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Re-vision as revision| Women narrating the past in The Woman Warrior, Housekeeping, and Cat's Eye

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RE-VISION AS REVISION: WOMEN NARRATING THE PAST IN
THE WOMAN WARRIOR, HOUSEKEEPING, AND CAT'S EYE

by
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B. A., Virginia Tech, 1990

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Date June 1, 1992
Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*, and Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* all explore the process of re-visioning personal and cultural pasts through the narration of their female protagonists. Their narrative techniques allow them to introduce alien, in this case, feminine, voices into the authoritative culture in their texts so that they may see their pasts and themselves from new perspectives. My thesis explores the ways in which these new perspectives reveal the multivoicedness in women's narratives.

My first chapter centers on how *The Woman Warrior* 's narrator rewrites ancient Chinese myths and family stories from the perspective of the heroines of those stories so that the "new" versions reveal different aspects which the authoritative versions had ignored or repressed. Through this re-vision, the narrator breaks partially free from the bonds of her cultural and familial myths, empowering herself with the alternative role models that her re-visioned stories produce.

In *Housekeeping* the narrator's desire to superimpose memories from her past, specifically images of her dead mother, onto her present relationship with her aunt is the subject of my second chapter. This desire connects with the narrator's need to understand past images in the context of the present. This chapter explores the ways in which re-vision's task goes beyond breaking free from the past; re-visioning permits this narrator to break into her past where she may live in union with her haunting memories.

My third chapter suggests that the *Cat's Eye* 's narrator is not only haunted by images from her personal past, but is also obsessed with the need to understand the context of those images. The alien voice of her childhood friend is the only key she has to understand her own discourse. Her narrative becomes her attempt to gain an understanding of herself as other in her past, to hear her voice as alien in order to understand it better.

My study suggests that the ambiguous endings of these three texts reveal that the narrators' selfhood and happiness are intrinsically entwined with people around them, which forces their feelings of contentment to lie on a tenuous base. Exploration of their re-visioning processes reveals how the narrators strive toward new selves through the changes in their relationships with people and traditional ideologies. The narrative theory of this project centers on women's ability to re-vision their own sense of themselves as well as their awareness of their relationships with other women be narrating their memories.
Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................. 11
Table of Contents ....................................... iii
Introduction .............................................. 1

Chapter 1: "Talk-Story" as Re-Vision in Maxine Hong
Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* .......................... 10

Chapter 2: Re-Vision into the Past in Marilynne
Robinson's *Housekeeping* ............................... 42

Chapter 3: Re-Vision for Context in Margaret Atwood's
*Cat's Eye* ............................................... 72

Epilogue ................................................... 99
Bibliography .............................................. 103
Introduction

Adrienne Rich's essay, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" emphasizes the importance for women of looking to the past in order to understand themselves:

Re-vision--the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. (35)

As the history of feminist scholarship reveals, re-visioning past texts sheds new light on the kinds of women's oppression through economic, religious, and familial forces, as well as educating us about women's attempts to liberate themselves from this oppression. Although Rich emphasizes the need to look back specifically at old texts to understand ourselves, I would argue that exploration and re-vision of a woman's personal past are as important for her to attain a sense of her individual self as an exploration of her literary or cultural past. Just as multiple versions of cultural history exist, multiple versions of the history of the self (in one's own imagination, at least), and therefore multiple selves exist as well. Cultural re-vision will affect a woman's life by broadening an understanding of the multiplicity of her cultural past, but personal re-vision will further illuminate the multiplicity of her Self.

A re-vision of personal pasts may help a woman understand herself better, but it also may help her free herself from the traditions that have limited her:
this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity; it is a part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society.

We need to know the writing of the past [and our personal pasts], and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us. (Rich 35)

Three texts by contemporary women writers explore this re-visioning process through the narratives of their protagonists' lives: Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*, and Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*. All three texts portray female protagonists who experience troubled childhoods, but who re-vision their often haunting memories through their narratives. By re-visioning their pasts, these characters break the hold patriarchal traditions have over them. Although their methods differ radically, the characters share some elements of the process of narrative which help them re-vision. They also share a sense of fragmentation in their lives that prompts them to weave pieces of cultural and personal tales together to form new tales and myths, and they appreciate art as a means to create these new tales. Ultimately, they all also struggle to understand mother/daughter or sister/friend relationships, which helps them re-vision, and revise, their sense of selves. The focus of their narratives on women and the family revises traditional narratives by insisting that family and gender are inherent characteristics in the development of the Self; instead of centering, as has been done previously, on man's relationship to society and institutions as catalysts to
personal fulfillment, these narrators insist that family and
gender roles are at the core of one's emotional and
intellectual development. However, although the narrators
share the above concerns and the desire to re-vision, the
differences in their lives and narratives underscore their
multiplicity; none of their narratives arrives at the same
conclusions regarding her development, if indeed we can say
that they "conclude" at all.

In his essay "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin emphasizes
the role different languages of the individual and the
sociolect play in the evolution of individual and cultural
change, and indeed, many women feel that male systems deny
them power through language, since the dominant culture is
based on, and runs on, a symbolic language system which
alienates or marginalizes them. Although Bakhtin did not
develop his theories according to feminist ideologies, we can
productively apply his language to an understanding of how
these narrators re-vision their pasts. For example, Bakhtin
identifies "alien" as being outside the self, or "not one's
own" (430); although he applies the term to anything outside
one's own viewpoint, it is useful to apply it to anyone on the
margins, anyone alien to the dominant ideology of the culture,
which in our primary texts means women on the various margins
of the patriarchy. He also describes "authoritative"
discourse as striving "to determine the very basis of our
ideological interrelations with the world, the very basis of
our behavior" (342). We can apply this concept to the idea
that the patriarchal culture enforces its authoritative language on all people. In my primary texts, not only do most men express this authoritative voice which tries to silence the alien voices of women, but women who have not escaped from the patriarchal life also speak within this dominant discourse.

In order to re-vision their memories and the cultural and familial stories in the authoritative language that influences their lives, the narrators introduce multiple languages into the narrative of their memories. They emphasize their own stories in their own voice (plus the stories of other women in their memories and tales) which had been heard as alien by the authoritative culture. Their own languages allow the reader to experience difference, to see that authoritative stories, told from monoglossic perspectives, are incomplete. When incorporated in their narratives, these different points of view reveal the multivoicedness in their lives:

"A particular point of view on the world belonging to someone else, is used by the [narrator] because it is highly productive, that is, it is able on the one hand to show the object of representation in a new light (to reveal new sides or dimensions in it) and on the other hand to illuminate in a new way the "expected" literary horizon, that horizon against which the particularities of the teller's tale are perceivable. (Bakhtin 313)"

By re-visioning their pasts through emphasizing their own views and other women's alien views, the narrators expand the potential of their pasts for revealing models of action. Furthermore, by "illuminating the expected literary horizon" (the limited cultural expectations which surround them and/or
those of literary traditions), they give themselves authority over their own lives instead of allowing the authoritative discourse to have power over them.

By becoming aware of how stories sound from new viewpoints, the narrative gains what Bakhtin calls heteroglossia:

> no living word relates to its object in a singular way: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme . . . . (Bakhtin 276)

What emerges in the text are aspects of the stories or events in memory which pervade the central action but had hitherto been considered unessential to the unwritten tale: viewpoints of people involved that had been overlooked and details which had been ignored reveal themselves through the process of writing, becoming new aspects of the stories. This awareness of other in memory and myth results in a narrative dialogic tension. Their narratives become a process of questions and contradictions which put into flux the static authoritative language of the surrounding patriarchal culture that had tried to ignore or even reduce an awareness of heteroglossia.

For example, The Woman Warrior's narrator rewrites ancient Chinese myths and family stories from the perspective of the women in those stories. The "new" versions reveal both the de-humanizing oppression of women and the ability of women to be heroic: aspects that the authoritative versions ignored or repressed. Hong Kingston's narrator often emphasizes aspects of the stories that reveal alternative role models for her to follow, expanding her cultural past so that it offers more
potential for action and selfhood than it had before re-vision. She at least partially breaks free from the bonds of her cultural and familial myths, empowering herself with the alternative role models which her re-visioned stories produce.

*Housekeeping*’s narrator superimposes memories from her past, specifically images of her dead mother, onto her present relationship with her aunt in order to understand these past images in the context of the present. She and her aunt eventually "adopt" each other as surrogate mother and daughter, which allows the narrator to merge her old mother with her new mother in a symbiosis that accommodates her past and her desires for the future. By re-visioning her memories, the narrator re-visions herself. She reconciles herself with the monumental loss of mother and family she faces daily to the extent that she merges with that loss; she enters a realm of being (from the viewpoint of her imagination and society) where she lives in her memories as another character. For this narrator, then, re-vision goes beyond breaking free from the past; re-visioning permits her to break into her past where she lives in union with her haunting memories.

The narrator of *Cat's Eye* is not only haunted by images from her personal past, she is also obsessed with the need to understand the context of those images, to become aware of the heteroglossia of her childhood. She attempts to discover this context as a visual artist by painting images that continuously rise in her imagination; but only images form in
the paintings while the context of her past remains conspicuously absent. For this narrator, the alien voice of her childhood friend is the only key she has to understand her own "internally persuasive" discourse and herself in relation to it. Her narrative, therefore, becomes her attempt to gain an understanding of the multiple views of her past so that she may see herself more fully, in relation to other voices and viewpoints of her past.

Although these narrators re-vision images of their cultural/familial/personal pasts to provide alternative models or to allow the narrators to see themselves in new ways and therefore become new selves, each of the narrators portrays herself at the end of her narrative as still lacking something in her life, as still being affected by the dominant culture in adverse ways. They represent their narratives not as failures, however, but more as reflections of the true nature of life as being fundamentally tragic. These endings aren't "happy" partly because the narrators wish to strip the power from the myth of the "happy ending" for women, since we still struggle fiercely to free ourselves from patriarchal pasts and presents. The narrators also reject the "happy-ever-after" endings because they see that their mothers have not been "happy" with their lives; none of the mothers of these narrators fully accepts the patriarchal ideologies that surround her, but none successfully escapes this culture either (the mother in Housekeeping does remove herself from the patriarchy, but only through suicide). Therefore the
narrators know that turning to their mothers as models of power and authority may not help them empower themselves.

