategies — back *into* the dialogue in order to reconstruct the process by which she was read out in the first place” (673). In first-person female narration, the “woman’s voice” is never read out of the dialogue. Perhaps, then, this voice guarantees the female narrator at least a partial circumvention around patriarchal language.

Both Bakhtinian and feminist criticism hold a place essential to an article written by Sheryl Stevenson and aptly titled “Language and Gender in Transit: Feminist Extensions of Bakhtin.” In this article, Stevenson uses Brigid Brophy’s novel *In Transit* as a vehicle to explore the larger issue of how language and gender function, whether it be mutually exclusive, totally together or completely separate. Stevenson cites David Lodge, who wrote that “contradiction is a primary structural principle of postmodern novels, which often focus on ‘sexually ambivalent’ characters or other central, unresolved paradoxes” (188). She then uses his point in order to move beyond it and make her own equally valid point. Stevenson maintains that contradiction in gender and gender roles in postmodern novels exists only inconsequentially in that postmodern readers have the ability to “identify with models of either sex” (188). Thus, for the

benefit of the reader, male or female, the language of reassurance reconciles these two points. For instance, the first-person female narrator contradicts her historically mandated position in any story. The paradox of a female in a male role as narrator could trouble the reader. Of course, the female narrator knows how skepticism in her abilities requires atonement; therefore, she remedies any problems with her use of the language of reassurance. Overall, though, contradiction and paradox in literature are entirely relative to many factors.

Josephine Donovan depends somewhat on Bakhtin as a model for her article, "Style and Power," which enlightens the idea of my thesis. For instance, she agrees that Bakhtin, like other Marxist critics, "recognized that literature exists in a political context and therefore literary devices [like style] reflect and refract the power differentials of the author's society" (85). (I reported on style and Bakhtin earlier, but not in the concept of feminist narratology.) Style, then, for the writer or the first-person narrator, is "a political expression" and not just a result of aesthetics, according to Donovan. She also views language as not just a vehicle for theme, but a theme itself. Agree or disagree, it at least presents one reason why the language of reassurance pervades first-person female narration. In the hierarchy of storytelling, no one "tops" the first-person narrator, and the woman narrating the story knows this. I postulate that using language in order to reassure may not be a genuine, or indeed generous, gesture for these narrators. For example, in some instances the language used to reassure the reader of the narrator's undeniable capabilities is subtly patronizing, manipulative, intelligently contrived and ironic, which are all indicative mechanisms of traditional power structures. Understanding the language

of reassurance in this way somehow champions the female narrator as someone in total control of every last detail in regards to her story, including her own thematic agenda.

Furthermore, Donovan reminds us of the tenet in Bakhtin's theories which suggests that the novel defies the classic genres, such as the epic and poetry, because of its language and style. Combining her words with Bakhtin's, Donovan asserts: "The authoritarian 'word of the fathers' [the epic and formal poetry] therefore cannot be used in the novel, because the novel problematicizes all received truths (342), denying the 'absolutism of a single and unitary language' (366)." Thus, any manner and means of conveyance that rejects the "official" or "reflects a counterhegemonic resistance to the 'word of the fathers,'" (86) as Bakhtin refers to it, like the means behind the language of reassurance, fits perfectly well in the novel. Indeed, these two forces in one context could result in feminist-inspired transformations.

The articles referenced thus far reflect Bakhtin's presence in literary theory as ubiquitous; however, as Brian Richardson points out in his essay "I Etcetera: On the Poetics and Ideology of Multipersoned Narratives," literary theorists neglect Bakhtin's stance on the issue of person, namely multipersoned narratives in the novel, or in Bakhtinian rhetoric "the polymorphous nature of the novel" (312). As already illustrated above, theorists concern themselves with how a single narrative voice exhibits a multitude of outside voices. In his article, Richardson addresses novels composed not of just one narrative person, but of several; indeed, some novels rely on first-person, second-person, and third-person narration(s) to convey the story. Even though this issue of person is largely "overworked," as Wayne Booth calls it (313), Richardson's essay opens unexplored issues regarding this subject.

Richardson asserts that even if a novel seems to have one fixed speaker, intruding voices other than that speaker continue to make the narrative situation unstable. The novels that I use to exemplify how the language of reassurance works vacillate between voices, even though the majority of narrative resides in the first-person female voice. Moreover, I would not agree with Richardson that instability results in that situation of vacillation. Once again, it works to reassure the reader of the narrator's abilities. For instance, if the "I" in narration moves into the "you" without a formal, grammatical switch, then that narrator presumes to speak for "you." Indeed, "you" identifies no one in one way and everyone in another way. This presumption is a bold act by that narrator. I will give specific examples of how voices interweave and vacillate when I discuss each novel.

Richardson suggests another equally viable effect when this interchange of "you" and "I" occurs. He refers to it as a "curious act of 'self-personalization through reducing myself' a practice that superficially can seem both tautological and self-contradictory" (314). I agree with this, and I see it as an act of rhetorically manipulating language and voice in order to achieve reassurance. Often the first-person female narrators undercut themselves and their abilities in one instance so that in the next instance of narrative something proves the narrator correct after all; this heightens the level of trust and stability in the narrator — her "reliability," to use Prince's word. Perhaps human nature requires one to be doubtful first before it allows doubt to be overcome. It is game-like. Moving into the second-person "you" is just one way in which this works.

Richardson concludes with the assertion that no form of person "has any inherent essence or tendencies" (321) that would guarantee it to be more liberating or empowering

or reassuring. Thus, if this vacillation between narrative person happens in novels written by women, which it does in the novels that I have chosen for this thesis, then perhaps it is because the combination of all voices elicits the strongest narrative. However, when Richardson discusses gender in his article, he does not draw the same conclusion. Instead, in a quote from Joanne S. Frye, Richardson responds to this issue, albeit inadvertently. In a chapter from her book Telling Lies: Women and the Novel in Contemporary Experience, Frye declares that for the woman writer to use the “I” is a subversive act. Frye says that for the female writer to “speak directly in a personal voice is to deny the exclusive right of male author-ity implicit in a public voice and to escape the expression of dominant ideologies upon which an omniscient narrator depends” (321). Like Richardson, I find it necessary also to quote her assessment of narrative voice and pronoun usage:

If a female pronoun recurs throughout a text it repeatedly reminds us of cultural expectations for what it means to be female; it reminds us, inevitably, of the [patriarchy’s] femininity text. The “I,” by contrast, reminds us only of a subjective narrating presence, a nameless agent; it asks us to remember only its subjective agency. The “she” can easily lull us into conventional expectations; the “I” keeps us conscious of possibility and change. (321)

Frye’s opinion unintentionally justifies the use of multipersoned narration as one method in the overall scheme of the language of reassurance. Because the reader is an amalgam of expectations, cultural influences, societal precedence and gender prejudices, then the use of “she” subversively comforts that reader so that when the narrator resorts

back to her “I,” the reader has learned to trust the female narrator. For me to assume this is to assume that the woman writer through the first-person female narrator knows exactly what she must battle to overcome the virtual non-existence of this type of narration.

I expected that none of the articles in this first chapter would express definitive reasons as to why the language of reassurance pervades first-person female narration. I believe that no one theory or historical factor(s) or social situation can adequately articulate the basis of this phenomenon. It just exists. I concede that studying theory is important, though, at least for some sense of stability, fundamentals and grounding. Perhaps it gives credibility, even if the level is somewhat superficial. Indeed, in the article “Fictionality, Narration, and the Question of Genres,” Francesco Loriggio makes a similar statement about the nature of theory. He says:

In literary studies, no less than elsewhere, a theory is as good as the field it presupposes. The works and authors a critic purports to interpret provide the logical motivation of his or her enterprise. Theory is irrevocably synecdochical: it generalizes and legitimizes the limited range of texts it inherits or whose traits it favors. (148)

Thus, what really matters above everything else is text. Text, unlike theory, can be almost indisputable, if the evidence is compelling enough. Moreover, it is important for a concept like the language of reassurance that is housed in text to be indisputable. Because the study of it has potential to challenge a reader’s ideology about a woman’s ability to narrate, to create a history rather than to be created, then one must be convinced without doubt. The following chapters will proffer evidence that may open new ways of

looking at narration, women, and fiction.

CHAPTER 2

Now in November

From the time it was written in 1934 until the present, Josephine Johnson's novel, Now in November, has received relatively little critical attention. The novel, though, is a beautifully written story about the life of the five members of the Haldmarne family during the Depression and Dust Bowl years. The middle child, Marget, narrates the entire story. She chronicles how she and Kerrin and Merle, her two sisters, cope with one another as siblings; with a domineering, work-obsessive father; with a passive but caring mother; and with the presence of Grant, Mr. Haldmarne's farm assistant. Although the plot maintains a level of simplicity, many things happen to the Haldmarne family. They battle daily with the thought of losing their land over an inability to pay the mortgage. Natural disasters such as drought and a fire that kills Mrs. Haldmarne plague them. They must constantly deal with the irrational and inexplicable antics/personality of the eldest daughter, Kerrin, who eventually commits suicide in one of the barns. The three daughters, especially Marget, our narrator, agonize over their love for Grant. They struggle (Kerrin particularly) with pubescent anxieties and with being daughters and not son(s) to their father. They also worry that they may be stuck on the farm forever. However, the novel shows how the natural world around them assuages harsh realities. Marget and Merle use the surrounding woods of their farm to explore and escape.

