

Carol Shields and Simone de Beauvoir: Immanence, Transcendence, and Women's Work in *A Fairly Conventional Woman*, *The Stone Diaries*, and *Unless*

Bethany Guenther

Volume 35, numéro 1, 2010

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl35_1art07

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (imprimé)

1718-7850 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Guenther, B. (2010). Carol Shields and Simone de Beauvoir:: Immanence, Transcendence, and Women's Work in *A Fairly Conventional Woman*, *The Stone Diaries*, and *Unless*. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 35(1), 147–164.

Carol Shields and Simone de Beauvoir: Immanence, Transcendence, and Women's Work in *A Fairly Conventional Woman*, *The Stone Diaries*, and *Unless*

BETHANY GUENTHER

IN HER PIVOTAL BOOK *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that woman “finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other. They propose to stabilize her as object and to doom her to immanence since her transcendence is to be overshadowed and forever transcended by another” (xxix). At the centre of Carol Shields’s 2002 novel, *Unless*, is a mother who suspects her daughter “has been driven from the world by the suggestion that she is doomed to miniaturism” (248), to “goodness but not greatness” (249) in a world in which greatness is mostly granted to men. Both de Beauvoir and Shields deeply fear what it means for a woman to be “doomed to immanence” (de Beauvoir 73, 248, 643) or “miniaturism” (*Unless* 248). De Beauvoir explicitly connects immanence to reproduction and domestic work by asserting that “Woman is doomed to the continuation of the species and the care of the home — that is to say, to immanence” (429-30), “nothing more” (73). Men’s work, she argues, allows “an expansion of existence . . . toward the world” that makes men “the incarnation of transcendence” (73-74). De Beauvoir’s fear of immanence, the “nothing more” that threatens women’s daily lives, is also a deep concern for Shields, described by housewife Daisy Goodwill Flett in *The Stone Diaries* as “the problem of how to get through a thousand ordinary days” (263). Many of Shields’s female protagonists exhibit aspects of immanence, embodied by the dailiness of running a household, yet Shields does not view the domestic work of women with the same terror as de Beauvoir, arguably because she equips her female characters with some sort of artistic or creative work that allows them the “expansion of existence,” or transcendence, that de Beauvoir saw as only possible for men.

Because Shields's characters do face the ordinary days of domestic life, often devoted to family and home, her repeated explorations of the lives of women in (largely happy) traditional domestic situations have led some critics to suggest that her work is lacking feminist force or meaning.¹ Shields's fiction, however, espouses the feminist message that transcendence for women can (and should) be found in meaningful work. Her consideration of women's work is increasingly evident in three novels that span more than twenty years, demonstrating the influence of various feminist theorists, such as Betty Friedan and de Beauvoir. In her essay, "A View from the Edge of the Edge," Shields says, "we needed Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan to come along and tell us we were smarter than we thought" (27). While Wendy Roy deals extensively with Shields's use of Friedan in both *The Stone Diaries* and *A Fairly Conventional Woman*, and critics such as Sarah Gamble, Susan Grove Hall, Lisa Johnson, and Dianne Osland have addressed Shields's use of women's work either in terms of domesticity or art,² no one has explicitly considered women and work in Shields's fiction with respect to transcendence, especially in the context of de Beauvoir's philosophy.

I am particularly interested in tracing intersections between Shields's work and that of de Beauvoir because of the French philosopher's highly influential place in the development of feminist thought. Considering Shields's work in light of de Beauvoir's theories not only illuminates Shields's own feminist philosophy but also situates her in the larger feminist community by demonstrating that she does indeed use a feminist approach to her recognition of women's work as a potential (and necessary) source of transcendence.

Work, whether gendered or not, is of great importance to Shields; Reta, protagonist of *Unless*, asserts her creator's position:

I passionately believe a novelist must give her characters work to do. Fictional men and women tend, in my view, to collapse unless they're observed doing their work, *engaged* with their work, the architect seen in a state of concentration at the drafting table, the dancer thinking each step as it's performed, the computer programmer tracing the path between information and access. The great joy of detective fiction is watching the working hero being busy every minute with work; work in crime novels is always in view, work is the whole point. (264)

Work, emphasized by this particularly revealing metafictional passage, is often the whole point for Shields's characters, a point that takes on great urgency and power when she is depicting artistic or creative work as a woman's means of transcendence or transformation. The 1982 *A Fairly Conventional Woman* shows housewife Brenda Bowman in the process of discovering her quilting as both work and art while she simultaneously encounters the burgeoning feminist movement. Shields's 1993 *The Stone Diaries* is an extended study of Daisy Goodwill Flett, a woman who — lost in the roles of daughter, mother, wife — eventually finds identity and purpose in her work as gardener and columnist. Finally, the feminist crescendo of Shields's consideration of women and work is found in *Unless*, a poignant contemplation of female powerlessness and the potential power of the female writer.