More important, I think that the ambiguous endings in these texts have more to do with the fact that each narrator's selfhood and happiness are intrinsically entwined with those of people around them. Because these narrators value the voices of others as a means to understand themselves, they depend on other people for a view of themselves. Jean Baker Miller asserts that "women's sense of self becomes very much organized around being able to make and then to maintain affiliations and relationships" (83). These relationships with other women constantly remind the narrators who they are from the outside, giving them an awareness of the heteroglossia surrounding their every act so that they may encourage a dialogic tension between their internally persuasive voices and the authoritative culture.

The inability of these narrators to re-vision their lives into perfect fulfillment does not reveal weakness on the part of the characters or their authors. On the contrary, "feminist theory suggests that the insistence on relationship reveals not a failed adulthood, but the desire for a different one" (Abel, Hirsch, Langland 10). Their re-visioning processes become important because these processes reveal how the narrators strive toward new selves through re-seeing their relationships with people and traditional ideologies. Instead of accepting past tales of women's lives and past myths that exclude the possibility of multiple selves and fragmented
memories, they desire to write a new tale, a new myth that accepts fragments, diversity, and open-endedness. The ambiguity with which they end their texts reinforces the idea that no woman's life can serve as an exemplar; all female experiences must be allowed and valued, especially as they broaden the image of female experience itself.
Chapter 1
"Talk-Story" as Re-Vision in Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior

In The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts, Maxine Hong Kingston reveals examples of blatant, de-humanizing sexism toward women in pre-revolutionary China as well as ways in which bigotry in the United States affects female Chinese immigrants. Instead of writing solely about how patriarchal aspects of Chinese and American cultures have diminished or even ruined her life, Hong Kingston creates beautiful stories of her struggles to free herself from such limiting perspectives. She bases her tales on traditional myths and family narratives that silence women's voices in both cultures. By approaching established myths from diverse points of view, she re-visions them so that they offer a greater flexibility of action for her heroines. Although much of Hong Kingston's re-visioning results in affirming images of women's social roles, nevertheless she cannot escape the forces of the patriarchy, forces that continue to dominate each of her attempts at freedom from them.

Hong Kingston's narrator speaks as if she were divided between two fears: first, that the anti-female culture of her family (China) will force her into a silent, self-less being like her aunt Moon Orchid and her "Chinese-feminine" classmate; and second, that without this culture she will be left totally alienated, without a community at all. As a Chinese-American woman, she is a minority within a
community of minorities, being neither fully Chinese nor fully American nor male. She needs to reject aspects of her Chinese heritage in order to free herself from that culture's gender constraints, but she also feels the need to embrace that culture because of her close relations with her mother and her fear of isolation as an independent woman. She is what Yaeger calls a "split subject who simultaneously gives into and resists the burden of the sociolect." Her narration is an "explosive protest" brought about by this split subject to those double binds (Yaeger 252), and yet she does not limit her text to a protest. She struggles with the discourse of her Chinese culture, its sayings, myths, and threats, and attempts to re-vision them so that they may aid her in hearing the many sides of her split self.

The task Hong Kingston's narrator faces is, in Bakhtin's terms, to "undermine the authority of custom" (368). To her, this means reducing the force of all that she has been taught by her mother and other members of her family about the submissive and often sub-human status of women. She attempts this subversion by re-telling authoritative stories through viewpoints of diverse voices.

It is necessary that heteroglossia wash over a culture's awareness of itself and its language, penetrate to the core, relativize the primary language system underlying its ideology and literature and deprive it of its naive absence of conflict. (Bakhtin 368)

Heteroglossia permits multivoicedness, since an awareness of the conditions surrounding an act (in this case a novelistic
act) promotes an awareness of the beings affecting and affected by the act. Although an authoritative viewpoint overlooks the Other, heteroglossia and multivoicedness include the Other as an essential characteristic of the whole. Hong Kingston's narrator's central means to achieve a sense of this multivoicedness is the division of her text into five sections, each relating the stories of women dealing with a hostile world and each told either in the single voice of the narrator (who attempts to consider multiple views as she constructs her plots), or in the voice of each protagonist. By dividing her text in this way, Hong Kingston's narrator allows multiple possibilities for action for her protagonists, shoving aside the essentially monoglossic voice of patriarchal myth and creating for herself multiple models of action as a woman.

From the beginning of her first story, Hong Kingston's narrator demonstrates her ability to discover or create alternative images of woman's role from within inherently oppressive myths and family stories. For example, while relating the first and most depressing story of her text "No Name Woman," the narrator creates an illuminating, symbolic, emancipatory image:

Women looked like great sea snails - the corded wood, babies, and laundry they carried were the whorls on their backs. The Chinese did not admire a bent back; goddesses and warriors stood straight. Still there must have been a marvelous freeing of beauty when a worker laid down her burden and stretched and arched. (11)

Hong Kingston's text functions like a woman who lays down her
burden and stretches, for it is exactly this freeing from traditional roles that the narrator searches for and often creates in the myths and stories she uses as her medium. In the midst of describing cultural legends and family stories that enforce gender-determined oppression of women in order to insure patriarchal survival, she changes the plots of the legends and stories by introducing such freeing images as the one above. However, just as the emancipation in the above image is merely momentary, since the women still must slave at their work, so are the beauty and freedom created by the text's narrator; her creative images are trapped both in the patriarchal order they attempt to suppress and in the pages of the text they create. The re-visioned stories may contain alternative action, but they are steeped in the expectations of their surrounding dominant society.

The text's first story is based on a warning the narrator's mother, Brave Orchid, gave her at the onset of menstruation. Brave Orchid tells the narrator that her aunt became pregnant while her uncle was away, and that the village felt threatened because of this break in the tradition of family heritage. She relates her mother's story in detail: how the village attacked her family's house and virtually destroyed it, and how the aunt gave birth to her child in a pigsty and then plunged both herself and her child into the family well. The narrator questions the tale's credibility, however, since her mother was most likely not living in the same house as the aunt and therefore could not have witnessed the attack. It is
also possible that there never was an aunt at all; perhaps all Chinese mothers repeated this fairy tale as a means to frighten their daughters about sexual promiscuity and shameful pregnancy out of wedlock. In either case, the narrator recognizes that her mother's story involves creative imagination, so she takes the liberty to begin her own creativity. She does repeat the story told to her, not to reinforce the patriarchal warning it conveys, but to re-vision it through multivoicedness.

Hong Kingston's narrator re-visions the story of the no-name aunt by discovering cracks in the story's plot and pushing her way through them, prying them open to allow space for alternative story lines. Although her aunt most likely was raped and forced to remain silent, the narrator proposes as many alternative possibilities for her as she can imagine. She does consider first that her aunt was raped by a fellow villager, making her less "guilty" for shaming the family and village. "But she suspends that narrative line, apparently dissatisfied with its unmitigated emphasis on female powerlessness and willingness" (Smith 154). She then approaches her past from another viewpoint, musing that perhaps her aunt may have actually enjoyed sensual pleasures; she may have searched for a fulfilling private life and then sacrificed herself for forbidden love. In this scenario, her aunt is still meek, though, for "fear at the enormities of the forbidden kept her desires delicate" (Hong Kingston 9). The aunt's lack of strength makes Hong Kingston's narrator
dissatisfied, so she re-visions her from yet another perspective. She considers the possibility that her "aunt did not take subtle enjoyment of her friend, but, a wild woman, kept rollicking company" (Hong Kingston 9). The narrator admits that these scenarios are improbable since they do not fit into the traditional, permitted behavior of Chinese women, but she presents them as possibilities nevertheless.

The narrator creates dialogic tension between the old family story and her own new versions simply by asserting difference. She tells her reader that she creates such tension because unless she can see her aunt's life "branching" into her own, her aunt can give her no "ancestral help" (10). Help from her family might make the narrator feel as if she has more authority backing her, that she isn't reaching out into an unknown territory alone. Smith's argument about the aunt's authority also relates to ways in which Hong Kingston's narrator authorizes herself through the dialogic tension she creates:

> the expansion of [the aunt's] very body and of her sense of her own authority to define herself ultimately challenges the ontological roots of her culture--"the real"; for publicized female subjectivity points to the fundamental vulnerability of the patrilineage by exposing it as a sustained fiction. The alternative genealogy thus engendered breaks the descent line, subverting the legitimacy of male succession that determines all lines of patriarchy--descent lines, property lines, and lines of texts. (Smith 154)

Although Smith refers to the aunt's power in her own life, we may also apply the above quote to the narrator's power in her text. Like the aunt, the narrator challenges the ontological
roots of her culture by expanding her "body" with these new additions to her genealogy. No longer can she be identified as a single self, with the popular stories of her cultural and familial past defining her; now she exists in an unlimited space, with continuously changing identities linked to the endless possibilities she creates through her re-visioned stories. She also exposes the patriarchy as a sustained fiction by showing other possibilities for the truth, such as her alternative explanations for her aunt's story, thus decentering the power of the patriarchy.

This first story of the No Name woman further helps the narrator to break the descent lines of the patriarchy because her mother tells it to her along with a condition: "Don't tell anyone you had an aunt. Your father does not want to hear her name. She has never been born" (18). Usually, the story would serve as a warning to the young narrator against private pleasure. By being told to keep this story a secret, however, the narrator is also commanded to participate in her aunt's punishment by protecting the patriarchy from the threat of female emancipation: "The real punishment was not the raid swiftly inflicted by the villagers, but the family's deliberately forgetting her" (Hong Kingston 18). By breaking this silence through her text, the narrator "denies the power of the community . . . . A story that is oppressive when orally transmitted within the context of family and community is liberating when transformed into writing" (Rabine 483), since it may be studied closely on paper, thus revealing its
forces as a dehumanizing agent. As Hong Kingston's narrator proves as well, it may be re-visioned to emphasize its alternative aspects. Thus, as Hong Kingston's narrator liberates her aunt's story, she participates in her own liberation.

The story of the No Name aunt is not simply limited to preserving or destroying the patriarchal order; it relates the struggle of a woman who attempts to find beauty in her surroundings, and freedom over her own body in an environment that produces only oppression and ugliness. Furthermore, as Li points out, by associating herself with her aunt, the narrator eliminates her own name so that she can recreate it, as she did for her aunt. Throughout the remainder of the text, the narrator does not name herself (she refers to herself as I), so we may see her both as a composite of her female characters and as a character, or self, in process (Li 503). By rewriting the story of her aunt, she begins the process of re-visioning herself; by opening spaces in tradition she subsequently produces alternative models to fill in those spaces. Her re-vision also permits an interesting heteroglossic self instead of the homogeneous patriarchal version. Because of the new "opened cracks" in tradition, her new re-visioned self may contain the contradiction of different voices, and may allow for even further possibilities.