Marget, the narrator, interweaves descriptions of nature with the occurrences in the text, as if they could not be separated.

In Now in November's few appearances in criticism, though, discussion has been limited to the novel's somewhat obvious qualities: its descriptions of nature, or its reflection of Johnson's own childhood, or its social agenda. Perhaps if Marget, the first-person female narrator of the novel, had portrayed herself in an overtly controversial manner or in a way that prompts critics to view her as a tragic character, then maybe substantial and enlightening criticism might have been written. Perhaps the novel overall appears too simplistic and obvious, which could lead critics to believe that not much can be discussed about it. The reason as to why critics neglect Now in November remains to be explained. Of the few sources on the novel, though, two come from literary anthologies. For instance, American Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide from Colonial Times to the Present, features a section on Josephine Johnson. When the writer of the section, Margaret McFadden-Gerber, discusses Now in November, she relies on not only the aforementioned themes, but also other fiction writers as reference points, as a means for comparison: "Although the novel betrays the influence of the social-protest fiction of Sinclair and Steinbeck, much of it is more reminiscent of the naturalism of Hardy or Zola" (412). Unless one is at least somewhat familiar with these writers, this assessment tells us nothing about Johnson's writings. McFadden-Gerber does say that Johnson's "attention to the limited point of view of the narrator" is praiseworthy. Other parts of the section explore Johnson's childhood as impetus for her writing. Now in November transcends easily established literary categories in that it exemplifies a specific

phenomenon in fiction that necessitates exploration. That phenomenon, of course, is the language of reassurance.

Another anthology, American Nature Writers, contains an article on Johnson. It primarily focuses on Johnson's childhood and how it affected her work. For instance, Vera Norwood, the author of the article, states that Benjamin Johnson's nickname, "old slow," pervaded not only Johnson's sense of herself, but also of the female characters in her novel. According to Norwood, both Johnson and her characters troubled over denigration and self-doubt in childhood. Nevertheless, it provides an interesting clue as to why Johnson felt the need to reassure others of her capabilities.

Indeed, the very first line in Now in November illustrates the language Marget, the first-person female narrator, relies upon for the purposes of reassurance: "Now in November I can see our years as a whole" (3). Marget's use of the word "can" establishes a conflicting, dualistic tone indicative of the language of reassurance. For instance, one way of reading "can" undercuts Marget: "I *can*" (strong emphasis on "can" when said aloud) sounds as if her narratee stands opposite to her, looks doubtful and says "I bet you cannot." The other manner is one that affirms Marget in that the emphasis rests on the word "I" as if to suggest that no one else, as referred to by the "our" part of the sentence, "can" tell the story: "I can see *our* years as a whole." This language dominates the entire text.

Moreover, the very last sentiment in the first paragraph, when Marget finds herself amazed that the end of the final year of all the years of which she is about to narrate has arrived, delivers the same result, except it is manifested in word choice and not tone: ". . . and I did not even quite realize that it had come" (3). The "it" refers to the

hour that ends the time before Marget begins to look back at the past. Thus, the word “quite” has a similar conveyance as in the above examples, especially when juxtaposed with “not” and “even.” Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary refers to “even” and “quite” as synonyms (430). These words both reinforce each other and compound the meaning; however, the presence of the word “not” tempers the effect.

One other explicit example of how Marget’s language embraces a sense of “dualistic” phrasing in order to arrive at the state of reassurance comes two paragraphs down from the first one. It is when she says, “but I remember the day we came and the months afterward well enough. Too well” (3). The phrase “well enough” could be anyone’s haphazard, ineffectual memory of something; however, she qualifies her own memory with “too well” in order not only to reassure, but to make it sound almost like a physiological necessity to tell the story, as if it needs to be purged from her system. Because it infiltrates her, then we as readers can be reassured that the story will be right.

Furthermore, Marget often conveys to the reader that she will include every perspective on any situation, as in the following sentence: “That first spring when everything was new to us I remember in two ways; one blurred with the worry and fear . . . and yet mixed with it this love” (6). For the purpose of reassurance, Marget states her ability to “remember in two ways.” This language guarantees to the reader an all-inclusive, thorough narrator. However, what she really remembers has nothing to do with helping the story to progress, which is the job of the narrator. She instead conveys the push and pull of her emotions during this time. Her desire to share her feelings must be prefaced by the decoy of “remember in two ways,” of which the true remembrance has nothing to do with an “actual” event in the story. Marget’s manner of language and its

consequent effect is the same as when she says at only page nine of the book, “Our lives went on without much event” (9) but then continues on for over two hundred pages. The reader might not expect much since even Marget, the narrator, describes their lives as “without much event.” Although there is little plot development, the language of reassurance mesmerizes the reader to continue to read.

Another example of how Marget employs language occurs a few pages after this one. In this instance, Marget compares a shrike to Kerrin, her sister: “They reminded me of Kerrin but this I had sense not to say aloud” (11). Again, this sentence depends upon the language of reassurance — the arrangement of words that at the same time undercuts the voice in order to make it seem more reliable. For instance, the words of and after the conjunction: “but *this* I had sense not to say aloud” implies that perhaps sometimes Marget does not use sense in order to differentiate what she should or should not say out loud, as if she is incapable on occasion. This admission undercuts her. Moreover, the fact that she feels compelled to assure that she has “sense,” even if it is inconsistent “sense,” works in part to betray her ability for narration.

At the same time, though, this sentence concurrently recommends Marget as a voice of storytelling in that she is sharply aware of her narratee/ reader’s needs. For instance, the relationship between Kerrin and Marget was not a close one. Marget even wished for her to just go away and never return again; she was glad Kerrin died (200). Why should Marget care, then, what she said around Kerrin or what Kerrin thought, especially since Kerrin disregarded almost everyone’s remarks? Marget, in this sentence, uses the language of reassurance to show that she knows how words destroy and that she is capable of choosing the right ones at the right time. As suggested by critic Josephine

Donovan, narrative style is more a matter of power and not aesthetics. Marget, though, uses both power and aesthetics in her narrative equally; the language of reassurance compels both.

Moreover, Marget inadvertently admits to doing to others what her language suggests is done to her. Readers will note everything, and Marget as a character-daughter embraces every word, especially the words of her parents. The following quotation refers to how and why Marget and her sisters are not only careful listeners but evidence gatherers: “and we thought they were probably glad to be alone one meal at least, without all our eyes staring them up and down and noting the things they said, to remember and repeat should they ever at anytime [sic] contradict themselves” (10). These words suggest that Marget understands the ways of verisimilitude, a necessary element in narration, by virtue of understanding how quickly words can be negated, denied and contradicted, which is why she relies on a specific language that reassures her listener.

Furthermore, Marget makes statements such as “I didn't have anything to say” (12) but then continues in a paragraph-long illustration of her understanding of the given situation. In another instance of her justifying her way of telling the story, she says in reference to the land: “To us it [the land] was a thing loved for its own sake, giving a sort of ecstasy and healing,” only to parenthetically qualify it with “high words, but even they are too pale” (35). She even wonders to herself “if anywhere on earth men could say such and such will be with certainty” (39), as if to protect herself in a way that assures the reader that Marget is aware of the difficulties of storytelling but that she is trying to achieve truth. It is as if these acknowledgements, which seemingly betray her ability, do just the opposite in their honest admission. Admission, then, allows for narrative

reassurance and progression once the hurdle of skepticism is crossed. She protects herself ingeniously.

Marget continuously involves ellipses in her language of reassurance, as exemplified in the following passage:

The hope worn on indefinitely . . . the desire never fulfilled . . . four o'clock and the ice-grey mornings . . . the cows and dark . . . the cans enormous in the foggy lamplight . . . day come up cold and windy . . . Max sullen as a red clod . . . the endless cooking . . . the sour rim of pails . . . Father's grey shirts soaking all day in water . . . There seemed no answer, and the answer lay only in forgetting. (38)

The use of ellipses here again shows the dualistic nature inherent in the language of reassurance. For example, the dot-dot-dot characterizes an admitted omission of words, as if Marget could find no apt or fine word to convey her thoughts. Why is she narrator, if she cannot find any words to say what she wants to say? These lapses betray her. However, the overall structure and meaning and stringing together of images in this passage suggests an even more profound idea, which is the other side of what ellipses do for a story: they have a rhetorical effect in that they allow each specific phrase to bask in special emphasis. Marget exonerates herself and subsequently reassures her reader of her narrating capabilities in the last line. Here she says: "There seemed no answer," which is made apparent by the manyness quality (in this instance of too many burdens) that a series of ellipses generates in a sort of metaphorical, reflective way.