As the title *A Fairly Conventional Woman* suggests, Shields depicts Brenda Bowman as average, middle class, and unabashedly domestic. As the novel begins, Brenda seems happy — she “glides — *glides* — down the wide oak stairs to make breakfast for her husband and children” (1); a certain smallness is suggested by the detailed description of Brenda's day, down to the types of cereal she sets out for her husband and children, and the kind of coffee grinder she uses (1). In her chapter entitled “The Married Woman,” de Beauvoir posits that “the bright ideal held up to [the engaged girl] is that of happiness, which means the ideal of quiet equilibrium in a life of immanence and repetition” (447). Brenda's life initially appears to be precisely one of immanence and repetition. Shields suggests that Brenda may, in fact, be trapped in a near claustrophobic state of equilibrium. Clearly desperate for escape, Brenda repeats “Philadelphia” over and over while fixating on the flight schedule that will take her to a craft conference (*Fairly* 1). Brenda is in danger of slipping into what de Beauvoir refers to as “stagnation.” “Every subject,” de Beauvoir asserts,

plays his part as such specifically through exploits or projects that serve as a mode for transcendence; he achieves liberty only through a continual reaching out toward other liberties. There is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an indefinitely open future. Every time transcendence falls back into immanence, stagnation, there is a degradation of existence into the *en-soi* — the brutish life of subjection to given conditions. (xxviii-xxix)

Using the male pronoun, de Beauvoir reiterates her belief that this “reaching out toward other liberties,” the expanded existence of transcendence, has always been a male privilege. Shields alludes to this same fear by beginning her novel with Brenda at work grinding coffee and setting out cereal, while the companion novel, *Happenstance*, opens with Brenda’s husband Jack, a historian, discussing “the defining of history” with his colleague (1). “History,” he states enthusiastically over lunch, “is eschatological. . . . History . . . is putting a thumbprint on a glass wall so you can see the glass wall” (1-2). This is Jack at work, putting forward new ideas as a historian, reaching out toward new definitions, if not new liberties. Meanwhile, Brenda “puts forks and knives on the table, checks the eggs. She will have to stock up on eggs today. . . . Eggs, the compleat food; where had she read that?” (*Fairly* 5-6). Shields sets up an opposition that fits perfectly with de Beauvoir’s philosophy: the woman trapped in the stagnant and mundane domestic life, the man reaching out into new liberties of thought and contemplation. But in a typically subversive move, Shields answers de Beauvoir’s fears by showing that Jack’s work is also a site of stagnation. Jack, with his emphatic iteration of the nature of history, is in fact trying to recover the urgency and significance that he and his colleague Bernie had previously found in their professional discourse. He observes that “sometimes, after summing up a crucial point, he had had the sick, dizzy sensation that the same point had been covered back in ’75 or ’68 or even ’59” (*Happenstance* 5). Later, he will be devastated and stricken by writer’s block when it seems his idea for a book has already been published by a female scholar. Academic life seems to be closing in on Jack, while Brenda is moving into uncharted waters, both in her work and art.

Through quilting, Shields gives Brenda “exploits or projects” that allow the possibility of “expansion into an indefinitely open future,” to return to de Beauvoir’s terminology. The sale of her first quilt is an empowering event, which imparts to her a certain buoyant energy and confidence that pervades other areas of her life. She works for hours in her workroom, stops worrying about the children, and has increased confidence and even potency in sexuality. No longer demanding “soft words, endearments, subtlety” (*Happenstance* 31), she seems “newly gifted with a random sense of knowing,” which leads to “nights of extravagant sexual adventure,” after which she often gives Jack’s shoulder “a light dismissing double pat” rather than lingering in his embrace

(*Happenstance* 31). Brenda's husband seems unaware that his wife's work is the source of these changes; to him, her quilting is simply about "the creation of *things*" (33), not a new-found fulfillment and empowerment resulting from a hobby that has expanded into a legitimate occupation and form of artistic expression.

Shields is careful to emphasize that part of Brenda's new sense of power is due to the recognition of her work that comes from financial remuneration. Shields, in a 1989 interview with Eleanor Wachtel, discusses the significance of her first paid job as an editorial assistant, saying, "that was very important to my self-esteem that someone would actually hire me and pay me" (Wachtel 27). It is equally important to Brenda to earn an income from her quilts. She balks at buying an expensive new coat, but after considering the amount she and other quilters are paid for their work, she thinks, "A few days work — that was all; the thought gave her a glimpse of a dazzling new kind of power" (*Fairly* 35). Brenda's new power resonates with the expansion of existence toward the world, or transcendence, that de Beauvoir associates with men's work.