However, Hong Kingston can never be sure what actually happened to her No Name aunt nor what her own genealogy
entails. All she can be sure of is that a woman and her family were once punished by their society because of the woman's pregnancy, and that the young mother killed both herself and her new-born child. She knows for certain that "ultimately, the full, the 'real' story of woman may lead to madness and to self-destruction rather than to legitimate self-representation" (Smith 157).

Hong Kingston's narrator tries to understand her past again then, by confronting it from a completely different angle, from a different voice. Her next story, "White Tigers," elaborates and recreates a story told to her by her mother, as did the first, but this tale is about a warrior woman who succeeded in becoming powerful and successful despite her gender. The way in which the narrator introduces this new story reveals Brave Orchid's willingness for her "to read between the lines" of her tale, to see that mother and daughter may share the same repressed desires. After remembering how Brave Orchid had taught her the story as a song, the narrator realizes that she has been inspired by her:

I had forgotten this chant that was once mine, given me by my mother . . . . She said I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman. (24)

As the title of her book suggests, the narrator becomes Fa Mu Lan in her imagination, the warrior woman whom her mother taught her to admire. However, the patriarchal rule controls Brave Orchid's Fa Mu Lan more than Hong Kingston's narrator will accept, so she elaborates on its more heteroglossic
aspects, rejects some patriarchal parts, and totally rewrites other sections in order to give the heroine more possibility for action and to make her a stronger model. The resulting narrative merges both the desire for personal freedom and glory with the need to fulfill communal and filial obligations, a merging which would seem impossible in any other context because of the restrictive wife/slave role forced on women in the Chinese culture.

The narrator relates the legendary myth of Fa Mu Lan by telling it through the first person voice of Fa Mu Lan herself. She adds a new dimension to the story by creating a dialogic tension between the ancient, well known legend and the new viewpoint of the legend's main character. This tension serves, in Bakhtinian terms, as a centrifugal force to decenter the authoritative discourse of the ancient myth. This particular myth has been popular with the ruling and ruled classes of China since the fifth century when it was first recorded on paper; its popularity stems from how it fulfills "the wish to perpetuate the social hierarchy as well as male hegemony . . . so that the cultural capital is reinvested" (Li 505). The myth of Fa Mu Lan is certainly authoritative, and therefore, according to Bakhtin, much in need of decentering to allow "the images of speaking human beings" to emerge from within it (Bakhtin 370).

By telling the story in an autobiographical manner, from a first-person narration, the narrator also identifies with the heroine. She gives herself new dimensions of identity by
expanding the plot of her and her heroine's adventures, traditionally limited to a mere six lines, to include a rather unusual childhood of mystical training and unity with nature (Li 506). This dream-like childhood emancipates Fa Mu Lan and the narrator from the earthly limitations placed on a regular female girl, since the main character is lifted into the sky to travel to her new training home, away from the chores her natural parents assign to her. Because her new teachers do not seem limited by the traditional roles associated by their genders, she also learns the advantages of being androgynous. Later as a warrior, she frequently succeeds through her ability to act both as man and woman, her disguise "enabling her to experiment and reverse the traditional role models and establish a new set of relationships based on equality and individual fulfillment" (Li 507). Fa Mu Lan is respected by her fellow warriors because of her fighting capabilities, but she is also loved by her husband because of her beauty. Furthermore, while she is fighting she is not her husband's slave, as she would be in the village; she is his partner (Hong Kingston 46, 47).

As mentioned above, the narrator's Fa Mu Lan fulfills filial obligations as well as her own desires to achieve vengeance for herself. She is told by her village and family that she owes them the activity of avenging the wrongs done them by their rulers; thus she allows her parents to carve their "oaths and names" on her back so that "wherever [she] go(es), whatever happens to [her], people will know [the village's]
sacrifice . . . . And [she'll] never forget either" (Hong Kingston 41). She murders the leaders of the armies who have been stealing her male kin for war; she liberates the villagers from their ruthless rulers and allows the people to kill those whom they believe have done them wrong. In this way, Mu Lan serves the patriarchy; she might be killing those who have tyrannized her village (thus believing she is serving the "good"), but she nevertheless allows her patriarchal culture new freedom to exercise its rule over women now that they are no longer limited by an outside political force. On a basic level, she also participates in the destructive patriarchal act of killing, which one might believe she had overcome as a result of her mystical up-bringing.

However, Fa Mu Lan's crusade does satisfy a personal desire of her own outside of the patriarchal requirements. Her woman warrior title means not only that she is a warrior who is a woman, but also that she is a warrior who fights for women, killing their oppressors and freeing them. She accuses the baron of her village of taking away her brother and her childhood, then rips off her shirt and shows him her word-scarred back. In response to "his startled eyes" staring at her "breasts," she "slashe[s] him across the face and on the second stroke cut[s] off his head" (52). She fights against the way the male ignores her achievements and concentrates on her body, thus adding her own vengeance to her list of hatred. Hong Kingston's narrator kills to avenge her family, her village, and her lost childhood, but she also
strives toward her personal revenge against the crimes of patriarchy.

Fa Mu Lan literally frees the most oppressed women she can find: those who have been caged "like pheasants that have been raised in the dark for soft meat" (Hong Kingston 52-3). The women she frees become "witch amazons," according to the future stories of the villagers, who accept unwanted girls into their group and train them to kill men and boys. The narrator's Mu Lan will not accept responsibility for these women, saying that she "has never encountered such women and could not vouch for their reality" (Hong Kingston 53), but she nevertheless tells their story, thereby giving them a place in myth and in other people's memory. She admits the possibility of their existence, the possibility of a threat to the patriarchy.

The narrator re-visions the myth of Fa Mu Lan to the extent that it involves the voice of Mu Lan herself, thereby giving it the characteristic of heteroglot:

[she] forces us to guess at and grasp for a world behind [the voices'] mutually reflecting aspects that is broader, more multi-leveled, containing more and varied horizons than would be available to a single language [of a single story version]. (Bakhtin 414-15)

But her heroine is nevertheless still a slave to the patriarchy at the end of the "new" myth; for, after her accomplishments as a warrior, she tells the family of her husband: "Now my public duties are finished . . . . I will stay with you, doing farmwork and housework, and giving you
more sons" (45). Although she killed the leader of the patriarchy, the baron, and freed the slave women who become witch amazons, she refers to her past actions as "public duties," reinstating herself as a gendered slave despite her androgynous childhood. She may have escaped the world of the patriarchy briefly and then robbed it of part of its power, but she swiftly succumbs to strengthening it in the end, planning to add more sons to a community who scarred her back with their own words of vengeance. After a lifetime of training, sacrifice, and war, she silences her own desires, erasing her personal victories from history.

Hong Kingston's narrator steps back from her work and tries multivoicedness again, approaching a different story from her past through the voice of her mother. In "Shaman," she relates a woman's struggle for productivity, and through the narration, relates the struggle to her own life. Since "language itself offers to reconstruct, again and again, the possibility of representation" (Yaeger 251), the narrator re-visions oral stories by transferring them to writing, thus expanding what they represent. To Brave Orchid, her story speaks of the power and glory she lost when she came to America, but to the narrator it represents women's ability to find "what they want: a job and a room of their own" (Hong Kingston [echoing Woolf] 73).

Again, the narrator learns only the skeleton of Brave Orchid's story from Brave Orchid, so she expands on the details, which makes the story more conducive to multiple
images and models. From her mother's advice to "'Give the concierge oranges,'" she creates an entire scenario wherein Brave Orchid cherishes her newfound independence at the dormitory and her freedom from her regular life:

Free from families, my mother would live for two years without servitude. She would not have to run errands . . . but neither would there be slaves and nieces to wait on her. Now she would get hot water only if she bribed the concierge. (73)

The creativity that the narrator reveals through her re-vision is remarkable; she is so eager to find emancipatory models in the stories of her past, that when she hears mere hints of them, she imaginatively extends these possibilities into full-blown models. Rather than be satisfied with the tiny scraps of information her mother gives her, the narrator concentrates on a lack of fluidity in Brave Orchid's narration that hints of denied or repressed details. By creating these details from her own imagination, the narrator in effect emancipates them from the silences in her mother's narrative. Therefore she creates a new story, based on her mother's bits of information, but infused with her own creativity.

The primary method the narrator uses to re-vision this story is her use of her mother's name when referring to the protagonist. She could have called Brave Orchid "my mother" throughout the tale, but by doing so she would be calling attention to her own powers of authorizing the story, of creating it from her own viewpoint and thus making it her own rather than Brave Orchid's. Instead she attributes the actions of the plot solely to Brave Orchid and tells the tale
in Brave Orchid's voice. She also views her mother from a completely new viewpoint, not as merely a relation to her, not as the Other outside herself, but as a woman with motivations of her own, entirely apart from those of the narrator.

Highlighted in the narration of Brave Orchid's social and scholastic life is the subplot of Brave Orchid's defiance of a "sitting ghost" who attempts figuratively to rape her. The narrator tells us in her mother's voice that Brave Orchid fought off the ghost by being "brave and good" and by having "bodily strength and control" (Hong Kingston 86). These attributes aren't necessarily gender-specific, but they do hint at a chaste, dispassionate character who survives because of her "feminine" ability to suppress her own desires. I don't believe this is the kind of character whom the narrator wishes to re-vision into her past, but she does allow her mother her own narrative; instead of censoring her mother's words, she adds 1) details which provide for a dialogue among the homogenizing influence in her mother's narrative (the aspects of the patriarchy which seep through her words, as in the above example), 2) her mother's details which promote her own individuality and rebellion, and 3) her own created details which add yet another voice to the now symphonic roar of the narrative.

Hong Kingston's narrator continues to play creatively at the end of the story, when Brave Orchid returns from school to practice medicine in her village. The narrator again fills in the gaps of her mother's tale, for if she were to depend on
traditional practice of Chinese doctors, she would be forced
to view her mother as strengthening that sexist society by
enforcing the patriarchal rule. As her mother tells her,
midwives frequently smothered baby girls as soon as they were
born simply because they were girls (Hong Kingston 101). But
the narrator hunts for evidence that her mother was an
exception to the rule. She remembers her mother telling her
about a baby whom she had left in the outhouse to die because
it had been born without an anus. The narrator writes: "I
hope that this holeless baby proves that my mother did not
prepare a box of clean ashes beside the birth bed in case of a
girl" (101). She may fear not only that her mother enforced
patriarchal order in this act, but also that she may not love
her as much as she would a baby boy. She therefore emphasizes
details which may hint at Brave Orchid's humanitarian,
non-sexist practices as a doctor.