Furthermore, Marget realizes that other people involved in this life of Now in November might be just as willing to tell the story. Thus, she manipulates this language

of reassurance in a subtle way that strikes off the names of characters from the list of those who have the capacity to narrate. For instance, Marget's sentiment about herself that "There must be some reason why I was made quiet and homely and slow" (128) provokes the reader also to think about the reason for her nature and selfhood. In part, this language makes Grant's non-attraction to her, perhaps by reason of this self-admission above and because Merle purportedly offers a more physically appealing aesthetic to him, even more devastating. Had she been otherwise, say "quick and beautiful and talkative," then the fact would not have been so harsh to the reader. It also puts this unrequited love out of her hands, as the Depression does to the family and the drought does to the farm; thus, the narrative becomes all the more convincing and compelling, paradoxically, by virtue of a female narrator who consistently and blatantly admits to being not so compelling. Moreover, it seems as if Marget realizes that the reader might trust a first-person narrator not so "riddled" by beauty and success. (Perhaps we distrust these "attributes" in that they seem to have no relation to an ability to tell a story of mostly hopelessness.)

Thus, when Marget, not only a woman but also a woman without formal education, intellectualizes and philosophizes to herself about the choices life offers, she feels compelled to undercut herself:

I wanted to know the reasons. And, more than that, wanted something outside myself. But a faith that would *fit* life, not just hide it. There was a great deal that I would have liked to believe . . . It would be easier to bear the inevitable and just, if there were no way out. But surely, I thought, we have the right to live as fully as anyone else! . . . Why were we chosen to

be so stinted? . . . Perhaps if we could have been cut off from all seeing and hearing of those rare safe ones who had no need, we could have begun to blame it on God and be at peace. Knowledge is a two-edged knife, all blade, with no handle for even the owner to strike out with. (142-43)

This passage further exemplifies how Marget uses the language of reassurance. Granted, she is an object in that things happen to her without her approval or acquiescence; however, she takes that objectification and reasons with it. This ability gives her credence as narrator; she makes things happen any way she is able, a quality essential for a narrator.

Marget, though, is also wary of sounding too philosophical. According to Nancy Hoffman in the afterword to the 1991 Feminist Press edition of the novel, most women, whether in the role of wife or daughter, know that the men in the family made all “decisions about religion and personal philosophy” (243). Moreover, even if a female somehow fosters independent, intellectual thought, Hoffman says that it will be “tempered in marriage” (243). Marget, though, relies on the language of reassurance to facilitate the dilemma of her intellect and her socially-mandated womanhood. She says that no answer or reason or justification for her situation in life as an intellectual woman trapped on a farm will make her feel any less desperate. She declares this in order to atone her desire for intellectualism for one of emotional love, which is a more “suitable” endeavor for a woman. Thus, the problem now rests in the simple fact that “no law could make Grant love me [her]” (143). Does she have to temper her intellectualizing with this statement because women during her time should, it was believed, be concerned only with finding a husband? What, though, is inherently wrong with that if that is what she

truly wants? Perhaps she wants, as contemporary society says, both family and career. Luckily, the language of reassurance assuages the dilemma that either she or society has placed on herself — the desire to be a complex person. It helps the reader and it helps her, even if no absolute resolution is reached. As literary critic Joanne Frye maintains, the female narrator knows what she must battle to overcome the reader's expectations, which are more often than not socially and economically influenced — factors over which Marget has no control.

Marget also uses the second-person narrator successfully, too, as part of her overall language of reassurance. She has made the reader trust her in her quiet, non-assuming way and the “you” she enforces works to affect the reader: “to feel that the land you ploughed and sowed and lurched over was your own and not gone out from under your feet by a cipher scratch” (76). The “you” carries with it that same dualistic nature in Marget's manner of language. Whenever the “you” appears, it serves to bring in the reader/narratee into the mix, which takes the singularity or separateness that one has become inured with, in these characters, out of the incident; thus, it removes a degree of devastation which might otherwise alienate the reader. Marget's narrative abilities include everyone, which illustrates the critic Richardson's point about how a vacillation between “you” and “I” is an act of self-personalization accomplished by reducing oneself.

Marget, as mentioned above, also suggests that none of the other characters are capable of telling the story of the Haldmarne family. It would be different if the story were indeed specific to Marget, but it is not. The events involve a litany of character occurrences connected in one story. For example, she subtly denounces Merle's ability by

complimenting her. Marget says of Merle: “Only Merle seemed in a way to keep an almost childlike pleasure in moments of happiness without thought of their end or their beginning” (70). Indeed, this sort of vision of life is neither good nor bad, really; if their lives during the Depression resembled more of a fairy tale existence in which beginnings and endings are inconsequential, then Merle might have told the story. But it was not. Moreover, the structure of fiction requires both a beginning and an ending. Merle, then, should not be the narrator.

Marget accomplishes the same championing of herself over Kerrin as to who should tell the story. She says of Kerrin: “There was something in her--or lacking--that kept her from seeing outside the warped and enormous ‘I’ ” (95). If Kerrin cannot view the world beyond herself, as Marget claims, then her story would be entitled My Autobiography rather than Now in November. Furthermore, Marget’s ironic assessment of Kerrin’s inability to separate fiction from fact undeniably disqualifies Kerrin as an able narrator: “and she had a faith that was almost religious in believing a thing must be so if a man would bother to write it out seriously and bind it in a book” (45). The tone and subsequent implications of the phrase “if a man would bother” also undermine Kerrin. This phrase implies that Kerrin trusts and regards as important and worthy only the things men, and not women, do. To Kerrin, men set the standard. Her hypothetical narration, then, would be overtly reminiscent of how a man would do it. What compounds this further is Kerrin’s sentiment that boys as students were better because “their [boys’] minds clicked faster. The girls were already vacant wives” (42). Thus, Kerrin’s shortsighted sentiments about the abilities of women cause her to rule her own self as anything other than a “vacant wife” (42).

Of course, Marget's father would make a terrible narrator, according to Marget. Marget recites words straight out of her father's mouth that men do not care anything about the power of words, as in a story: " 'Women like words too much,' Father said. 'They like to be told what a man would see for himself. A woman'd get fat on words alone' " (84). Mr. Haldmarne's contempt for words, and possibly, women, count him out as the possible narrator.

Finally, Marget's mother, Willa, stands closest to Marget as potential storyteller. In her quietude, Willa, like Marget, is able to observe everything — a necessity in narration: "Mother never talked much herself but listened to everything that was said" (17). However, Marget also disqualifies her mother by revealing her quiet acquiescence to her husband: "But Mother sat there very quiet" (5), as if she were too afraid to question or to negate her husband's ideas. Moreover, Willa, as mother and wife, feels compelled, according to Marget, to play the role of mediator; in this role, she glosses over what desperately needs to be said. An example of Willa's appeasing nature occurs when Father and Mother discuss Max's abilities as farmhand: " 'Max is good enough for a while, I guess,' Mother said very fast" (27). Thus Marget accepts that there are moments when her mother is not afraid to say what she thinks, but Marget at the same time undercuts her by describing the way in which she says it: "very fast." Indeed, Marget persuades the reader to believe that timidity about one's convictions would make a story too censored and self-conscious.

Marget's effective and often subtle use of language to narrate the story of herself and her family, the Haldmarnes, not only reassures the reader of her prowess as narrator, but it also gives the critic a new literary phenomenon to ponder. Marget's language of

reassurance moves the text beyond the obvious observations that literary critics made in the past.

CHAPTER 3

The Keepers of the House

Shirley Ann Grau's novel The Keepers of the House tells the story of the Howland family: William Howland, his daughter Abigail Howland, his granddaughter and the narrator of the story, Abigail Howland, Abigail's husband John Tolliver, and William's lover/wife Margaret Carmichael. The main conflict in the novel, which is set in the South, revolves around the relationship between William and Margaret. William, who owns virtually the entire county in which the Howlands live, falls in love with Margaret, a woman not only half his age, but also a "Negro." No one in the county knows for certain the situation at the Howland plantation. Although Margaret bears William three children, they are eventually sent away to boarding schools. Indeed, the truth does not surface until John Tolliver, William's granddaughter's husband, runs for governor. Robert, Margaret's oldest child, leaks his interracial parentage to the newspapers after John makes racial slurs and openly allies himself with the Ku Klux Klan. John subsequently leaves Abigail. The county becomes enraged at the revelation and attacks the Howland/Tolliver mansion. The granddaughter Abigail, determined to maintain the Howland legacy, protects her home and subsequently shuts down the town she inherited from her grandfather; her retributive action puts the entire county out of business and home.

Abigail, like Marget in Now in November, wants to prove herself as the person most capable of telling the Howland story. She, too, uses the language of reassurance to achieve her goal. One aspect of the language of reassurance that Abigail depends upon is to provide the reader with multi-faceted narration. For example, she becomes Margaret's voice, William's voice and her own voice in three different stages: adolescence, early adulthood and midlife, which she offers as her extant state at the time of narration. As narrator, her task is huge in that she must recollect the lives of seven generations of Howlands, as originally told to her by her grandfather. She must also address her own life story. However, from her depiction of herself and from what she reveals about how the men in her life treat her, to assume such a task as narrating an extremely difficult story for her is in many respects risky, unlikely and brave. The one thing that she can rely on, though, to help her through any lack of confidence in narration is the language of reassurance.