The trip to Philadelphia and ensuing conference are steps in a rising crescendo of personal expansion and development, as Brenda's work exposes her to a world of new ideas. At the orientation meeting of the conference, one woman asks to present a concern, and she is told to keep it "non-political," resulting in loud laughter that "Brenda doesn't understand" (66). Although the story is set in the late seventies, Brenda's confusion here shows that she has had little exposure to the feminist movement that is well underway. The feminist agitator starts an uproar by suggesting the craft conference participants' "rights as women" (67) are being violated, as some of their reservations have been given to members of a (predominantly male) metallurgists' conference; another woman protests that the registration packages all contain makeup kits and proposes they all throw away these signs of "traditional female vanity" (69). Although "the room seems to Brenda to be tilting" (70), she does think of joining in throwing the makeup away, but she is afraid of losing her seat (69). Brenda's art has led her unwittingly into the ideological foment of second-wave feminism, and this new world of ideas also will have an effect on her views of her own art and art in general.

Brenda begins to think in more feminist and aesthetic terms in the climactic moment when she goes to an interview wearing her quilt as a cape. The scene is one of powerful transformation:

I am not walking, Brenda said to herself; I am striding along. I am a forty-year-old woman, temporarily away from home, striding along a Philadelphia street wearing a quilt on my back. . . . Mrs. Brenda Bowman of Elm Park and Chicago, gliding along, leaving a streak of indelible colour on the whitened street and trailing behind her the still more vivid colours of — what? Strength, purpose, certainty. And a piercing apprehension of what she might have been or might still become. . . . Forty years of preparing — a waste, a waste, but one that could be rectified, if she could only imagine how. (123)

This is a stark contrast to the Brenda at the beginning of the novel quietly gliding down the stairs to prepare breakfast. There is nothing quiet about this moment of awakening; the narrator asserts that “there was something epic in her wide step” (123). The power of this moment is immediately challenged when the reporter calls her “Mrs. B.” (142) and she is reminded of her perceived “housewifeliness” (142). “Gone,” she intones, “was the full-spirited woman striding through the snow. Poof,” (143). But, clearly, Brenda is not ready to relinquish that woman, and echoing the anger of the women at the orientation meeting, she has “a sudden, seething desire to be unaccommodating” (142). More importantly, though, is what Brenda tells the reporter about her work, revealed later in the replication of the newspaper article. “Art,” she suggests, “poses a moral question; craft responds to that question and in a sense provides the enabling energy society requires” (161). This, it seems, is a challenge to the newspaperman to take her seriously, and he does. Although Brenda self-consciously dismisses her printed comments as “pompous junk” (161), they suggest not only her deepening awareness of the importance of her art, but a new-found ability to create her own discourse about art and, in doing so, to transform her own self-perception and the way others see her. Roy argues that ultimately Brenda “is compelled to reinterpret quilting as an art rather than a craft and to view the resulting quilts as feminist statements rather than just ‘warm, attractive bed coverings’” (“Brenda” 120). While Laura Groening argues that “Shields’s focus is on the quiet, unappreciated lives of artistic women who have lost themselves (albeit quite willingly) in their attention to their families” (14), I would argue that *A Fairly Conventional Woman* is

about a woman who finds access to feminist modes of thinking through a transcendent engagement with art and work.

While Brenda's work arguably saves her from being subsumed by her familial role, *The Stone Diaries'* Daisy Goodwill Flett is indeed a woman lost in her family. Lisa Johnson argues that Shields "undergirds postmodern style and content with the more specific story of the thwarted (white, middle-class) female self in twentieth-century North America" (204) — precisely the kind of thwarted figure with which de Beauvoir is concerned. Yet Johnson also recognizes in Daisy the "presence of alternatives to history, and to the story one is assigned by the traditionally gendered rules of society"; these alternatives to history allow Shields to take on the "larger task of reimagining cultural history" (215). Thus, in *The Stone Diaries*, "history is based on 'women's' life landmarks — births, marriage, love, and the development of a particular family — rather than wars, drawings of national borders" and other things generally thought essential in traditionally male dominated histories (215). Significantly though, in her list of women's life landmarks, Johnson leaves out work. This omission points to Shields's concern with what Rachel Blau Duplessis refers to as "the other side of a well-known tale, the elements of women's existence that have never been revealed" (3); with Daisy, Shields suggests that work is one of these unrevealed elements.

The table of contents for *The Stone Diaries* reveals how Shields's depiction of "the other side" of the tale may have an unexpected connection to work. All but one title in the contents is followed by a single year: "Childhood, 1916," "Marriage, 1927," and so on. Only the entry entitled "Work" includes a range of years: "1955-1964." These dates and titles are not arbitrary: "Marriage, 1927" is conspicuously dated eleven years before "Love, 1936." Similarly, the family tree shows that Daisy's husband, Barker, dies in 1955. One might expect the chapter entitled "Sorrow" to share the date of Barker's death, but instead "Work" begins in 1955. "Sorrow" begins in 1965, after the end of work. Shields signals first that love and marriage do not necessarily go together and, more importantly, that they may not necessarily be as central to the novel, or to a woman's life, as work.