As a myth-maker, the narrator searches for scraps of truth
on which she can base her fictions so that she can assure
herself that she is not wholly creating her own world, for she
has such a strong tie to her family and their culture that she
feels dependent on them for the basis of her reality. As a
woman, she does not want to betray her mother by completely
changing her through re-vision, because by doing so she might
feel she would be betraying herself. Therefore, when the
basis for her conception of her personal and cultural pasts
fails to supply the narrator with an understanding of herself,
she elaborates on it with ideas of her own, ideas which remain
consistent with her family's culture. As a result, her narrative provides images of her mother (such as empowering herself among her classmates through her bravery) which subvert images provided by the limited authoritative discourse, but her story also continues the control of the patriarchal order. Although Brave Orchid may have succeeded on her own and for her personal ends in school, she does return to the village to practice what she has learned for her patriarchal culture and within its rules. Although the narrator hopes that her mother did not practice the tradition of killing baby girls, she is not sure. As an empowered woman acting in the patriarchal world, Brave Orchid provides a confusing model; she does not clarify how she resolves the contrary expectations of the roles of woman/mother and doctor. Hong Kingston's narrator is left without any idea how to live in the public and private sphere simultaneously, as she will have to as a working American woman.

Again, the narrator steps back from her narration to begin with a new story from a different point of view. In her final story, "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," the narrator merges one of Brave Orchid's original tales with her own rewritten story to produce a new myth. Like her previous productions, this new story is based on, and also partially transcends, traditional paradigms. It contains not one, but two heroines who offer a broader spectrum of world-views and lifestyles. The first heroine is the narrator's grandmother, whose faith in the power of art saves the family from bandits. She
insists that the family attend the theater even though bandits usually rob the houses of theater-goers, and she even orders the family to leave the house open, believing that appreciation of art is more important than worrying about material possessions. But to everyone's surprise, the bandits rob the theater instead of their homes. The next morning, "the entire family was home safe, proof to [the narrator's] grandmother that [their] family was immune to harm as long as they went to plays. They went to many plays after that" (Hong Kingston 207).

As Sau-ling Cynthia Wong points out, the grandmother is the only woman the narrator presents who is not punished for her desire to enjoy sensual pleasures (Wong 22). The narrator's No Name aunt had to kill herself for her extravagance, the crazy lady with the mirrors on her head was stoned to death partly because she loved nature, and Fa Mu Lan surrendered to her family after her adventures. Thus only the grandmother survives as a truly emancipatory figure whose story shows "the positive consequences of abandoning oneself to art" (Wong 22). Brave Orchid has been trying to illustrate this theme to her child in the past as well, for although she does not possess her daughter's insight to transform talk-stories into multivoiced myths and therefore to provide helpful models for women, she nevertheless makes an impression on the narrator; she provides her daughter with the raw material from which she may form her own identity.

Hong Kingston's narrator also asserts through this last
re-vision that "safety is not found in the known limits of house and family but rather in the non-domestic game-space of the theater, where experience is re-imagined and transformed" (Gilead 58). This theme emphasizes the power of the narrator's writing to transport the thrust of myths out of the "domestic" sphere of traditional China and into the "game-space" of her imagination, where she may stretch their applicability by making them several possibilities for action among women.

The first part of this final story portrays an image of woman as daughter-in-law/slave, which Hong Kingston's narrator reports, but does not explain or attempt to revise. While narrating what the family enjoyed during their visits to the opera, she tells her reader some startling information in the midst of refreshing images about women. She says that an opera singer:

was standing on a chair, and she sang, "Beat me, then, beat me." The crowd laughed until the tears rolled down their cheeks. . . . "She is playing the part of a new daughter-in-law," [Brave Orchid] explained. "Beat me, then, beat me," she sang again and again. It must have been a refrain; each time she sang it, the audience broke up laughing. Men laughed; women laughed. They were having a great time. (Hong Kingston 193)

The grandmother may have achieved respect and even power in her family circle, but only after being subjected to a de-humanizing life. The narrator goes so far as to say that she identifies herself with the pitiful daughter-in-law, and that the support of the community for this awful scene confuses her: "The singer . . . sounded like me talking, yet
everyone said, 'Oh beautiful. Beautiful,' when she sang high" (193). The narrator does not find enough support from these myths and family stories, even though some aspects pierce through the patriarchal cloud to reveal themselves as alternative images.

So she tries yet again. She muses that perhaps the family enjoyed another performance at the opera, that of the legend of Ts'ai Yen, who was captured by barbarians and made to fight with them. The narrator's Ts'ai Yen eventually learns to live and communicate with the barbarians, but then is sent back to her family to continue her father's patriarchal line. Again, the narrator rewrites this ancient myth by adding details which open it from its traditionally authoritative, closed status, thereby expanding its potential to portray women. In the original myth, Ts'ai Yen was honored as a heroine when she returned to China because she led an exemplary life of filial piety (Rabine 484). Hong Kingston's narrator omits this aspect from her new myth. According to her, Ts'ai Yen is a heroine because she survives her abduction and learns to communicate with her abductors through song. Like the narrator's grandmother, Ts'ai Yen creates happiness through art in the midst of her oppression.

Another way in which the narrator alters this story, as well as her story of Fa Mu Lan, involves her method of translating the heroines' names. According to Li, the narrator not only venerates these two heroines by presenting their names fully in Chinese, but by doing so she also conceals "the
stereotypical nuances their given names carry" (500-01). Translated into English, Mu Lan means "sylvan orchid," and Yen means "well-wrought jade." As Li asserts, the narrator would hate to see her heroines put in a vase or stored in a vault" (501-02), so she suppresses this information and in a sense renames her heroines, emphasizing their individuality over their stereotyped femininity. The narrator does translate Brave Orchid's name, however, to emphasize her mother's conflicting characteristics of strong independence, as when she empowers herself as a brave and intelligent student, and of female domesticity, as when she insists on trying to find her daughter a husband. The narrator does the same for Moon Orchid, compounding her aunt's strength which she reveals in the domestic sphere of Brave Orchid's house, and her fragility which she reveals outside the home in the patriarchal sphere. The narrator renames and recreates not only the plots of her stories but her heroines as well, eliminating their traditional power to influence, and assigning to them the ability to empower both themselves and her through her identification with them.

The original Ts'ai Yen myth tells of Ts'ai Yen's hatred of being a slave to the barbarians (Li 510-11), but the narrator leaves this hatred out, writing that Ts'ai Yen rides alongside the barbarian chieftain through battle and is rewarded when she bears him children. The narrator seems to have acquired her mother's style of story-telling in this instance, since this aspect of the re-visioned story is similar to parts of
the story of the No Name aunt which Brave Orchid told the narrator. Just as Brave Orchid omitted the details about the aunt's suffering, which would have made the aunt seem more human and less of a commodity of the patriarchy, the narrator omits Ts'ai Yen's suffering by saying simply that "after she became pregnant [by the barbarian chieftain], he captured a mare as a gift to her" (Hong Kingston 208). She goes so far as to say "became pregnant by," which in this story is an euphemism for "raped." The first part of this last story also shares this uncharacteristic re-vision, for when the narrator tells of opera singer playing the daughter-in-law screaming to be beaten, she also omits the viewpoint of the daughter-in-law. The narrator treats the daughter-in-law and Ts'ai Yen's oppression through enslavement and marriage almost as an understood aspect of the stories. If we were to envision these stories and the story of "No-Name Woman" as puzzles with missing pieces, and we were to lay the three puzzles one on top of the other, the holes in the puzzles would match up perfectly, leaving the exact same gaps in narration. Surely the narrator is not asserting that women do not or should not hate slavery; perhaps she is instead offering herself a past of happiness (albeit limited through wifehood/slavery) to which she may look back. At least the narrator's Ts'ai Yen is content; the narrator leaves the reader to judge if Ts'ai Yen's lack of struggle is in fact a desired form of happiness. Perhaps, though, this part of the story story indicates places in the culture that no amount of re-visioning could repair.
In order to think about this new re-vision in more detail, it is important to understand what the narrator has in common with Ts'ai Yen which might reveal why she would want to re-vision her traditionally accepted myth. Both the narrator and Ts'ai Yen venture into the unknown and not only learn to appreciate this new space, but also to invest it with their own ideals of individualism (Gilead 59). Ts'ai Yen contributes her own song to the singing barbarians; likewise, the narrator contributes her own story to her story-telling culture and to the "barbaric" Americans. Furthermore, both the narrator and Ts'ai Yen are translators (Rabine 485); they translate by amending and converting their new cultures into their own voices, thereby both improving the cultures within which they work and expanding their own realm of action.

This last story also succeeds in bringing the narrator and her mother closer together, a goal which I have not fully addressed in this chapter but is nevertheless a significant factor throughout the text. The narrator introduces this last story by saying "Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk story. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine" (240). She identifies herself as not merely sharing her mother's pastime of telling stories, but as participating in an honorable custom as one of the story-telling women in her family. Furthermore, by sharing this particular story with her mother, she is showing how their voices are "inextricably and dialogically linked, even if they are different" (Schueller..."
Hong Kingston's narrator accepts her mother's method of communication, storytelling, and as with the other myths, she has altered this method by changing its genre. She writes her stories instead of telling them, thus making them more a part of herself by transforming them into something tangible which she can claim as her own. Writing the stories also re-visions them to some extent, making them more accessible to others and capable of being further re-visionsed through others' voices. Not only does the narrator share in her mother's culture when she writes her stories, but she also shares in her mother's tongue: the language of poetry and prose.

The character of Ts'ai Yen merges mother and daughter, since they are like her, but in separate ways. Both Ts'ai Yen and Brave Orchid are forced far from their homelands into an alien culture where they consider the people to be barbarians. Both bear children in these foreign lands, and their children speak the language of the barbarians, not their own. Thus both feel alienated and alone, without the support even of their offspring to comfort them in the wild. At the same time, Ts'ai Yen is like the narrator because she learns to sing along with the barbarians, and later she brings their songs back to her homeland and teaches her people to appreciate this foreign culture. By merging these characteristics into one character, the narrator brings herself and her mother closer by attempting to heal their relationship through communication. She learns to share her mother's alienation and fear, and she gives her mother the ability to accept the
strange world around her. Thus, Brave Orchid is given the characteristics of Ts'ai Yen, whose "children did not laugh, but eventually sang along when she left her tent to sing by the winter campfires, ringed by barbarians" (Kingston 243). Through the narrator's stories, Brave Orchid gains her daughter's respect and the courage finally to settle with the barbarians.