Indeed, The Keepers of the House begins with the sentence: "November evenings are quiet and still and dry" (3). These words immediately establish a tone of all-knowingness in the first-person female narrator that ultimately results in reassurance. For instance, on a logistical level, the month of November has thirty consecutive evenings in which these attributes can be manifested. For her to claim this broad, timeless and yet timely generalization about November makes her not only willing to prove it, but also demands that she prove its validity. Indeed, Abigail makes herself immediately accountable.

Moreover, to reinforce and reassure the reader, Abigail, the first-person female narrator, repeats herself in the second paragraph, only a few sentences down from the

first one: “November evenings are so quiet, so final” (3). At this point, no doubt about Abigail’s ability to provide a trustworthy narrative should exist in the reader’s mind. Thus, when she states in a further reference to November: “There is no wind yet; it will rise later on. It always does” (5), she guarantees by virtue of the promise “It always does” that she and she alone, in her intimacy, self-purported accuracy and willingness to prove herself about the narrative’s setting, is the most competent character to tell the story.

The Keepers of the House is set in a small Southern town. It epitomizes some stereotypes that abound in small Southern towns, or indeed in small towns in general: judgmental, gossipy, presumptive, racially-tensioned, folktale-rich, single-minded. Of course, it could not be this way if at least one group of people, in this case the Howlands, did not challenge the perpetrators of small-Southern-town stereotypes. Abigail, then, makes stereotypes exist in mutually exclusive situations like this one. For example, when Abigail says in the second page of the novel that “The *county* does not know of that yet, but *they* will, *they* always know *everything*. ‘Just like a *Howland*, *they* will say. ‘*Always doing crazy things . . .*’ ” (italics mine), then the reader understands her impetus to offer her version, even if she does not necessarily always negate what they say. Just because the county “know(s)” everything means nothing. Knowledge is relative and slippery. Thus, she sets up the opposition between the Howlands and the town as fodder and purpose to her narration. Abigail’s establishment and acknowledgement of another potential version to her own story reassures with her language that she has something to prove; she faces her opposition.

In addition to Abigail’s recognition of opposing voices, she also hears and cites voices from her own side, the Howland clan. For instance, she inadvertently says that

these Howland voices need an outlet for their story, and hers is the one. Abigail claims to “feel the pressure of generations behind me, pushing me along” (5) to tell the story of the Howlands. Moreover, when she acknowledges that “They are all dead, all of them. I am caught and tangled around by their doings” (6), then it inadvertently expresses a need/a push to untangle their doings. Narration is her vehicle. Abigail signifies the point as well in the following quote:

I stand in the pitch darkness and listen to the sounds of voices that roar around in my head and watch the parade of figures that come and jostle for attention before my eyes. My grandfather. My mother. Margaret. Margaret’s children: Robert and Nina and Crissy. (6)

She has a “calling” to tell their story in her voice. Although they are “family,” which might concern the reader that Abigail as narrator might be protective and biased, she nonetheless addresses this skepticism when she declares in the final paragraph of this first section “And when I am being honest with myself, as I am tonight” (6); she is implicitly saying that she will be honest with others. She knows herself both in and out of honesty. This is reassurance that what she narrates to us, especially all the unpleasantness of her family, is true and indicative of why she should narrate.

Abigail officially accepts this “calling” in the second section of Grau’s novel: “I want to tell you the story of my grandfather, and Margaret Carmichael, and me” (9). She does not “need” to tell you, as if her agenda is merely didactic or moralistic, which would be too confining for a reassuring narrator. Moreover, the voices from the above-cited passage may be an irritation to her, but they cannot “make” her tell you the story; her narration, then, would be contrived and forced, which is something incompatible with her

natural language of reassurance. Indeed, she “want(s)” to tell you the story. Abigail feels a pure desire; this is why she is the narrator. Concurrently, though, she admits that her task will be a difficult one. She does not assume an immediate prowess for storytelling (or really for anything in life). However, because she yearns to narrate, readers know that she will try her best: “It’s hard to know where to begin, everything leading back and weaving into everything else the way it does” (9). To acknowledge the “weaving,” though, is to acknowledge what it will take to unweave. Abigail in her language shows that she has what it takes.

One way she accomplishes the act of telling their story is to remain in her voice and then infuse it with free-indirect discourse of whomever she discusses.

Narrative/Theory, edited by David Richter, defines free-indirect discourse as “a narrative mode in which the language is read as that of a focalizing character. In effect what the character would be thinking in the first person present tense is expressed in the third-person past tense” (326). For instance, Abigail often sneaks her grandfather’s voice into her own narration. The following quotation is from the passage about William’s relationship with his daughter, Abigail. Abigail first gives him credit for the voice: “Did they still tell children, he wondered, that if they looked up a chimney . . .” (35). Then she just assumes his voice onto and within her own: “Now, that much color in the sunset might mean something toward rain and that wouldn’t do the cotton any good. And wasn’t it a peculiar thing, good summer for cotton made a bad one for corn. Seemed you couldn’t get the two together” (35). The William in this passage comes across in the form of incomplete sentences, knowledge about farming, about weather and a colloquial tone. Abigail comes across in the absence of formal markers that she would need as narrator to

differentiate voices. The formal markers would say: This is William speaking now. Her free-indirect discourse works in conjunction with the journal-like question-and-answer aura of her narration, as if she “interviewed” her subjects. This propensity for free-indirect discourse provides Abigail’s readers with confidence in her conveyance of the narration, which is necessary for Abigail as first-person female narrator. Indeed, the reader learns in the last section of the novel, “Abigail,” that those who raised and married her apparently silenced her. Only in the end of the story, which is really the beginning, do we hear her as who she is and not just entirely a construct of other people — male and female characters alike. However, being a construct for the purposes of a reassuring narrator is also not a bad or negative idea. She pieces herself together by a multitude of inherited factors for whatever she needs to be, as in the “William” and “Margaret” sections. The idea that a female narrator, in her embracing of both objectivity and subjectivity, forever constructs herself is reminiscent of Cobb’s view that I reported on in the first chapter.

Moreover, Abigail relies on the “fact” that both the citizens of the town and her family gathered and kept stories for decades. When she alludes to this, it not only normalizes her job but makes narration an inevitable occurrence. Everyone has a story to tell, and this particular “Howland Family” story is all Abigail’s.

Everyone tells stories around here. Every place, every person has a ring of stories around them, like a halo almost. People have told me tales ever since I was a tiny girl squatting in the front dooryard, in mud-caked overalls, digging for doodlebugs. They have talked to me, and talked to

me. Some I've forgotten, but most I remember. And so my memory goes back before my birth. (14)

In conjunction with the sentiment conveyed in the above quote, Abigail also concedes to the fact that she realizes the arbitrariness and supposition in storytelling. In a rumor about her grandfather's dating practices, Abigail states, "Perhaps he had some sort of arrangement in Chattanooga, but no one ever knew for sure. It just gave them something to talk about" (27). It is as if she speculates with "Perhaps," and then qualifies it with the statement "but no one knew for sure" in order to make her other observations, ones that convey a similar supposition-like tone but without the formal qualifications, a heightened level of verisimilitude and reassurance.

Abigail also inculcates her narration with formal, grammatical markers, such as parentheticals, that make her first-person female narration more reassuring. In some instances, it is Abigail's voice encased in parentheticals that formally reflect "asides" or opinions of her voice and William's. These intimate the narrative in a way that combines Abigail's consciousness and that of her subject. Indeed, parentheticals formally reflect her mental assessment/ additions, especially during those times when she is not actually present. "(. . . But none of them could ride well enough, and the country was too broken anyway)" (15). This quotation comes from the "William" section of the novel. The "them" refers to women in relationship to hunting in one sense; in another, it depicts William's opinion of the townswomen as overall incapable of most things, and it reflects the way Abigail has been taught by William and others, like her great-aunt, to think about herself as an incapable woman. (One can only believe that Abigail thinks of herself in this way because of asides that she makes: "And the next time I would order properly"

{194}, which refers to John “correcting” Abigail’s bar beverage order; and, “How silly. I can’t do anything right. I can’t even get to the hospital in time for a baby . . .” [205].)

Abigail’s narrating ability to meld sentiments, whether contrived or not (and especially if Abigail teaches herself differently as she ages in regards to many situations), nevertheless exemplifies how she uses language to reassure. To allow the reader to assume that the opinion about women might be hers at one time in her life is narrative honesty at its best.