Duplessis writes of the recent past when "the rightful end of women in novels was social — successful courtship, marriage — or judgmental of her sexual and social failure — death" (1). In a subversion typical of

this novel, Shields writes the “rightful end” of love and domesticity into the beginning of the novel, with the quiet, erotic, and even romantic story of Daisy’s parents’ courtship and early marriage. The romance is short-lived, however, as Mercy dies giving birth to Daisy. Shields then turns her attention to Clarentine Flett, the neighbour who becomes Daisy’s guardian and who, in a surprising plot twist for a story set in the early 1900s, leaves her husband and starts a successful business selling plants she grows in a vacant lot. Shields reveals that Clarentine has read *Jane Eyre*, one of the novels Duplessis discusses as an example of the typical endings for women in (and out of) fiction. Like Duplessis, Nancy Miller argues that “the ideological underpinnings of the old plot have not been threatened seriously: experience for women characters is still primarily tied to the erotic and the familial” (4). This criticism is echoed in feminist scholars’ views of Shields, who has faced “repeated accusations of dwelling on domesticity, and [is] frequently linked with marital compromise and happy endings” (Glaser 366). Shields both recognizes and subverts Miller’s “old plot” by essentially ending the erotic and familial with Mercy’s death and instead contemplating a woman, who, like Jane Eyre, “seems to want . . . the same as what a man wants: an adequate field for her endeavors” (Osland 103). Osland’s “endeavors” closely resembles de Beauvoir’s “exploits or projects”; Clarentine, like Brenda, embodies transcendence in the form of “reaching out toward other liberties” through (traditionally masculine) business exploits, at the expense of the “old plot” of domestic bliss.

As the emphasis on work in the table of contents suggests, Daisy, like Clarentine, may also desire a “reaching out toward other liberties,” a desire signaled by a rising discontent with the erotic and familial. In the subsection entitled “Mrs. Flett’s Intimate Relations with her Husband,” Daisy, waiting for her husband, is struck by a sudden “gust of grief” and “she lies stranded, genderless, ageless, alone” (Stone 189). During their bleak lovemaking, Daisy’s mind wanders over “pregnancies, vacations, meals, illnesses” (191). It occurs to her that “she will never again be surprised. It has become, almost, an ambition. . . . Houseplants, after all, thrive in a vacuum of geography and climate — why shouldn’t she?” (191-92). Shields’s sharp irony in Daisy’s moment of bitter resignation echoes de Beauvoir’s emphatic proclamation that “there is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an indefinitely open future” (xxviii).

Shields's irony points the way forward: Daisy must move out of the vacuum into an open future. She gives Daisy a field for her endeavors: gardening and, ultimately, writing, in the form of a paid gardening column. The garden Daisy creates is "enchancing in its look of settledness and its caressing movements of shade and light" (*Stone* 196); it is "Eden itself, paradise indeed" (196). It is the garden that "she lives for . . . if the truth were known" (194). There are caresses here not found in Daisy's intimate relationship with her husband and a paradise that hearkens back not only to her father's experience of the erotic but also to her mother's experience of the artistry of cooking. While working in the kitchen, a sense of transcendence surrounds Mercy. Daisy, as narrator, observes of her mother that "every last body on earth has a particular notion of paradise, and this was hers, standing in the murderously hot back kitchen of her own house, concocting and contriving" (2). Of the above quotation, Johnson says, "traditionally female art forms in *The Stone Diaries* — the folk arts of cooking and gardening — reiterate the alchemy of women's imaginations on everyday materials. . . . Daisy inherits her mother's talent for making art from things of the earth" (206). Moreover, Johnson suggests, Daisy's "ability to transform dire earthly conditions into cultivatable soil is pointed out by the narrator as the one activity through which Daisy becomes able to perceive her own impact on the world around her, making gardening both sensual and subversive" (206). Significantly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines an *immanent act* as that which "produces no external effect"; de Beauvoir's fear is that women not only have little effect on their immediate sphere but also that they have no effect, or impact, on the world at large. Similarly, Shields recognizes that it is not enough for Daisy to simply perceive her impact on her own small world; she must have an expanded existence that allows her to engage with the world.

Shields creates this expansion by turning Daisy's art — gardening — into recognized work, in much the same way she turns Brenda's quilting into a profession. Shields conveys "Work, 1955-1964" entirely through letters, most of them fan mail written to Daisy who takes over her husband's gardening column after his death. As the fan mail suggests, Daisy is finally being recognized for her work, and this is a major departure. During the "Motherhood" chapter, Daisy, exhausted after cooking an intricate dinner, notices with disappointment that no one has asked for second helpings (162). Had her family asked for seconds,

it would have been a confirmation, a recognition of her efforts. De Beauvoir acknowledges this need for recognition: "The validity of the cook's work," she asserts, "is to be found only in the mouths of those around her table; she needs their approbation, demands that they appreciate her dishes and call for seconds" (455). But Daisy receives from her family no recognition, no reassurance that her efforts are, in fact, having some sort of external impact, no matter how small. By contrast, when she begins writing, in no time at all and with seemingly little effort, she wins accolades and respect not only from fans but also from her editor, who refers to her work as "solid in the best journalistic sense" (204). Daisy's work, like Brenda's, allows her to step outside the potentially limiting circle of familial duties and contribute knowledge and energy to the world beyond the domestic space.