We must question, though, if Hong Kingston's narrator is truly satisfied with either the methods of her re-vision or the product of those methods. Although she ends her narration with the image of Ts'ai Yen returning to her family as the bearer of a new culture, she also ends that story on an essentially patriarchal note. She writes, "After twelve years among the Southern Hsiung-nu, Ts'ai Yen was ransomed and married to Tung Ssu so that her father would have Han descendants" (209). Yes, the narrator does omit the traditional theme that Ts'ai Yen's people honored her for her filial piety, but she nevertheless pointedly states that when Ts'ai Yen returned to her family, she was not welcomed as a heroine, but instead was "married to" (note the passive structure of "married") a man in order to continue the patriarchal genealogy. This ending is quite problematic we we consider that previous re-visions of the narrator avoided such limiting images.

Study of this last narrative reveals further themes which show the strength of the patriarchy instead of women's achievement to decenter it. Although Ts'ai Yen does
contribute her own voice to the alien culture and the song of that culture to her Chinese people, the theme of the song that unites the two cultures is "sadness and anger" and "forever wandering" (Hong Kingston 209). The fact that Ts'ai Yen's song of alienation "translated well" (Hong Kingston 209) into Chinese means that her two cultures have identified with each other through suffering. If we consider Ts'ai Yen as a point of unity for the narrator and Brave Orchid, then we realize that mother and daughter also may finally identify with each other, not primarily through their story telling, but through the wandering which serves as the impetuous for them to talk-story. Neither is in one culture, nor has a firm sense of one on which she may base her identity, and neither has the support of her family.

Study of another passage in this last narrative might reveal why the narrator ends her five stories by implying what she rejects at the beginning of her narration. Only a few pages before the story of the narrator's grandmother and of Ts'ai Yen, the narrator tells her audience about the contradictions inherent in her mother's speech. Brave Orchid tells her daughter that the Chinese "like to say the opposite" (203). Of course, this statement forces the narrator to re-vision everything that her mother has told her, and therefore everything on which she has based her initial re-vision (the stories which she has just presented to us). She admits that "suddenly [she] was confused and lonely" (204), since even her mother's voice becomes alien through
misunderstanding.

Hong Kingston's narrator rebels fiercely against this confusion by abandoning her imaginative re-visioning process:

Be careful what you say. It comes true. It comes true. I had to leave home in order to see the world logically, logic the new way of seeing. . . . Concrete pours out of my mouth to cover the forests with freeways and sidewalks. Give me plastics, periodical tables, t.v. dinners with vegetables no more complex than peas mixed with diced carrots. Shine floodlights into dark corners: no ghosts. (104)

The complexity and fluidity of re-vision frightens her, shying her towards an opposite extreme of vision. Her male-oriented, twentieth-century, American vision of concrete pouring from her mouth seems to abandon any alternative options to myth along with the magic of re-visioning and of ghosts. She says, "I continue to sort out what's just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living" (205), as if what once was worth re-visioning now is merely an aspect of her past, to be catalogued and ignored.

The narrator does assert however that she continues "to sort out" her past. For even if this sorting out process results in a partial acceptance of the concrete-like patriarchy, it nevertheless is a form of re-vision, albeit one which revises little. Significant to this re-vision is that Hong Kingston's narrator does not end her collection of stories with a drastic change of heart; she instead includes a story told to her and revised by her after her initial decision to stop re-visioning. As we discovered above, the story of Ts'ai Yen is indeed a re-vision of a limiting paradigm, a compromise
between the narrator's fervent re-visioning techniques from before her disillusionment with the process and her decision to reject the process all together. She re-visions a story so that it produces some heteroglossic images, but she leaves other images in that story that she might believe to be too strong to be revised so easily.

Why, then, does the narrator bother to relate her five stories to an audience at all, if she changes her attitude toward her method of narration near the end of that narration? One outcome of the process of re-vision is that the narrator also re-visions herself by writing her stories. Through them she nevertheless avenges herself and other women by writing what has been repressed by Chinese culture and by making dominant myths more open to possibilities for womankind. The narrator transforms herself into her own woman warrior whose pen is her sword:

She has found a way to exact revenge against her background (the idiom for revenge being 'to report a crime') and yet to honor it. By telling about her culture's mistreatment of women she has taken on her culture's warrior role, and by writing about it she is paying tribute to her family and culture's reverence for talking story. (Hunt 11)

The narrator creates for herself the ability to have what she earlier thought was unattainable: an "American" life consisting of new myths and simultaneous respect from her family.

In "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe" the narrator offers a metaphor that describes her new role:

Long ago in China, knot-makers tied string into
buttons and frogs, and rope into bell pulls. There was one knot so complicated that it blinded the knot-maker. Finally an emperor outlawed this cruel knot, and the nobles could not order it anymore. If I had lived in China, I would have been an outlaw knot-maker. (190)

She could never become a Chinese outlaw knot-maker however, since in China she would be blind to the possibilities of “knot-making” from the start. According to Bakhtin,

The resistance of a unitary, canonic language, of a national myth bolstered by a yet-unshaken unity, is still too strong for heteroglossia to relativize and decenter literary and language consciousness. (370)

In other words, Chinese patriarchy is too strong for Kingston’s narrator to decenter with the multivoicedness of her re-visioned stories. But American culture may be just weak enough, since she does become an American outlaw knot-maker by writing her stories. As knot-makers produce art from bits of string, Hong Kingston’s narrator creates stories from bits of memory and myth. Also, considering the fact that masculine, patriarchal thought is linear like unknotted string, it is significant that the narrator prides herself in weaving and joining this linear string into her complex tales. She writes what has been forbidden: words which blind other people because they have been outlawed by patriarchy for so long. She also breaks tradition by not only revealing these truths, but by imagining and then creating the parts of the truths which have not yet been said. She then tells the whole world what has been forbidden them, risking blindness herself through possible annihilation from the culture she decenters.

Li says that the “desire expressed in the myth marks the
lack of such fulfillment in the reality of the myth-maker" (507), and in the narrator's case I agree with him. She is faced with the task of pleasing her family, whose demands are rooted in a culture she does not understand, a culture that is being destroyed through emigration to America and through enforced Communism. She writes,

To avenge my family, I'd have to storm across China to take back our farm from the Communists; I'd have to rage across the United States to take back the laundry in New York and the one in California. Nobody in history has conquered and united both North America and Asia (58).

Furthermore, as an American woman, she also knows that she must fulfill her own needs or she will never survive. In reality she is double-bound by her obligations to her family and herself, unable to join her two cultures.

In her art as Pa Mu Lan and Ts'ai Yen, however, the narrator is able to merge these obligations to her two cultures, successfully fulfilling them, even while achieving the love and support at the end of the tale (when the heroines return to their husbands) that she fears she will not gain in real life. By giving the heroines attributes that fulfill her own needs and then associating herself with them, the narrator liberates herself from obligations to both her American and Chinese cultures. She actually becomes the warrior woman by revising its terms; she doesn't kill those who subjugate her, she instead uses words (her rewritten myth) to avenge her family and village. Indeed, as Sarah Gilead asserts, her "heroism is as a myth-maker -- she has earned the gratitude of
the 'village' by re-investing with significance the legends of
the distant cultural past, even if her versions reflect
dissent" (56-57). The narrator's contribution to the old
myths through her alternative re-visions renders them with
possibility for Chinese-American women as role-creating myths
and allows her to claim them as her own story of
emancipation.
Chapter 2

Re-Vision into the Past in

Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*

Like Hong Kingston's narrator who uses aspects of Chinese myths from various perspectives to create her autobiographical text, Robinson's narrator, Ruthie, also works with myth, but in a different way. The childhood and adolescence of Hong Kingston's narrator are shaped by cultural myths, but Ruthie's childhood is shaped by memories of relatives who have abandoned her. Instead of re-visioning myth, then, Ruthie re-visions memories. She creates myth out of the fragmented memories of her past, to make a significant whole out of a pastiche of seemingly unconnected images:

> For why do our thoughts turn to some gesture of a hand, the fall of a sleeve, some corner of a room on a particular anonymous afternoon, even when we are asleep, and even when we are so old that our thoughts have abandoned other business? What are all these fragments for, if not to be knit up finally? (Robinson 92)

These details that consume Ruthie's imagination center around disconnected images of her past which seem to float in her mind. She rejects simple explanations of these images, though, in favor of allowing contradiction within them. Just as Hong Kingston's narrator imagines herself working as a knot-maker with bits of stories from her past, Ruthie "knits up" her autobiography with fragmented memories and images of her past.

Hong Kingston's narrator and Ruthie also especially value the role their mothers play in the process of creating and
shaping their own voices. Just as Hong Kingston's narrator weaves the story of her life through the tales of several female mentors, focusing on the voice of her mother, Ruthie also concentrates on her mother's story to the point where it influences her vision of life and her experiences. However, neither Brave Orchid or Ruthie's mother Helen provide their narrating daughters with sufficiently powerful role models. Brave Orchid remains steeped in the patriarchal culture from which her daughter wants to escape, and Helen resorts to suicide as perhaps the final expression of her rejection of life within patriarchal bounds. So while both narrators wish to rely on their mothers as role models, neither daughter may emulate their actions without submitting in some degree to patriarchal influences.

Because Helen acts in Ruthie's life so fleetingly, Ruthie grows up depending on nearly all women as models. After the first pages in the text, where men's stories serve as background for Ruthie's narrative, males almost disappear from the text, leaving Ruthie even more impressionable by the influence of women in her life. Although being influenced by women may seem like a good thing to happen to a girl growing up, it's not such a positive phenomenon in Ruthie's case. As she points out in the first paragraph of her narrative, her childhood consists of a series of deaths, abandonments, and escapes: her mother, grandmother, two elderly great-aunts, and her sister all abandon her through death or rejection. They leave her with nothing but memories which confuse her about
her strange family history, her personal past, and her potential for the future. Hong Kingston's narrator may have been confused by her mother and her mother's implied roles for females, but Ruthie is confused during her childhood by her mother and most other women.