If parentheticals play an important role on a formal level, as they do in this last incident, then so do dashes. Indeed, dashes convey the same narrative reassurance as parentheticals. For instance, in the passage that tells about William’s first wife, Lorena Hale Adams, Abigail interweaves her voice with William’s by using dashes: “There was a brother too — William forgot to ask his name — who had run off to a ship at Savannah and disappeared” (20). Abigail shows not only reassurance but also brilliance in that it is as if a narrator asked him for narrative clarity, but he did not remember or ever even know. Thus, the passage becomes not just a recounting of facts but puts the reader in the storytelling mode wherein naturally some things will and should be forgotten. Moreover, not only is the name of William Howland’s first dead wife’s brother inconsequential and unimportant, it also in its brevity provides room for what is important [in and as memory], memory used for good-storytelling. Thus, Abigail here illustrates the art of disposable memories in narration. These facts are both forgettable and necessary. They basically reassure of Abigail’s thoroughness, but then can be forgotten. A few sentences down from the one about Lorena’s brother is one about Lorena’s sister. It is brief; it adds nothing essential to Lorena as a character or to the story, but it is part of the story: “There was an older sister, [dash-like pause] married to a railroad engineer. They lived next

door, in a neat white house with four red-headed children, and raised fighting cocks in the backyard” (20). This is all that Abigail tells us, which is brief and intimate and just enough.

One final formal element that works with Abigail’s language of reassurance as first-person female narrator is the use or non-use of quotation marks. Quotation marks, of course, indicate the exact words said by characters. Abigail formally quotes William in the following example taken from the passage about William’s wife’s death: “ ‘I don’t want a grave for her,’ he told his parents. ‘I want the tomb’ ” (25). However, Abigail also quotes William without the formal use of quotation marks. In an example taken from the passage about William’s daughter’s wedding, Abigail, the granddaughter-narrator, narrates without the use of quotation marks. “What else, he argued to the people clustered in the back of the Feed Store, crunching their parched peanuts and corn, could explain the different postmarks on the letters?” (33). The letters refer to ones sent by the fiancée of William’s daughter, Abigail. The question-part of the quote definitely comes from William, but the “crunching their peanuts” part of the quote could have either been William embellishing his telling of the story to Abigail, or Abigail, the narrator, enriching her own recounting of the situation. It does not really matter. Her combination of voices reassures the reader of Abigail’s prowess in narration. Occasionally, Abigail even leaves out the “. . . he argued . . .” part in the narrative, or rather the part that differentiates the voice. In Abigail’s narration of William’s search for a whiskey still, she uses this format: “But he’d never found any island large enough and high and dry enough to hold a still. And where would it be?” (35). Again, knowing that both characters live in the exact same area, this “And where would it be?” question could come from either Abigail or William.

This informal interweaving of voices demonstrates the subversive way that language works to reassure the reader of a narrator's understanding and insight into the characters and story.

Abigail continuously relies on second-person "you" when she narrates about events that involve both the townspeople and the Howlands, the story's opposing sides. There are a few reasons why she depends on the "you." Because of the story's problematic social dilemma, interracial marriage, Abigail uses the "you" so that her listeners feel no obligation to pick a side in the controversy. "You" engages the reader for both sides and includes them in the narrative without the implications involved in the strife. The "you" also works to combine both the Howlands and the town in one pronoun. For instance, Abigail narrates with "you" in a passage about "market Saturday," which is a day of commerce among town members. "It was the busiest day of all, it always was . . . but you had to get early to get one [a chair] . . . If you listened, over the chatter of people you could hear the sounds of the animals in the back lots" (36). That the two sides could come together in any capacity, whether it is metaphorically reflected by the "you" or within the narrative's setting, enriches the times when the two sides are their own pronoun. Abigail also uses "you" to combine the Howlands with Negro cotton-pickers. The two groups together in this one pronoun illustrate the inherent difficulty of distinguishing the "you." Indeed, Abigail's manipulation of "you" bears thematic implications for which no real answer surfaces. Answers, though, are inconsequential as long as the reader is reassured that Abigail sees her own eventual point. "It wasn't hard work, picking, all the small children did it . . . Picking did give you a very muscular hand: you yanked the cotton out of the prongs of the boll with the tips of your fingers" (39).

(The reader would hope that at least the author, if not the narrator, too, is ironic here about the supposed virtues of a “muscular hand.”) Indeed, Abigail places a heavy importance on pronouns of any kind. They differentiate without being specific. For a story whose theme is in part interracial marriage, superficial society protocol versus subversive truth and politics, then specificity should maintain a capricious mien. Pronouns allow inclusion without specifics. Abigail explicitly demonstrates the persuasiveness of pronouns in this quote about Margaret: “Living with *him*, *she* lived with *us all*, *all* the Howlands, and *her* life got mixed up with *ours*. *Her* face was black and *ours* were white, but *we* were together anyhow. *Her* life and *his*. And *ours*” (78). Finally, pronouns enable Abigail as narrator to contrast how the town thinks with the reality of the situation.

In the last section of The Keepers of the House, Abigail, the first-person female narrator, formally introduces herself. Because Abigail narrates and ages concurrently, she introduces herself to us in an adolescent voice. Indeed, her first voice represents several youthful attributes that affect her narration: naivete, unpretentiousness, inconsequential ramblings and child-like humor. Abigail’s adolescent narration assumes no greater point than just the retelling of her own youth and of the lives around her. In part, it is not her fault in that what needs to occur for revelation is still many years away. In part, though, too, it is a process. She wants to illustrate to the reader, by the end of her narration, the immense progression of her voice and her thought process and her actions. Nevertheless, Abigail relies on the language of reassurance for every stage of her life and her narration. Growth, which is a naturally occurring process, only enhances reassurance in the narrator.

The language of reassurance, then, accomplishes a simpler task for Abigail's adolescent voice. For instance, on the very first page of the "Abigail" section, Abigail reassures the reader of her accuracy as narrator through repetitive word usage. Granted, repetition is also a factor of Abigail's limited teenage vocabulary, but this limitation is necessary in order to show the progression, as mentioned above. For instance, Abigail uses variations of the words "come" and "wait" at least seven times in six sentences: "I came . . . coming back home . . . We came . . . we had to wait . . . just us two waiting . . . we had to wait . . . You could see that waiting" (140). Furthermore, she begins the third paragraph with the phrase, "Like I said" as if she knows that someone, an adult, might not be listening to her; thus, she needs to reassure him/her of what she said.

Abigail weaves admissions of memory loss with striking recollection. In terms of her adolescent narration, her weaving makes sense. It is not really that she does not remember; rather, it is that what is really important to remember for the overall purpose of telling the story is not known to her quite yet. As a result, she often recounts inconsequential events, as if they might bear meaning. But this, too, is problematic in that some memories, important or not, must be recollected in order to reach other memories. Thus, when Abigail states, "I remembered so little" and then follows with a paragraph-long string of specific memories that may or may not further the plot, she exemplifies this point. Her memory of the town where she lived with her mother and birth father, a college professor, illustrates how her narrative functions. First she says, "I remembered so little," but then recounts many striking images of what she "supposedly" does not remember about the town. These memories, though, offer little to the narrative as a whole: "There was only one house left standing, at on top of the highest hill in town. Not

a pretty house.” She then recollects the town’s river: “I saw them pull a body from it one day . . . A couple of fishermen dragged it out, one by an arm, one by a leg. I remember it was a Negro, I saw the dark skin clearly, and it was naked” (141). Afterwards, she says that she remembers how her parents were not getting along. Thus, although her handling of memory in some sense and instance often seems banal and inconsequential, it almost always results in something profound. Abigail’s connection with a dead “Negro” and two married people “not getting along” implicates her own life, her own story. Indeed, it implicates every life in The Keepers of the House.

Furthermore, if the equation can be made that a reassuring narrator is one with a propensity for memory, then for a narrator, Abigail, to admit that “There are places — months and years even — when I cannot recall a thing” is at first not very reassuring, even if she says “And I have tried” (144). Abigail, though, recovers herself by equating the desire for memory with the need to understand her extant life, not just for the details of memory on their own. As was shown earlier, some memories are disposable. Her next statement, then, “If I could just remember . . . I would understand” (144) elevates what she does remember and recount into a level of higher purpose: understanding. If the narrator does not “understand” then the reader, who depends on the narrator, will definitely not understand. Just having a goal to arrive at this higher purpose guarantees this. Moreover, for her to say a few paragraphs later that “I never have any great revelation — I’m too dull for that” (145) does not make her any less reassuring; indeed, the story would not be a story if it simply listed one revelation after another. She demonstrates a tool of the language of reassurance here in that she qualifies certain things

as “not remembering” or “not noticing” so that what she does *not* qualify must be true and vastly important.

Abigail also establishes herself as completely the opposite of Margaret’s children, who are her peers and who could conceivably tell the story just as well if not potentially better than Abigail. Abigail sets herself up like this because it makes what she notices and narrates about the other characters seem quite easy and natural. Really, though, it is just a matter of difference. Abigail separates herself in one sense, which might make her seem incapable of understanding her opposition. Concurrently, though, this separation serves to make her observations and subsequent narration appear brilliant. This brilliance is, of course, reassuring. Thus, when Abigail compares herself with Margaret’s children and compares Margaret with Abigail, both parents of the children under comparison, her depictions by virtue of exacting difference represent how the language of reassurance works. Abigail states that she “could fake colds and sore throats and general aches . . . My mother did not object. But if Margaret’s kids complained, she paid no attention” (146). Indeed, Abigail affirms her recognition of this tool in narration when she states “My mother liked Margaret. Maybe because Margaret had everything she hadn’t: size and strength and physical endurance” (149).