While Shields clearly recognizes in Daisy the importance of a woman having a professional identity outside of her familial role, not all critics have necessarily recognized Shields's implicit feminist commentary on the importance of work to Daisy's identity. Coral Ann Howells describes Shields as possessing an "unassuming feminism" (*Contemporary* 80), yet she recognizes other critics' views of Daisy as "a decentered subject whose identity is invented for her by others" (84). It is a far from "unassuming feminism" that builds an entire book around a woman whose identity has been invented (or obscured) by others. When de Beauvoir theorizes that men compel women to "assume the status of Other" or propose to "stabilize" them as objects, it becomes clear that the roles of mother and wife can function as forms of both otherness and objectification when they subsume the identity of the woman who fills them. While Howells argues that Shields's intention is to "demonstrate that through the opinions of others . . . surrounding us, our identity is constructed as intelligible" (*Contemporary* 84), I would argue, in contrast, that Shields's intention, as a feminist, is to demonstrate that without the possibility of self-invention found in both work and art, women are in danger of being stabilized (stagnant) objects. Howells, however, seems uninterested in the possibility that Daisy is able to invent herself through her gardening column. She notes that "at no point does Daisy question the categories that mark her female life as daughter, wife (twice), mother," and mentions that Daisy "conscientiously learns the appropriate behavior for these various domestic roles through reading *Good Housekeeping*" and similar women's magazines

(*Contemporary* 85).³ Daisy may be trying to fill these roles according to society's demands, but that does not mean she is not also attempting to create her own identity through work. Susan Grove Hall writes that Daisy "builds her life as wife, mother, and garden columnist by taking up available materials and cultivating them; and like her father's carved stones, none of her accomplishments is particularly original or significant" (45). The question this statement raises is, significant to whom? Daisy's work is significant and life changing *to her*, and it does in fact touch the lives of others, as evidenced by her fan mail. Hall suggests that the stone tower Daisy's father creates is an attempt "to escape in transcendence" (45), but she does not recognize the same potential for transcendence and subjectivity in Daisy's gardening and writing.⁴

After losing her identity as Mrs. Green Thumb when her column is given to a male writer, Daisy fades back into the non-workrelated titles that define her in relation to others: mother, grandmother, aunt. In her feminist reading of the novel, Roy notes how Shields "constructs Daisy Goodwill Flett almost entirely in relation to others . . . as a way of illustrating [the] sacrifice of individuality" that women have traditionally undergone ("Autobiography" 124). Daisy's depression functions as a prolonged resistance to the sacrifice of her newly found professional identity, but it is a form of resistance that she cannot sustain. Her only recourse is to return to the unrecognized work she did previously as wife and mother: "she understands, and accepts, the fact that her immense unhappiness is doomed to irrelevance anyway. . . . She'd like to tie a crisp apron around her waist once again, peel a pound of potatoes in three minutes flat and put them soaking in cold water" (*Stone* 263). While this simple task suggests solace, it is also heartbreaking that a woman previously praised for her solid journalistic work has been forced (by male management) to return to the quiet immanence of the home.

Shields suggests a great deal with Daisy's acknowledgment that the wrenching away of her first job outside the home, and the importance she attached to it, is largely perceived as irrelevant by those around her. Male worth has long been associated with gainful employment; for a man to lose his job is tantamount to a significant loss of self. Shields reveals Barker's fear of retirement, as he wonders, "what happens to men when their work is taken from them?" (163). She asks the same question for women through Daisy. Daisy's recognition of the irrelevance of her

loss in the eyes of society is Shields's indictment of how little women are allowed to derive personal enrichment and identity from work.

Shields once said, "I am interested in writing away the invisibility of women's lives, looking at writing as an act of redemption" ("A View" 28). Daisy never quite attains this redemption from invisibility or the transcendence that once seemed so close through her work; she is, in fact, less visible by the end of the novel: she has faded into de Beauvoir's realm of immanence. Her first-person voice is heard less and less, and her first name is barely even used — she is simply Mrs. Flett or Grandma Flett. Yet as Daisy's death approaches, she may be surrounded by the debris of everyday life and conscious of her failing body, but her essence is not quite lost:

Everything makes her cross, the frowziness of dead flowers in a vase, the smell of urine, her own urine. She's turned into a bitter hag, but well, not really, you see. Inside she's still a bowl of vibrating Jello, wise old Mrs. Green Thumb, remember her? Someone you can always call on, count on, phone in an emergency, etc. (335)

With this significant reference to Mrs. Green Thumb, Shields reminds the reader of the pivotal time when Daisy's work allowed her to transcend the everyday, transcend her pre-ordained roles of wife and mother, and reach out toward other liberties. This transcendence reaches to the end of her life and brings a sense of redemption to the fading of her body and mind.