As a result of the confusion caused by her initial abandonment by her mother, Ruthie desires a more secure past. She reveals her awareness of her fragmented memories and asserts her need to create a more understandable reality from them early in the text, immediately after she narrates her mother's suicide, which leaves her and her sister Lucille with their grandmother. Ruthie's first re-visioning, then, focuses on her grandmother's mourning of her grandfather, a grief Ruthie did not witness and therefore can only construct from the fragments she has been told. Just as Hong Kingston's narrator re-vision her mother's tale by filling in the gaps of narration with possibilities, Ruthie fills in the gaps of her grandmother's life with images of everyday life which also emphasize a type of possibility:

One day my grandmother must have carried out a basket of sheets to hang in the spring sunlight, wearing her widow's black, performing the rituals of the ordinary as an act of faith. Say there were two or three inches of hard snow on the ground . . . and say she stooped breathlessly in her corset to lift up a sodden sheet by its hems . . . . That wind! she would say . . . . (16)

This expansion of Grandmother Foster's tale results in "the resurrection of the ordinary" (18), a zone where she continues her daily rituals, seemingly unaffected by her loss.
In Ruthie's imagination, accomplishing household chores as "acts of faith" helps her grandmother cope with grief and provides a model for Ruthie's coping as well. She "improves" her memory of her grandmother by transforming the ordinary actions of her grandmother into tools with which she handles loss, thus transforming her grandmother's housekeeping from slavery for the patriarchy into housekeeping as a support in difficult change. Housekeeping as a ritual thus becomes the stabilizing force in Ruthie's imagination.

Ruthie narrates her version of this sheet-hanging scene in the orchard by infusing it with "say" and conditional verbs to remind her audience that she reports "what it was like" (19) in her own words, using her imagination. By offering her version of her grandmother's story, the narrator rejects the monoglossic, single version of the story that she received (like "my mother drowned" or "my grandfather died") in favor of heteroglossic contextuality that adds tension, struggles, and dialogue. Images of spring with snow, of widow's black in sunlight, and of hanging sheets in a corset, emphasize the contradiction that Ruthie's grandmother embodies as a role model. To Ruthie, she seems self-sufficient as an independent woman, since "for five years [her] grandmother cared for [her] very well" (Robinson 24), but she also seems dependant on her husband for her identity, since the announcement of her death focused on the death of her husband instead, omitting "even essential information about [Ruthie's] Grandmother" (40). Ruthie therefore gives voice to multiple versions of her
memories (as in the above contradictions), thereby preventing an authoritative version from imposing itself on her memory. This continued lack of closure keeps the memory alive for Ruthie.

Ruthie's use of "say" throughout this and subsequent re-visions also affects the reader as an incantation; to say is to speak, and to speak something makes it occur. Ruthie asks the reader, then, to speak her re-visioned reality into existence, to include it in the reader's vision as well. Ruthie's extensive use of narrative play throughout the text acts almost as witchcraft; her unusual style of storytelling treats memory and imagination as equally productive arenas for forming the narrative of her life. Her non-linear worldview absorbs each "gesture," each memory, no matter how slight, as significant to a comprehension of the various aspects of her life and the readers' understanding of the text.

After her grandmother's death, Ruthie learns more reasons why she may want to re-vision her memories and therefore her past, from her new guardians, her elderly great-aunts. Her great-aunts view Ruthie and Lucille almost as freaks because of their unusual family background, fearing that they may be "tainted" by their mother and their harsh physical surroundings. They truly fear for Ruthie and Lucille's lives:

And granting that this and even subsequent winters might spare [them], there were still the perils of adolescence, of marriage, of childbirth, all formidable in themselves, but how many times compounded by [their] strange history? (36)
Like the great-aunts who express these fears, Ruthie may also believe her history is "strange," since her mother killed herself, her aunt is a transient, and her remaining family seclude themselves from society. Perhaps she wants to avoid the future predicted by her great-aunts, since it seems bleak even without the addition of her strange history. Rachel Blau DuPlessis asserts that modern women may "replace the alternate endings in marriage and death that are their cultural legacy... by offering a different set of choices" (4). In an attempt to avoid the prescriptive and dangerous future of childbirth and marriage, Ruthie re-visions her history to make it less strange and more familiar, as she imagines her grandmother did, so that she may indeed experience "a different set of choices." She may also hope that life holds something more for her than hanging sheets on a line wearing her widow's black.

While living with her great-aunts, Ruthie attempts to come to terms with her memory of her mother. Her descriptions of Helen are recurring images which come to her unexpectedly, as if she has no control over which memories come to her or when:

> here [Helen] was, wherever my eyes fell, and behind my eyes, whole and in fragments, a thousand images of one gesture, never dispelled but rising always, inevitably, like a drowned woman" (163).

It's not specific memories of her mother that haunt Ruthie, but vague images of her living her everyday life. Her watery vision constantly resurrects in Ruthie's imagination; she cannot be rid of it. Ruthie therefore attempts to re-vision...
her mother, as she did her grandmother, so that she can understand why her mother's images won't leave her in peace. Unfortunately, Ruthie doesn't remember her mother as specifically as she does her grandmother, so Ruthie can't give her mother any "tools" with which she may make sense of her. Her grandmother embraced housework as the familiar, so Ruthie gives her that familiar activity in her re-vision to help her in resurrecting the ordinary. Since Ruthie doesn't know what was familiar to her mother, she cannot give her anything in her re-vision that might unify her vision, that would give her a comprehensible mother.

Ruthie's lack of definitive memories is compounded by her disagreement with Lucille about the memories she does retain. They argue about the color of the car in which Helen committed suicide, the color of her hair, and the way she treated them as children:

Lucille's mother was orderly, vigorous, and sensible, a widow who was killed in an accident. My mother... tended us with a gentle indifference that made me feel she would have liked to have been even more alone -- she was the abandoner, and not the one abandoned. (109)

Lucille imagines Helen as a victim in order to be able to forgive her for leaving them, but she also wants to reject the stigma of having had an inadequate mother with no husband, no time to spend with her children, and no will to live. She sees her mother from the viewpoint of a dependant child only, and therefore misses the opportunity to see her mother's viewpoint, to apprehend her mother's own needs instead.
Ruthie, however, determines to remember her mother as she really was, with all these problematic characteristics. In Bakhtinian terms, the sisters represent two sociologically opposed worldviews: an authoritative discourse and an individually, "internally persuasive" discourse. Lucille's view that mothers are and must be providers of stability is authoritative, since it is backed by centuries of "religious, political, [and] moral" views of the patriarchy (Bakhtin 342). However, Ruthie's view of mothers simply as human beings, with problems of their own other than those of their families, is internally persuasive, since it is "denied all privilege, backed up by no authority at all" (Bakhtin 342). Lucille and Ruthie thus play out a tension between these points of view, producing a dialogue of ideologies in the text.

Ruthie insists that her vision of her mother is more realistic than Lucille's, even though she can find no support for it. While describing a dream she has of her mother, she reveals why she prefers her image and what its realism means to her:

In my dream I had waited for [Helen] confidently, as I had all those years ago when she left us in the porch. Such confidence was like a sense of imminent presence . . . . [This] expectation, this sense of a presence unperceived, was not particularly illusory as things in this world go. The thought comforted me. By so much was my dream less false than Lucille's. (122)

The "fallout" of Ruthie's confused memories and the sense of expectation with which they leave her give Ruthie a strong tie to the past. Waiting for her mother makes her feel like her
mother had actually been in her life, and may again be there. Instead of rejecting confusing details of abandonment as Lucille does, Ruthie embraces them to find comfort. She perceives the unperceived to try to complete her vision.

While Lucille becomes dependent on the image of an "orderly" mother, Ruthie imagines her mother as anything but ordinary. In Ruthie's imagination, her mother rises from the dead in an almost gothic manner, seemingly to inspect her children and give them treats from the underworld:

> Perhaps we all awaited a resurrection . . . . Say that this resurrection was general enough to include . . . Helen, my mother. Say that Helen lifted our hair from our napes with her cold hands and gave us strawberries from her purse. (96)

Helen may not have been a model caregiver to her children, but in Ruthie's imagination she rises from the dead to pay attention to them and mysteriously provide them with nourishment. Although Ruthie cannot change what her mother was like when she was alive, she can play creatively with the vision of her mother in death in order to "authorize" images in her memory:

> Say that my mother was as tall as a man, and that she sometimes set me on her shoulders so that I could splash my hands in the cold leaves above our head. (116).

Ruthie's re-visionsed mother resembles the re-vision of Brave Orchid in Hong Kingston's chapter "Shaman," for she takes on mythic proportions through the uncertainty of her motives and characteristics. Subsequently, the images of this mother in Lucille and Ruthie's imagination become increasingly opposed
through their mythic properties.

What Ruthie and Lucille need to settle their dispute is evidence to reveal Helen's characteristics, and that's what they get when Helen's sister Sylvie appears on their doorstep to take care of them so that the great-aunts may flee. Indeed, Ruthie and Lucille "began to hope, if unawares, that a substantial restitution was about to be made" (42). Sylvie's characteristics may reveal to them their mother's characteristics, and so they ask Sylvie to "tell [them] about her" (50). Sylvie's actions and implied worldview reveal more to the girls than her words, though, for instead of helping them end their opposition, Sylvie provokes them to disagree even more. Because she seems so like the Helen of Ruthie's memories, she strengthens Ruthie's belief in the oddity of her family, but her strangeness challenges Lucille's sense of her family's stability. This prompts Lucille to think of Sylvie as an exception to the Foster family, instead of symbolic representation of their characteristics.

After only a few days in the Foster household, Sylvie reveals to the girls that she travels in boxcars across the country, making friendships with unusual women. For example, Sylvie invites a woman to dinner whom she met on a train. The woman was traveling to see her cousin hanged. According to Sylvie, the woman was not "trashy" as Lucille describes her, since "she didn't strangle anyone" (104). Furthermore, "it was kind" of the woman to go to the hanging, since her cousin had strangled his last remaining relative (who could attend)
besides her. This example, along with dozens of other unusual characteristics, reveals Sylvie's rejection of the dominant culture's customs, such as judging people according to their wealth, familial social status, or chosen lifestyle (including hoboing across the country in boxcars, which Sylvie enjoys doing herself).