The difference in Abigail’s adolescent narration and her young adult-to-midlife narration rests in her goal: as an adolescent, she wants to reassure the reader and herself only about herself. In the latter stages of her life, though, she wants to reassure the reader of her ability to tell the story better than any other character. Thus, for her the language of narration is a natural progression. Her confidence as narrator continues to build so that by the end of the story, reassurance has taken hold in both her ability to narrate and in her

own self. For instance, when the conflict between Robert and Abigail occurs, Abigail finds herself in a new demeanor. She says that she “hadn’t expected him to listen to me. But then it had been such a long time since anyone had listened to me. If ever before” (267). Moreover, page after page Abigail belittles herself for “not understanding” anything in regards to the events in her life until she reaches a whole state of reassurance. In the following quote, which refers to the attack made on her house, Abigail for the first time does not qualify what occurs as something that she cannot understand. “I wondered how they had shattered so many panes. I supposed they had used a shotgun blast or two. I hadn’t heard that either. *But then I’d been down under the hill and very busy*” (289). The sentence in italics (my emphasis) illustrates the point. It is not that she does not understand, it is that she was just someplace else, thus not given an opportunity to understand. Abigail has definitely “come into her own.”

In the next chapter, I will demonstrate how Ruth, the first-person female narrator of Robinson’s novel Housekeeping uses the language of reassurance. Ruth, like Abigail, feels a need to prove herself capable in the lead role of narrator. Thus, she relies on language, a trustworthy, effective entity, to reassure her reader, as does Abigail, in order to achieve her goal.

CHAPTER 4

Housekeeping

Marilynne Robinson's novel, Housekeeping, is the story of two sisters, Ruth and Lucille, who grow up with a series of different caretakers after their mother, Helen, commits suicide. Before the suicide, though, Helen takes her two girls to her hometown of Fingerbone, where after her death the girls' grandmother takes them in. When she dies in turn, however, and the girls' two Great Aunts decide that they don't want to be their guardians, their aunt Sylvie becomes their surrogate mother. Sylvie, though, has been living a life of transience, so that when she arrives in Fingerbone she brings with her all the obvious habits of a transient. The town begins to notice and eventually condemns Sylvie as an unfit guardian. Ruth and Lucille differ in their sentiment of Sylvie. Lucille, the younger girl, decides to leave Sylvie's household for her economics teacher's home. Ruth, in contrast, leaves Fingerbone with Sylvie after a brilliant attempt to burn down their house. She, like Sylvie, becomes a transient.

Ruth is the first-person female narrator of Housekeeping. She, too, pursues the same agenda as both Marget and Abigail in that she also uses the language of reassurance. Ruth feels the same compulsion as Marget and Abigail to prove herself as the only character with the ability to tell the story of Housekeeping. For instance, as in the other novels, the very first line undeniably establishes Ruth as the definitive voice of

Housekeeping's narrative: "My name is Ruth." By virtue of naming herself to the entire reading world from the very beginning, she immediately lifts her voice over everyone else's in the story. She puts herself out on the line. She becomes accountable to both herself and her audience for all narrative matter. This is reassuring for both herself and her readers.

In the article "The Poetics of Transience: Marilynne Robinson's Housekeeping," Marcia Aldrich suggests that the opening sentence expresses Ruth's desire to have the women of the novel come into their own. Perhaps through Ruth's use of the language of reassurance throughout the novel, which serves to strengthen and foster the female voice, Aldrich's assertion can be accomplished. Aldrich also maintains that when the women of the novel do come into their own, then it works to "inscribe female difference within writing itself" (127), which is an alternative to entirely removing oneself from the patriarchal system of language. Indeed, Ruth's voice never sounds specifically "female" or specifically "male." She concurrently encompasses and negates both genders, but only after she asserts "My name is Ruth."

Moreover, "My name is Ruth" is an entity of its own because of its sentence structure. This metaphorically enacts her ability as narrator in that she distances herself on a syntactical level in order to better observe the other characters on a thematic level. This is perhaps why she follows this short opening sentence with a long one wherein she quickly and rhetorically lists the names of all the other characters, melded together and unspecific: "I grew up with my younger sister Lucille, under the care of my grandmother, Mrs. Sylvia Foster, and when she died, of her sisters-in-law, Misses Lily and Nona

Foster, and when they fled, of her daughter, Mrs. Sylvia Fisher” (3). This names the people whose story Ruth and only Ruth is capable of telling.

Literary critic Sian Mile views narrative situations like the one above differently. In an article entitled “Femme Foetal: The Construction/Destruction of Female Subjectivity in Housekeeping, or Nothing Gained,” Mile claims that Robinson as Ruth does not want to “reclaim” the female body, as in an instance of separation from other characters. Rather, Mile sees it as a “merging.” Merging “allows for a multiplicity of self; a self constructed in relation to other selves . . . where there are no divisions between subject and other and maybe no gendered subjects at all” (134). However, if a first-person female narrator uses the language of reassurance, as does Ruth, then both merging and distancing must be accomplished concurrently. Ruth knows this. They must work simultaneously, as will be shown in the following pages, in order to reassure the reader.

The idea of merging assumes a different role for literary critic Karen Kaivola. In the article “The Pleasures and Perils of Merging: Female Subjectivity in Marilynne Robinson’s Housekeeping,” Kaivola refers to merging more concretely than Mile. Kaivola sees that life, textual life, offers Ruth two choices: “On the one hand, this female escape from containment and reintegration into a repressive status quo [Lucille’s world] is liberating and promising. But the only alternative to the status quo . . . is transience” (671). Kaivola wonders which life would be the worst. Indeed, Ruth must “merge” regardless of her choice. To merge is to lose oneself. It seems, though, that since she constructs her own narrative and controls her voice and others, then she does not lose herself. Her language of narration maintains an equal level of distance and inclusion. Often, Ruth makes observations about her surroundings, or other characters, or the extant

situation. She does this without definitive regards to anyone else. Often, too, Ruth admits to fear of abandonment and loneliness. Her way with language, then, illustrates a wonderful balance that works to reassure the reader that she is capable of both.

Immediately after this list of female caretakers, Ruth begins to tell the history of her grandfather and of the house where he lived as a child. Because her grandfather “escaped this world years before I [Ruth] entered it” (3), then Ruth cannot or will not assume that her audience will overlook this time-inconsistency. Indeed, any reader should question Ruth’s ability to narrate about someone dead and unable to answer for himself. Ruth, of course, recognizes this and embarks on telling his story nonetheless. In order to accomplish this, she manipulates language to reassure her audience that what she tells them is true. For instance, after she admits that she was not alive during her grandfather’s life, she states: “It was he who put us down in this unlikely place [Fingerbone]” (3). By using the present-situation pronoun “us” with the past-situation pronoun “he,” Ruth makes the narrative situation a timeless one. Furthermore, although she promises to be such a great storyteller/fact gatherer that she knows about things that are not even in this life, she nonetheless manifests this initial description in specific details of something materialistic, inanimate and easily ascertainable. I refer to the house, or even the idea of “house,” where the grandfather lived as a child. Indeed, Ruth uses the language of reassurance in order to create a *sense* of complete intimacy about the house where her grandfather lived as a boy; this assures verisimilitude in her narrative, especially because she makes a convincing connection between this house, her grandfather’s personality and motivations and his art. However, upon a closer reading, with the idea of the language of

reassurance kept in mind, her details about the house that her grandfather built are really just superficial observations:

He had grown up in the Middle West, in a house dug out of the ground, with windows just at earth level and just at eye level, so that from without, the house was a mere mound, *no more a human stronghold than a grave*, and from within, *the perfect horizontality of the world in that place* foreshortened the view so severely that the horizon seemed to circumscribe the sod house and nothing more. So my grandfather began to read(3)

Ruth's interweaving of spiritual, intimate comments (in italics) with physical evidence, evidence that in reality could be amassed or imagined in any way, enriches the narrative in a holistic way. It also subtly conveys a very intimate personality of her grandfather that relieves Ruth of the fact of her not actually being present in her subject's life.

To further reassure her readers of her ability to reconstruct her grandfather's past, Ruth parallels the evolution of nature with that of time (her present time and her grandfather's past time) — two important staples in fictional storytelling. Her narrative becomes a melange of dropped boundaries wherein the reader does not have to be thrust back and forth in town. Here she describes the town of Fingerbone where she now lives and where her grandfather eventually settled, which exemplifies the point: "It seems there was a time when the dimensions of things modified themselves, leaving a number of puzzling margins, as between the mountains as they must have been and the mountains as they are now . . . sometimes in the spring the old lake will return" (5).