Shields's last novel, *Unless*, has been described as "a brave, strikingly feminist examination of goodness, loss, family love, and the process of putting words to paper" (Roy, "Unless" 125). Roy's use of the phrase "strikingly feminist" is important, for more than all Shields's novels, *Unless* presents her most explicitly feminist discussion of women's roles. Her main character, Reta, reflects throughout on the idea of goodness versus greatness, mirroring the language of de Beauvoir's immanence and transcendence. The focal point for Reta's anguished contemplations is her daughter Norah, who has inexplicably abandoned her life and family to sit on a Toronto street corner wearing a sign that reads "GOODNESS." For Reta, Norah is the embodiment of female powerlessness, and her speculation on the causes of Norah's self-destruction nearly consumes her. Reta's writing is, in part, a tool for surviving the loss of her child, whether she is writing her sunny novel as a distraction

and emotional outlet or writing letters she will not send to perpetrators of the patriarchal system she sees as contributing to Norah's self-enforced otherness. As Nora Foster Stovel argues, "Reta employs fiction to rewrite reality, to fill the gap left by Norah's disappearance" (65).

Reta's writing, however, is not only about rewriting reality but coming to a new understanding of the realities of what it is for women to be consigned to mere goodness, as opposed to *greatness* – a term that closely correlates to de Beauvoir's "expansion of existence," or transcendence. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *transcendence* as "surmounting, or rising above; . . . excelling, surpassing" — in other words, greatness. Reta's new editor, Arthur Springer, says that what attracts him to her novel's protagonist, Alicia, is not only "the way she has of sitting still in a chair" but also "her goodness" (*Unless* 212). Goodness, Shields suggests, however, is hardly an asset in the world of publishing. Springer clearly views Roman, the male character in Reta's novel, as capable of greatness. He sees Roman as having a complex history of hardship and difficulty that he has somehow managed to transcend; he is destined for an epic pilgrimage to get in touch with his heritage in Albania while Alicia stays home talking to the cat and making casseroles (285). Roman has history and an "ever active brain" (285); Alicia has only goodness and the ability to sit on a chair without moving.

The editor's analysis of, and plans for, these characters is important on two levels. First, Springer's not-so-subtle transfer of significance from Alicia to Roman mirrors Reta's increasing suspicion that Norah's loss of significance is a result of the gendered power structure that confines women to lives of immanence. Second, his analysis of Reta's novel underscores Shields's concern with who has the power to assign "the moral centre" of art. Springer tells Reta that a reader would never accept Alicia as "a decisive fulcrum of a work of art" because she "writes fashion articles" and "makes rice casseroles" (285-86). Because her work outside the home is decidedly unmasculine and she does domestic things, Alicia cannot be the "moral centre" (285) of a novel. Reta and Springer's conflict over Alicia's role parallels a conflict Norah had with a male professor shortly before disappearing, regarding her belief that "Madame Bovary was forced to surrender her place as the moral centre of [Flaubert's] novel" (217). By including a similar conflict between Reta and Springer over Alicia's potential as a moral centre, Shields creates a feminist connection between mother and daughter as

both struggle to protest the bestowing of moral power solely on male subjects. More importantly, she notes how the woman writer has the power to challenge, and hopefully transcend, the long-standing power structures of both literature and the publishing world. Norah's ongoing exile, however, is a continual reminder that female power is tenuous and sometimes non-existent.

Although using more figurative language, Shields essentially rephrases de Beauvoir's repeated fears that women are doomed to immanence, and that their transcendence is to be overshadowed and forever transcended by others in an "uncoded otherness" (270). This idea of uncoded otherness is found in one of the key passages of the book, one that powers Reta's anger at the patriarchal world and also illuminates much of Shields's other work. "What I believe," Reta says, is that

the world is split in two, between those who are handed power at birth, at gestation, encoded with a seemingly random chromosome determinate that says yes for ever and ever, and those like Norah, like Danielle Westerman, like my mother, like my mother-in-law, like me, like all of us who fall into the uncoded otherness in which the power to assert ourselves and claim our lives has been displaced by a compulsion to shut down our bodies and seal our mouths and be as nothing against the fireworks and streaking stars and blinding light of the Big Bang. (269-70)

With the phrase "random chromosome," Shields emphasizes the arbitrariness of gender inequality while underscoring the deeply damaging results of the myth that inequality between the sexes is genetically ordained. The displacement of power and the female compulsion to "shut down" are suggestive of the imagined passivity that Springer admires in Alicia and hopes to find in an acquiescent Reta. Before disappearing, Norah, the most "shut down" woman in the novel, speaks in huge terms of the "the world" and the earth's tides (129) and "existence" (128); at the same time, she says, "I'm trying to get past the little things but I can't" (131). Norah — caught, it seems, between transcendence and immanence — has preemptively removed herself as the moral centre of her own life. In light of Norah's marginalization, it is all the more urgent that Reta keep Alicia as the centre of her novel, if not to save Norah, then at least to begin to understand, and even combat, the powers that have forced her into self-exile.