Lucille deeply values the patriarchal view and finds Sylvie's behavior embarrassing. Sylvie's habits are "clearly the habits of a transient. They offend Lucille's sense of propriety" (Robinson 103). Furthermore, while Lucille seeks her peers in school as refuge from her homelife, she discovers that they support her ideas, that their voices back hers up:

Lucille had a familiar, Rosette Browne, whom she feared and admired, and through whose eyes she continually imagined she saw. She was galled and wounded by her imagined disapproval. (103)

Rosette Browne offers Lucille the ability to view her family through the eyes of a "typical" girl in the dominant culture; this prompts Lucille to disapprove of and maybe even hate them. She is ashamed of the fact that Sylvie refuses to keep the house orderly, as other women do in Fingerbone. Although Grandmother Foster seemed to have depended on housekeeping as a ritual to connect her to the present, Sylvie sees it as a way to make the house more like nature. Lucille is embarrassed that Sylvie allows the natural world to overtake the house so boundaries between the inside of the man-made structure and the structure's outside blur. Indeed, Sylvie eliminates all boundaries, sleeping sometimes outside the
house and sometimes in public (on a park bench or at the train station), as if her private space were everywhere.

Because she represents the authoritative discourse, Lucille cannot live with Sylvie, who represents an alien voice:

authoritative discourse permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders, no gradual and flexible transitions, no spontaneously creative styling variants on it. . . . One must either totally affirm it, or totally reject it. (Bakhtin 343).

Lucille's classmates and the popular magazines that they give her authorize Lucille's discontent, since they continually reflect to her a sense of how "regular" people live and the discrepancy between their lifestyles and her own. Partly because she is authorized by the majority of the society of Fingerbone, Lucille totally affirms the voice of her society, rejecting Sylvie and refusing to accept her as a reflection of what her mother Helen may have been like. Like the great-aunts, the insecurity of her family history disturbs Lucille so much that she too abandons it even if it means abandoning her own sister; Sylvie's world without rules makes her feel too insecure to continue living in it. Perhaps she even fears that she will become like Sylvie if she stays with her longer (she accuses Ruthie of doing so after only a short period with Sylvie [Robinson 130]). So Lucille seeks the orderly security of a home-economics teacher, in whose house she hopes to "better" herself by learning "proper" housekeeping.

For a third time, family disappearance prompts change in
Ruthie's life. As Helen's suicide moves Ruthie to her ancestral home where her past assaults her through memories, and as the great-aunts' flight brings Sylvie into Ruthie's life as evidence of what Helen was like, Lucille's abandonment also spurs a significant change for Ruthie. While Lucille lived in Sylvie's house, her limited vision of woman's role stifled Sylvie; without her, Sylvie and Ruthie experience a wilder, freer lifestyle. They no longer are reminded of the order-obsessed, patriarchal society of Fingerbone, which had previously found its voice in Lucille's Rosette Browne.

Sylvie's image had begun to merge with Helen's in Ruthie's imagination, even before Lucille's departure, creating a new mother-model for her own developing sense of identity. The day after Sylvie's arrival, Ruthie remembers a scene from her childhood when her mother tore up a letter from Ruthie's absent father and then glanced at her children's faces, responding with a cold "It's best" (52). While remembering this scene, Ruthie looks up to find that Sylvie's face fits on top of that image like a transparency; Sylvie begins "to blur the memory" of Ruthie's mother, "then to displace it." In both Ruthie's memory and in reality, Sylvie looks up "startled, regarding [Ruthie] from a vantage of memory in which she had no place" (Robinson 53). Thus even before Lucille leaves Ruthie, Sylvie begins to replace Helen as the main character in Ruthie's mother-memory fragments. She begins to become a mother figure for Ruthie, revising the role of mother. Without Lucille, though, a merging of Sylvie's and Helen's images
comes to Ruthie more easily, since she is free to base her memory of her mother in whatever version which will help her the most in understanding her past.

Instead of dreaming about her dead mother resurrected, Ruthie can imagine that the resurrection has already taken place, with Helen recurring in Sylvie. She needs only to reestablish her relationship with Sylvie in order to repel her past feelings of anticipation. Lucille's leaving prompts Sylvie to realize Ruthie's need for a new relationship, so the first day they have to themselves, Sylvie smiles and offers to "show" Ruthie "some things" (142). She wakes Ruthie early the next morning to travel to a mystical place of which she is fond, and Ruthie finds herself identifying with her aunt even as they leave their house and venture into the woods:

I walked after Sylvie down the shore, all at peace, and at ease, and I thought, We are the same. She could as well be my mother. I crouched and slept in her very shape as an unborn child. (145)

As they scramble into the boat to cross the lake which separates them from this secret place, Ruthie "crawled under [Sylvie's] body and out between her legs" (Robinson 146), symbolically experiencing a rebirth as Sylvie's child. This initial rebirth signals the beginning of a major change for Ruthie. Until this trip, Sylvie merges with Helen only in the images of Ruthie's memory, but actual experience with Sylvie gives Ruthie the physical closeness she needs to complete the joining. Whereas Helen is present for Ruthie only in her imagination, Sylvie can touch Ruthie physically, in the
material world.

Sylvie encourages Ruthie's "initiation" into her world and thus into a closer relationship with her by leaving Ruthie alone in a cold, frosty orchard that the bright day transforms into an edenic paradise: "It was as if the light had coaxed a flowering from the frost, which before seemed barren and parched as salt" (152). In this place of transformation and renewal, Ruthie reflects on her past disappointments and realizes that by remembering what she has lost, she regains it in her imagination. Expanding on her earlier vision of her mother rising from the dead with strawberries in her pockets, she considers desires made real through desire itself:

For need can blossom into all the compensation it requires. To crave and to have are as a thing and its shadow. For when does a berry break upon the tongue as sweetly as when one longs to taste it . . . . And here again is a foreshadowing--the world will be made whole. For to wish for a hand on one's hair is all but to feel it. So whatever we may lose, very craving gives it back to us again. (152-153)

Ruthie brings her mother to life in her imagination by remembering her, transforming this memory of her mother "into a generalized image of fulfillment, a nurturing angel embedded in a metaphor of 'longing'" (Ravits 651). Again she embraces loss, this time as a kind of companion, allowing craving and anticipation to replace what's craved and anticipated. By reconciling herself with the idea that her mother will never come back, Ruthie prepares herself to accept Sylvie completely as a surrogate mother.

The orchard where Ruthie confronts her loss contains a few
abandoned houses destroyed by the harsh winters of northern Idaho. She huddles near one of these houses, having been told by Sylvie that children were living in the woods around them, ghost children who had once lived in the decayed cabins. Alone in the woods, Ruthie imagines that these children surround her, that in the fleeting shadows they move just outside her vision. She describes them as "persistent and teasing and ungentle, the way half-wild, lonely children are" (154). They haunt her, as if calling her to join them in the loneliness and isolation of being abandoned children, and she responds by digging through the rubble of the cabin, imagining herself first as their rescuer and then their companion. She rummages until she is exhausted, until she concludes that "it is better to have nothing, for at last even our bones will fall" (Robinson 159). Ruthie's identification with the children in the woods who "have nothing" means that she has accepted the inevitability of loss, that if even our bones desert us in their eventual decay, so too will mothers, grandmothers, and sisters desert and abandon. She in effect renounces her loss, and thus her grief.

In a splendid turn, Sylvie, however, does not abandon Ruthie. Sylvie's return to Ruthie near the cabins demonstrates her success "as a mother in the most elemental way that others have not--she stays [with Ruthie]" (Meese 60). She looks deeply into Ruthie's eyes "as if she were studying her own face in a mirror" (Robinson 161), searching to see if her mission has been accomplished, if Ruthie has forgiven
Helen and is ready to accept her, or perhaps to accept a combination of the two women. Indeed, Ruthie has faced her loss, realizing that the act of needing will have to replace what is needed, since her mother will never really resurrect. Having fully accepted her loss, Ruthie leaves the forest in Sylvie's gentle embrace, ready to live with her new companion who embodies both past and present.

On their trip home, Ruthie completes her rebirth. It began in the womb of sleep as she followed Sylvie early that morning, continued as she emerged from Sylvie's legs on the first trip in the boat, and it finishes on the return journey while Ruthie lies on the bottom of the boat in Sylvie's coat, imagining that she "should swell and expand" until she bursts her shell (Robinson 162). At the end of this second birth, Ruthie fully recognizes Sylvie as her aunt and her mother, identifying her with both names:

the faceless shape in front of me could as well be Helen herself as Sylvie. I spoke to her by the name of Sylvie, and she did not answer. Then how was one to know? And if she were Helen in my sight, how could she not be Helen in fact? 'Sylvie!' I said. She did not reply . . . . 'Helen,' I whispered, but she did not reply. (166-67)

Sylvie does not answer Ruthie perhaps because she refuses to be identified as either woman. If she answers to the name of Ruthie's aunt, then she refuses the potential of being her mother as well (and vice versa). She may also want Ruthie to realize that names and identities are worthless, since everything is made less significant by inevitable loss; everything decays, so there is no use in identifying one
particular object and holding on to it as if it were immutable. By refusing to be identified by a name, Sylvie subverts the cultural custom of naming, undermining the power afforded to the patriarchy through this custom.

Once Ruthie merges Sylvie and Helen in her imagination, she understands that her mother is not altogether lost, since she is partly resurrected in Sylvie. Not only is Sylvie something Ruthie can "hold in [her] hand," but "Sylvie can feel the life of perished things" (Robinson 124) for Ruthie. Death becomes a permeable state for the narrator, allowing figures from the past and the present to intermingle and merge identities. Furthermore, as Ravits asserts, because Sylvie "inhabit[s] a millennial present" (Robinson 94), she gives Ruthie the feeling of mutability so that she isn't constantly looking to the past (Ravits 658-59) or awaiting the future. Foster agrees: "As [Sylvie] practices it, anticipation becomes not reification of the future, but transfiguration of the present, the creation of prefigurative forms that release the imagination of what could be" (92). Ruthie's rejection of anticipation and expectation from her relation to the world allows people and events simply to come and go from her life. By offering Ruthie an object in the present (herself) which represents something of the past, Sylvie also gives Ruthie a way to accept life which results in the elimination of her overwhelming burden of anticipation.

Absence of need, however, does not necessarily mean a blissful life for Ruthie. The day after she and Sylvie return
from their trip, the sheriff approaches them with a warning about their behavior. He then polices them through the spies of the patriarchy, the townsmen's wives:

Neighhor women and church women began to bring [Ruthie and Sylvie] casseroles and coffee cakes. They brought [them] knitted socks and caps and comforters. They sat on the edge of the couch with their offerings in their laps and made delicate inquiries about Sylvie's can and bottle collections. (179-180)

The obsessive cleanliness and charity of these women compared to Ruthie and Sylvie's earnest living arrangements, and these women's casseroles compared to Ruthie and Sylvie's close relation with the Earth, make the townswomen appear artificial and laughable. They blindly struggle against natural forces with their sponges and rubber gloves, while Ruthie and Sylvie sit back, comfortably awaiting whatever changes may occur.