Furthermore, from the telling of the very first event in the story, that of the train wreck that killed her grandfather, Ruth at first lessens the event, which is also a component of the language of reassurance. She uses this language in this way only to prove later that just through her own telling of the story will it be captivating and worthy of reading. For instance, Ruth says, "Though it [the train wreck] was reported as far away as Denver and St. Paul, it was not, strictly speaking, spectacular, because no one saw it happen" (6). For whatever reason behind Ruth's initial distrust in herself to make the story automatically and originally "spectacular," her finish proves that only through her storytelling does it become "spectacular." Indeed, the effect of the train wreck on all the characters throughout the novel further ensures its spectacularity. The following sentence, describing the morning after the train wreck, proves both of these points: "When the sun rose, clouds soaked up the light like a stain" (7). The image here about the sky that surrounds the train wreck is not only striking, but also the simile "like a stain" brilliantly conveys the irremovable effect that this wreck bears on the lives involved.

Since Ruth states that there "were not really any witnesses in any sense," (6) then the reader has no one else to trust but her, even if she herself was not alive at the time of the train wreck. Moreover, because fiction and uncertainty hovers over this train wreck, Ruth knows to make another person's attempt to construct any aspect of the event sound fabricated: "The boy [who claims that he touched the train] was an ingenious liar, a lonely boy with a boundless desire to ingratiate himself. His story was neither believed nor disbelieved" (8). The last sentence, "His story was neither believed nor disbelieved," implies an audience. It also shows that Ruth is sensitively aware of what audiences think. The indeterminacy of his story bears implications for the end of the novel, too. No one in

Fingerbone knows for certain what happened to Ruth and Sylvie; only Ruth and Sylvie know the truth, and only Ruth can confirm it by way of narration.

Furthermore, the way in which Ruth talks about the train wreck makes her sound as if she has done extensive research: “Some of the divers remembered pushing past debris as they swam down into the water” (6). The “some” suggests that other divers who were present at the scene of the train wreck did not remember this aspect of the search. This example of the language of reassurance seems as if Ruth asked every single diver and then came up with a ratio, albeit inexact. Moreover, “pushing past debris” of any kind as one descends into a body of water near a town and an area of commerce (train tracks) — seaweed, industrial muck, pollution — is not that unlikely an occurrence. Her handling of it, though, gives it importance. Thus, Ruth definitely provides enough evidence in the beginning of the narrative to prove that only she can gather details and tell the story.

Ruth, like the first-person female narrators already discussed, employs a narrative voice that seems timid and shy, but actually empowers her. Her method exemplifies the language of reassurance. For instance, statements such as “As far as I know” (15) induce a feeling that we can trust Ruth in that she will not deny the reader any aspect of the story. She will not hide anything from the reader; she does not privilege herself or make herself separate and therefore better because she knows things that we do not know. Perhaps she realizes that hiding knowledge from the reader will really not benefit her in any way. This manner of storytelling seems implicitly female, something ideologically and socially fostered. Historically, women have more often than not been excluded from

certain types of knowledge. Thus, Ruth as a first-person female narrator will keep this in mind.

Ruth then recreates her grandmother and her grandmother's relationship with her daughters. In this portrayal, Ruth uses language to convey an intimate knowledge of the dynamics involved in this situation. For example, she says, "What was it like" (19), which refers to the living situation of Ruth's grandmother and the grandmother's three daughters. Although the sentence is an interrogative, it contains no question mark. It is as if Ruth is asking herself this for rhetorical purposes in that she already knows the answer. She was not alive to witness and yet she knows. Even if the assessment is merely an opinion she reassures that this, too, is accurate. She accomplishes this by making such statements as: "She had never taught them to be kind to her" (19). This is an opinion with a sad weightiness to it. It offers an answer to the mysterious behavior of the daughters; nonetheless, it is in reality no way absolutely verifiable. Ruth, in her willingness to assert bold opinions like this, inadvertently reassures the reader that her narrative can be trusted. Ruth practically demands acquiescence from her reader.

Ruth exhibits a narrator's ability to decode the language of other characters while concurrently including the exact wording of their speech. This makes her language significant and reassuring. What she notices in her Great Aunts' speech exemplifies this: "And they [the Great Aunts] had lived all their lives together, and felt that they had a special language between them" (46). However, the aunts did not really "feel" this language: it is more (because of the first part of the above quote.) It just became "their" way. Indeed, Ruth knows that they know just as much if not more about the family and could easily tell the story just as well. Ruth represents their dialogue in the following

passage about what to do with Lucille and Ruth, though, as just a mirroring of each other's thoughts:

It would be lovely to take them home.

They'd be safer.

Warmer.

They clicked their tongues.

We'd all be more comfortable.

So near the hospital (37).

Ruth does not even need to assign a name to each line of dialogue; the voices are so perfectly interchangeable and replicated with such ease. In contrast, Ruth represents her voice as distinct on all occasions. This is why she is the narrator.

How Ruth deals with what she feels assertive enough to mention in her narrative is indicative of the language of reassurance. Her method imparts a non-presumptive air about herself as narrator. Like Marget and Abigail, Ruth never assumes that she would be allowed to know every detail and specific of an event or person. She does not have that privilege. Thus, she uses language to temper whatever unsure knowledge she offers in her narrative. For example, in one paragraph, Ruth says "perhaps" four times: "Perhaps from a sense of delicacy . . . Perhaps she was not curious . . . Perhaps she was so affronted . . . Perhaps she did not wish to learn" (20). Ruth begins the paragraph that follows this one with: "If she had asked me" (20). Ruth does not automatically assume that anyone wants to know anything, or that what she has to say is important or even interesting, or that anyone would even listen. She often prefaces what she says with statements like the ones above, but then follows with a rich and abundant and convincing narration. Here are other

examples: “If *someone* had asked *me* about Lucille . . .” (53), even though no one asked her opinion; “Yet I remember her neither less nor differently” (55); “It was *perhaps* only from watching gulls fly like sparks up the face of clouds that dragged rain the length of the lake that I imagined . . . Or it was from” (92); “*Say* that Helen . . . *Say* that my grandmother” (96).

As first-person female narrator, Ruth treats the most obviously significant events, the ones wherein the metaphor becomes itself in a way that does not overtly assume significance. Nevertheless, her language conjures a sense that the event is indeed extremely important. How Ruth relates the snow-woman incident illustrates this. Ruth makes it seem as if it was just one snowy day and they decided to build a snow-woman: “It was mere accident . . . but her shape became a posture” (61). However, it should be remembered that for two young girls to have a “posture,” which resembles a woman, will probably ultimately lead to that posture abandoning them, as has everyone else in their lives. The “gleam” of hopefulness in this posture is just a gleam and assuages nothing. Ruth consistently tempers this and other events with a lack of conviction or unsureness in one sense: “And while in any particular she *seemed* crude and lopsided, altogether her figure *suggested* a woman standing in cold wind. It *seemed* we had conjured a presence” (61). Once again, for two girls abandoned by practically everyone in their lives, anything with human resemblances must consciously or sub-consciously be emotive for them, even if Ruth does not in any way admit this. Admission, though, is not necessary. The details in the language reassure the reader of its importance. “We hoped the lady would stand long enough to freeze” carries with it many implications of this sort, as does the passage in which the snow-woman decomposes: “her head pitched over and smashed on

the ground. This accident cost her a forearm and a breast . . . a shoulder dropped away . . . she was a dog-yellowed stump” (61). (What happens to the snow-woman illustrates how comedy evolves from tragedy.) A few pages later Ruth remarks that “The combined effects of cold, tedium, guilt, loneliness, and dread sharpened our senses wonderfully” (79). These examples show how metaphors can be too perfect if allowed. In their perfection, then, the emotive consequences disappear. Ruth uses language to protect this from occurring.

Ruth’s intuition about metaphor and other narrative components cements why Ruth should narrate. For instance, if we examine the stories that Sylvie tells to Ruth and Lucille, what we hear are events without implication, however subtle. They are just self-contained memories. And “besides that . . . every story she told had to do with a train or a bus station” (68). Ruth chooses to retell them in her own narrative, but only as a matter of comparison and as a part of establishing a composite of Sylvie’s personality. Sylvie herself lives a life of minimal consequence or implication. Her stories reflect this. Ruth also says of Sylvie’s stories and dialogue that “she sometimes *tried* to make her stories useful” (88), and “Her advice to me never held her attention even as long as it held mine” (106) Ruth, though, from the very first page of her narrative establishes her ability to see consequence in life (the fact that her grandfather’s childhood house caused his outside view to be horizontal to the earth provides answers to why he lived his life as he did). Indeed, consequence is like a metaphorical enactment of narrative: it is something that produces something else, and so on and so on; the effects as well as the possibilities are endless. This is an important quality for a narrator to possess for the purposes of reassurance.

Ruth uses questions to indicate potential paths that the narrative could take. She throws out “what if’s” as if to show that she considered these options but chose the extant situations. She wants to reassure us that she acknowledges everything in relation to her narrative: “How far might she have gone had she not seen us watching her? And what if the wind had risen? And what if a train had come while she was still on the bridge?” (83).