Ultimately, Reta represents Shields's assertion that the woman writer or artist is essential because she allows women the power to decide where the moral centre will be. While a concrete reason (post-traumatic stress disorder) is found for Norah's exile, her trauma results from seeing a marginalized and essentially powerless woman attempt to transcend an implied immanence through public self-immolation. Sadly, even such a shocking death is, like Daisy's grief, doomed to irrelevance. When the circumstances of Norah's trauma come to light, Reta only vaguely remembers reading a brief mention of the woman's suicide in the newspaper. Like Norah's silent protestation in support of goodness, this young woman's death has had little impact on the world. If such extreme actions by women have so little impact, Shields implores, what are we to do? She answers through Reta's decision to reclaim Alicia:

Suddenly it was clear to me. Alicia's marriage to Roman must be postponed. Now I understood where the novel is headed. She is not meant to be partnered. Her singleness in the world is her paradise, it has been all along, and she came close to sacrificing it, or, rather, I, as novelist, had been about to snatch it away from her. . . . The novel, if it is to survive, must be redrafted. Alicia will advance in her self-understanding, and the pages will expand. (172-73)

In making Alicia the true centre of the novel, Reta symbolically reclaims for herself, for Norah, for women in general, the power of centrality. As Foster Stovel argues, "Norah's feminist perspective in real life catalyzes Reta's revolutionary realization in fiction" (67). Unlike the domestic paradise of Cuyler and Mercy, Alicia's paradise will be one brought about by self-understanding; the resulting expansion of pages is a metaphor for both Alicia and Reta's expansion, or "reaching out toward other liberties."

For the women in each of the novels examined above, work, particularly artistic work, represents an act of transcendence, a rising above the "problem of how to get through a thousand ordinary days" (*Stone* 263). Brenda's work allows her to escape the ordinary concerns of coffee grinders and cereal for a brief few days that promise the beginning of a wider expansion into artistic and self-discovery. Similarly, the art of gardening and the work of writing transform Daisy into a woman with a purpose beyond household chores and childcare. Her job as Mrs. Green Thumb gives her recognition and the possibility of personal expansion that comes from having access to a wider world than that within the circle

of home. In the depictions of both Daisy and Clarentine, Shields asserts the feminist belief that the best experiences of women are not limited to sex, love, and marriage. Finally, with *Unless*, Shields makes explicit both her feminist philosophy and fascination with work as Reta must use her power as a writer to bring about an (essentially transcendent) engagement with the world in the face of Norah's self-imposed immanence. At the end of *Unless*, Reta says of her next novel, "I want the book to have the low moaning tone of an orchestral trombone and then to move upward toward a transfiguration of some kind, the nature of which has yet to be worked out" (319). This passage is a lovely metafictional moment, for it says something about Shields's own characters who are always moving upwards toward a transfiguration or transcendence that de Beauvoir might describe as a reaching out toward other liberties. In de Beauvoir's final chapter, entitled "Liberation: The Independent Woman," she asserts that the independent woman "is productive, active, she regains her transcendence; in her projects she concretely affirms her status as subject" (680). Through her depictions of women's work and art, Shields affirms and celebrates the productive, the active, the transcendental, and the powerful in the lives of her female subjects.

NOTES

¹ In her 1991 article, "Still in the Kitchen: The Art of Carol Shields," Laura Groening argues that while Carol Shields's novels "celebrate the world of a certain kind of woman who is perhaps under-regarded in today's world, they most certainly do not welcome feminism as a way to alleviate frustration or powerlessness" (14). Elaine York discusses Shields's tactic of "fending off inquiries about her fame by strategically deploying the details of domestic life," citing the *Vancouver Sun* article in which Shields quips that even a Pulitzer Prize winner "stirs the porridge in the mornings" (247). "The danger in this sort of tactic," York notes, "is that it can be taken up by others . . . and used to confirm gendered stereotypes: the woman writer who is really a homebody at heart and not too unfemininely ambitious" (248). I would suggest that York's argument shows that this tactic has created a kind of lore, both critical and popular, in which Shields possesses an "unassuming feminism" (Howells 80) or none at all.