Nevertheless, these are just narrative ponderings that exist only in Ruth’s imagination. Indeed, any real, actually-occurring event that Ruth recounts about herself guarantees that at least one witness is with her. Ruth uses the pronoun “we” more often than not: “We — in recollection I feel no reluctance to speak of Lucille and myself almost as a single consciousness — we always” (98). Ruth then moves from Lucille’s constant presence into Sylvie’s. She even admits that “Having a sister or a friend is like sitting at night in a lighted house” (154). The few times Ruth is alone, she overtly draws it to our attention: “And I was left alone” (123) (this passive voice fortifies my point); “Lunches were terrible [because she ate alone] . . . It was a relief to go to Latin class, where I had a familiar place in a human group, alphabetically assigned” (136); “Because, once alone” (157). The reader can easily understand that solitude might be daunting for both Lucille and Ruth, considering how often people disappeared from their lives; moreover, the “we” becomes an agent for verisimilitude and reassurance. If someone else is with Ruth when these events occur, then they must be true. Concurrently, Ruth accedes that “Loneliness is an absolute discovery” (157). This bold statement also protects her reputation as a narrator for those times when she is alone. No one can really dispute her stories either way, thanks to her reassurance.

Ruth also manipulates these instances with statements such as, “Lucille would tell this story differently” (116). An admission to this does not undercut Ruth’s own version. Rather, it seems to work, albeit paradoxically, to protect Ruth’s narrative from an invasive voice just by merely acknowledging that voice. Other examples of how Ruth prefaces her accounts for this purpose are: “Such details are merely accidental. Who could know but us?” (116); and “since memories are by their nature fragmented, isolated and arbitrary” (53) but not necessarily untrue. Finally, Ruth’s opinions on stories passed down through generations exemplifies this: “There were any number of fierce old stories, one like another, varying only in the details of avalanche and explosion, too sad to be told to anyone except to strangers one was fairly certain not to meet again” (177).

Ruth, like Marget and Abigail, never automatically assumes that her listeners will believe in her ability to narrate. Ruth constantly and convincingly manipulates language to reassure her audience. That language is the language of reassurance.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

Marget, Abigail and Ruth, all first-person female narrators, refer to themselves as dull. They repeatedly claim to have no propensity for memory. They say that they understand very little about the nature of things, of situations, of people. Indeed, they describe themselves as not being good at much of anything. However, all three female narrators have a story to tell. All use the same language to tell their story, a language that works to compensate for the self-proclaimed, unreassuring attributes mentioned above, a language that swears this female deserves her position as narrator despite how she projects herself or how she thinks she might be perceived. That language is the language of reassurance.

As shown in the preceding chapters, the language of reassurance works for these and other female narrators in various ways. For instance, as illustrated in Chapter Two, one of Marget's primary uses of it is to insidiously weaken the other characters in the story, as if a real competition existed over who should be the narrator. What Marget chooses to tell the reader about her parents and two sisters subtly and subversively disqualifies them as potential narrators: her father hates words; her mother is too timid; Kerrin verges on insanity and would not be trustworthy; Merle's perspective would be too light-hearted and easy for a story about Dust Bowl and Depression hardships. Marget

undermines the potential narrative ability of the other characters to reassure the reader that she should be the only one to narrate.

Perhaps first-person female narrators like Marget, Abigail and Ruth find it necessary to reassure readers of their capabilities because of some opposing, invisible, historically and socially-weighted force — for example, because the storyteller is a role more often than not given to a man. (I think of Barbara Johnson’s statement, “Yet how could it be otherwise, since the very notion of a self, the very shape of human life stories, has always, from St. Augustine to Freud, been modeled on the man?”) This possible explanation, though, does not entirely explain Marget’s use of the language of reassurance in that her father is her only male competitor. Females make up the rest. Perhaps women, as well as men, have not in general allowed themselves a chance to learn to trust the abilities of women with the task of telling a story worth hearing. Moreover, storytelling involves the creation, manipulation and control of images. It also involves how events and people should be perceived, a role not usually associated with self-proclaimed “dull” women with poor memories. It is a big deal. Marget, then, stands alone and must reassure both women and men that she, and only she, should be the narrator of the Haldmarne family story.

Abigail relies mainly on the aspect of the language of reassurance that allows the first-person female narrator the ability to assume the voices of not only other characters but of her readers as well, which makes her a convincing narrator. Ironically, she probably would not be gifted with this quality had the men in her life not silenced her for so long. As a female compelled to play the traditional role of woman, wife and mother and “proper” granddaughter to a rich Southern man who himself epitomizes a double

standard, Abigail knew to keep “her mouth shut” on any issue, important or not. In her silencing, Abigail became a great listener and enactor of other voices, which is how she uses language to reassure. For the reader to be able to rely on one voice that with her language can effectively simulate other voices for the purposes of storytelling is a reassuring, amazing allowance.

Ruth depends equally on several workings of the language of reassurance. For instance, she subtly undercuts other characters who possess an equally viable ability to tell the same story (like Marget). Moreover, when she narrates events that occurred before her time, she manipulates language to make herself sound nonetheless like an expert or eyewitness. She constantly reassures the reader that she will share all that she knows about any narrative situation, event or other character. Ruth, like Marget and Abigail, projects herself as a not very attractive person. She realizes that her listeners’ preconceptions about women, especially given the non-progressiveness of how people perceived women at the time of the story, might not allow cuteness to be coupled with intelligent capabilities. Unattractiveness, though, can be associated with intelligence. Cuteness almost always justifies and can more often than not stand on its own.

Indeed, because a woman’s presence in storytelling has been so limited, for first-person female narrators to use a narrative tactic such as the language of reassurance is not surprising. Moreover, if female narrators foster erroneous myths consistently perpetuated in male-centered narration for the purposes of subversively reassuring what one already believes in order to manipulate for narrative reassurance, then this, too, does not seem inconceivable or surprising. Once one reaches a point of concession in a certain thing,

then one can understand its underpinnings and move beyond it, as Marget, Ruth and Abigail have done.

However, not all first-person female narrators in novels written by women need the language of reassurance in their storytelling. Indeed, in Sylvia Plath's novel, The Bell Jar (1963), the female narrator's character establishes herself from the beginning as troubled and unstable; thus, the rest of her narration is excused from the need of narrative certitude and reassurance ascribed to by Ruth, Marget and Abigail. Her language, then, is not one of reassurance in that her "character" makes it unnecessary. The female narrator in Katherine Dunn's novel Geek Love provides the reader with the same sort of precursor to her narration. Because she describes herself as a hunch-backed albino born into a family of genetically engineered circus geeks, the most normal of the family, then pressure to reassure her readers of her ability to tell the story of her circus family never impacts this "character's" mind. Indeed, these two narrators exemplify aberrations, not only from what traditional narrators represent, but also from "acceptable" roles for women. Their state as "character" exempts them from certain narrative expectations. Readers, then, are forced to focus mainly on the "character" in The Bell Jar and Geek Love for the purposes of literary studies. Often, though, in literary studies the focus rests too much on that of "character."

Abigail, Marget and Ruth's admissions to being dull, unattractive and forgetful practically force the reader to focus on something other than "character." What the language of reassurance does ultimately, then, is to suggest a move away from the study of woman as character and how she is projected, perceived and represented. Since the study of woman as character often results in simply trying to match the woman into an

already established stereotype or someone's socially constructed ideology, then the task seems futile. To study the way in which a female character communicates, regardless of that woman's role or socially given position, reveals a truer image of that woman. To solely study aspects of something a woman has no control over, like her gender or her genetics or how society has forever perceived her, is to discover nothing real or substantial. To study something that a woman has control over, like her language, allows a much greater understanding of women overall. The language of reassurance facilitates that understanding.

To reassure does not imply that the first-person female narrator doubts her own abilities. Rather, to reassure recognizes that literature exists within the parameters of certain expectations. The female narrator knows that either not much is expected of her or that overwhelming, unattainable expectations are placed on her, if only to prove her incapable. The reader approaches the book with pre-established ideologies about women and people in general, and the narrator realizes this better than anyone. She, as do Ruth, Marget and Abigail, believes in herself as able. She does not, though, believe in her reader's ability to move past his/her original, pre-text disposition. The language of reassurance facilitates her endeavor.

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VITA

Karen Elizabeth Royall was born in Greenville, Texas, on October 24, 1969, the daughter of Toni Ann Truax Royall and Johnnie Bruce Royall. After completing her work at Greenville High School, Greenville, Texas, in 1988, she entered the University of Texas in Austin, Texas. She received a Bachelor of Art in English from the University of Texas in May, 1993. During the following years she worked odd jobs in between travels to both Europe and Central America. In June, 1997, she entered the Graduate School of English at Southwest Texas State University, San Marcos, Texas.

Permanent address: 3304 Eastland Street
 Greenville, Texas 75402

This thesis was typed by Karen Elizabeth Royall.