² Sarah Gamble's "Filling the Creative Void: Narrative Dilemmas in *Small Ceremonies*, the *Happenstance* Novels, and *Swann*" is largely about "the figure of the writer" (41); Gamble does consider Brenda's work as a quilter in comparison with her husband's work as a writer, but her interest is mostly in "the limitations of narrative" (50) and the way that Shields explores or evades these limitations through both characters' work. In "The Duality of the Artist/Crafter in Carol Shields's novels," Susan Grove Hall is interested in whether Shields's artist figures "are meant to or do embody genuine artistry" (42). In her essay "*The Stone Diaries*, *Jane Eyre*, and the Burden of Romance," Dianne Osland explores "the criteria of

tellability" (91) established by traditional narrative structure and, in doing so, considers various aspects of women's work in *The Stone Diaries*. Lisa Johnson in "A Postmodernism of Resistance in *The Stone Diaries*" and Wendy Roy in "Autobiography as Critical Practice in *The Stone Diaries*" and "Brenda Bowman at Dinner with Judy Chicago: Feminism and Needlework in Carol Shields's *A Fairly Conventional Woman*" both present feminist readings of women's work that will be discussed in greater detail later in this essay. Finally, in "Carol Shields and the Poetics of the Quotidian," Marta Dvorak equates Shields's work with Andy Warhol's, suggesting that both blur "the distinction between the kitchen and art gallery" (66) and, thus, that Shields creates a "vindication of banality" (66).

³ In "*The Stone Diaries*, *Jane Eyre*, and the Burden of Romance," Osland, like Roy and Howells, discusses the role of women's magazines, commenting that "Daisy buries herself in the domestic. 'Deeply, fervently, sincerely desiring to be a good wife and mother' ([*Stone*] 185), she reads every issue of the twentieth-century's conduct books, *Good Housekeeping*, *McCalls*, and the *Canadian Home Companion*" (101).

⁴ Howells also makes a connection between transcendence and the traditionally male work of structure building in "Larry's A/Mazing Spaces," as she asserts that it is "in the artificial space of the maze" that Shields "relocates the . . . experience of the sublime, with all its rapture and self-transcendence" (132).

WORKS CITED

- de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Trans. H.M. Parshley. New York: Knopf, 1968.
- Duplessis, Rachel Blau. "Endings and Contradictions." *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985. 1-19.
- Dvorak, Marta. "Carol Shields and the Poetics of the Quotidian." *Journal of the Short Story in English* 38 (2002): 57-71.
- Dvorak, Marta, and Manina Jones, eds. *Carol Shields and the Extra-Ordinary*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2007.
- Eden, Edward, and Dee Goertz, eds. *Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2003.
- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.
- Gamble, Sarah. "Filling the Creative Void: Narrative Dilemmas in *Small Ceremonies*, the *Happstance* Novels, and *Swann*." Eden and Goertz 39-60.
- Glaser, Brigitte. "Digressing to Inner Worlds: Carol Shields's 'Our Men and Women' (1999)." *The Canadian Short Story: Interpretations*. Ed. Reingard M. Nischik. Rochester: Camden, 2007. 365-73.
- Groening, Laura. "Still in the Kitchen: The Art of Carol Shields." *Canadian Forum*. Jan.-Feb. 1991: 14-17.
- Hall, Susan Grove. "The Duality of the Artist/Crafter in Carols Shields's Novels." *The Kentucky Philological Review* 12 (1997): 42-45.
- Howells, Coral Ann. *Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction*. New York: Palgrave, 2003.
- . "Larry's A/Mazing Spaces." Dvorak and Jones 113-35.
- "Immanent." Def. 2. *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford UP. 14 June 2010 <<http://dictionary.oed.com/>>.

- Johnson, Lisa. "'She Enlarges on the Available Materials': A Postmodernism of Resistance in *The Stone Diaries*." Eden and Goertz 201-29.
- Miller, Nancy. *The Heroine's Text: Readings in the French and English Novels, 1722-1782*. New York: Columbia, 1980.
- Osland, Dianne. "*The Stone Diaries*, *Jane Eyre*, and the Burden of Romance." Eden and Goertz 84-112.
- Roy, Wendy. "Autobiography as Critical Practice in *The Stone Diaries*." Eden and Goertz 111-46.
- . "Brenda Bowman at Dinner with Judy Chicago: Feminism and Needlework in Carol Shields's *A Fairly Conventional Woman*." *Atlantis* 33.1 (2008): 120-30.
- . "Unless the World Changes: Carol Shields on Women's Silencing in Contemporary Culture." *Carol Shields: The Arts of a Writing Life*. Ed. Neil K. Besner. Winnipeg: Turnstone, 2003. 125-32.
- Shields, Carol. *A Fairly Conventional Woman*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1982.
- . *Happenstance*. Toronto: Ryerson, 1980.
- . "Interview with Carol Shields." By Eleanor Wachtel. *Room of One's Own* 13.1-2 (1989): 5-45.
- . *The Stone Diaries*. Toronto: Vintage, 1993.
- . *Unless: A Novel*. Toronto: Random, 2002.
- . "A View from the Edge of the Edge." Dvorak and Jones 17-29.
- Stovel, Nora Foster. "'Because She's a Woman': Myth and Metafiction in Carol Shields's *Unless*." *English Studies in Canada* 32.4 (2006): 51-74.
- "Transcendence." Def. 1. *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford UP. 14 June 2010 <<http://dictionary.oed.com/>>.
- York, Lorraine. "Large Ceremonies: The Literary Celebrity of Carol Shields." Dvorak and Jones 238-55.