To the women of Fingerbone, however, it is Ruthie and Sylvie who have threatened the "natural" order since they refuse to abide by the patriarchal rule of containing women in the home. Rather than disapprove of Ruthie and Sylvie because they stole a boat or trespassed on another person's property, they condemn them instead because they travel away from home in freight trains (186). They insist on keeping Ruthie, at least "safely within doors" (Robinson 183). In order to convict them of "erratic" behavior, the ladies ask Sylvie some personal questions which Sylvie deftly ignores. They counter, however, with a direct attack:

Do you know why we're asking all these questions? . . . Some people--some of us--feel that Ruthie should have--that a young girl needs an orderly life. (185)
The townswomen believe that Sylvie debases Ruthie's life by leading her astray, by allowing her an "alternative lifestyle" involving travel and "instability." Like Lucille, their basis of order is threatened by Sylvie's lack of "housekeeping."

Sylvie's subtle response opens their eyes to her own worldview. By telling them a story of a hobo friend whose life involves universal aspects of family, love, and loss, she manages to gain their sympathy:

No one says anything for a long time. Finally someone says, "Families are a sorrow, and that's the truth," and another one says, "I lost my girl sixteen years ago in June and her face is before me now," and someone else says, "If you can keep them, that's bad enough, but if you lose them——" The world is full of trouble. Yes it is. (186)

Sylvie persuades these women to side with her, placing them in a position to accept her into their culture or to venture into hers, unaware of their transgression. In Sylvie and Ruthie's parlor, the division disappears between the forces which homogenize (the attempts of these ladies to make Ruthie just like them), and the forces which decenter (Sylvie's alternative lifestyle). Bakhtin sees this type of dialogue as crucial to the evolution of individual consciousness, but it also is crucial to the evolution of social consciousness as well:

When someone else's [Sylvie's] ideological discourse is internally persuasive for us and acknowledged by us [the authority of the Fingerbone women], entirely different possibilities open up. . . . consciousness awakens to an independent ideological life precisely in a world of alien discourses surrounding it. (Bakhtin 345)
Ever so briefly, Sylvie loosens the static quality of the authoritative discourse, allowing the patriarchy to hear and sympathize with an alien voice.

Unfortunately, as in other times in Ruthie's life when she experiences harmony, this understanding does not last long. The townswomen are not fully convinced of the positive effects of dialogue, and thus prompt the sheriff to insist on taking Ruthie away from her radical aunt. During their last encounter with him, he voices his disapproval of their living conditions, suggesting that he will personally aid in taking Ruthie away from Sylvie. Daughter and surrogate mother refuse to be separated, though, but they also refuse to be turned into objects; if they were to remain in Fingerbone they would be forced to transform into objects of "improvement" by their surrounding society. They decide, then, to destroy their old possessions as well as their old lives:

In the equal light of disinterested scrutiny such things are not themselves. They are transformed into pure object, and are horrible, and must be burned. (Robinson 209)

So Sylvie and Ruthie burn their ancestral house: "Now truly [they are] cast out to wander, and there [is] an end to housekeeping" (Robinson 209). After having missed a passing train, they are forced to cross the railroad trestle that bridge the Fingerbone lake.

Ruthie describes her trip across the bridge as an event that catapults her to a new way of envisioning life outside the logo and phallocentric:
I believe it was the crossing of the bridge that changed me finally. . . . Something happened, something so memorable that when I think back to the crossing of the bridge, one moment bulges like the belly of a lens and all the others are at the peripheries and diminished. (215)

Ruthie's final rebirth as she crosses the bridge is such an important experience that it occupies her mind fully, leaving no room for the memories and visions of her past which previously troubled her. Finally she experiences a moment which supersedes in importance all of her confused memories; finally she experiences the present without any reminder of the past.

This moment moves Ruthie into a new life of transience even more radical than her life in Fingerbone. After their night-long struggle with the pull of wind and water, Ruthie and Sylvie reach the far side of the trestle and catch "the next west-bound" to drowse "among poultry crates all the way to Seattle" (216). Ruthie emphasizes to her audience that although she and Sylvie ride the trains throughout the northwest for over seven years, they "are not travellers," since they go places without specific motivations. They have "no particular reason to go to one town rather than another, and no particular reason to stay anywhere, or to leave" (216). It's almost as if, along with her motivation, Ruthie loses any particular identity which she may have had in Fingerbone. Although she comes in contact with people and outside influences, she nevertheless seems only to absorb the sensations and information around her. She says that she'd
rather work in a truck stop than anywhere else, because she
likes "to overhear the stories strangers tell each other, and
[she likes] the fastidious pleasure solitary people take in
the smallest details of their small comforts" (Robinson 214).
The pleasure Ruthie derives as a solitary person seems to be
from observing other people experiencing their own pleasure,
but she doesn't interact with people. It's almost as if she
has no particular identity to offer for interaction:

> when the customers and the waitresses and the
dishwasher and the cook have told [Ruthie], or said
in [her] hearing, so much about themselves that [her]
own silence seems suddenly remarkable, then they
begin to suspect [her], and it is as if [she] put[s]
a chill on the coffee by serving it. (214)

By distancing herself from other people, by removing herself
from any dialogue of ideas, Ruthie renounces her identity,
becoming more like the weather or the earth. Mallon
explains that she and Sylvie have "broken the 'tethers of
need' that confine their spirits by constricting their bodies"
(103-04); they simply live, without any motivations or chosen
actions, almost like ghosts outside the world of living
people.

Although Ruthie speaks of her life as a transient as if it
satisfies her, we must remember that she was forced into it
against her will. Not only will the patriarchal society of
Fingerbone not accept Ruthie's life in a "millennial present"
with Sylvie, but they force the dissenters into a realm in
which they exist merely as fictive characters to the only
"real" person they know: Lucille. As Foucault asserts in "The
Discourse on Language," people are called "mad" if their "speech could not be said to form part of the common discourse . . . . [Their] words were considered nul and void, without truth or significance" (217). The community of Fingerbone determines Ruthie's and Sylvie's speech to be outside the "common discourse," so their explanations as well as their lifestyle are "without truth or significance" to the society. In the statement that functions as a poetics for the text, Ruthie admits that she is unable to distinguish between reality and illusion:

I have never distinguished readily between thinking and dreaming. I know my life would be much different if I could ever say, This I have learned from my senses, while that I have merely imagined. (215-16)

This ability to merge thinking and dreaming into one act helps Ruthie re-vision, since what takes place in her imagination, as she dreams, may more easily merge with what takes place in reality, as she thinks. Furthermore, if thinking and dreaming meld in this text to create an alternative existence for the narrator in her fiction, then perhaps Ruthie's words may be read as a sort of prophecy, for Foucault suggests that the words of a mad person are "credited with strange powers, or revealing some hidden truth, of predicting the future, of revealing . . . what the wise [are] unable to perceive" (Foucault 217).

If Ruthie does reveal prophesy, it is a strange message indeed. As many critics have pointed out, Robinson writes an extremely ambiguous ending. Foster says that since "the
combination of critique and pre-figuration of a positively different social order manifests itself at the novel's end as an ambiguity that joins the literal and figurative senses of death" (95). Ruthie and Sylvie may have escaped the pressures of an ordered existence by fleeing from their house, but they had to leave behind their past lives in order to do so. When they cross the bridge, they experience a figurative death in that they leave their old lives behind them to begin a completely new life with new identities (or no distinct identities at all). Indeed, Ruthie centers her description of crossing the bridge around darkness and water, which are associated throughout the text with images of death. As she crosses the bridge, she crosses over to a new dimension in which the line separating modes of being is indistinct. She does admit that that night she and Sylvie are "almost a single person" (209), and she describes her life after the crossing as if she and Sylvie were ghosts to the rest of the world. 68 They leave their past lives behind them to rise again to experience a new mode of action which allows them to be at least partially free from the constraints of the patriarchy. They are invisible to society, so they are dead in the eyes of the people who surround them, and back in Fingerbone they are considered dead as well, for the residents chose to believe that they committed suicide, like Helen, by jumping into the lake. Ruthie even refers frequently to herself and Sylvie as being dead during the last passages of the narrative, as in "Since we are dead, the house would be "Lucille's now"
Although we know that her references are based in the belief of the townspeople, the way in which she continues to say that she and Sylvie are dead adds to the image of their transient existence as being like a state of death.

Yet after this crossing of existential boundaries, Ruthie's imagination continues to function in the realm of possibility. She imagines how she affects Lucille's life after Sylvie's and her departure, describing rather eerily how they haunt Lucille in the old house:

If Lucille is there, Sylvie and I have stood outside her window a thousand times, and we have thrown the side door open . . . and we have brought in leaves, and flung the curtains and tipped the bud vase, and somehow left the house again before she could run downstairs, leaving behind us a strong smell of lakewater. (218)

Even in their absence, Ruthie and Sylvie impose disorder into Lucille's life, continually halting any effort to keep house "properly," destroying boundaries, and reminding Lucille of the inevitability of change and the uselessness of barring against decay and loss. The patriarchy's insistence on dividing the human world from the natural world, on never living in the present but for the goal of progress only, appears futile and even dangerous in Ruthie's and Sylvie's world of resurrected ghosts. Out of love it seems, they attempt to save Lucille from this process even in their "death."

In this last passage of the text, Ruthie adds even more possibility to her narrative by using negatives in her fictive narration of Lucille's possible lives. She begins by
imagining Lucille as "stalemating the forces of ruin" (216) in their old house in Fingerbone, but she abruptly changes the scenario by moving Lucille to Boston where she has "won the admiration of skeptics." Then, after certain conjectures of where Lucille may be living and how, Ruthie explains that all visions of Lucille's life are worthless: "All this is fact. Fact explains nothing. On the contrary, it is fact that requires explanation" (Robinson 217). By adding her own imagination to Lucille's life, Ruthie gives her the endless possibility produced through the use of the negative. While envisioning Lucille sitting in a restaurant, she describes only what could not be happening to her:

Sylvie and I do not flounce in through the door . . . . My mother, likewise is not there, and my grandmother, . . . and my grandfather . . . does not examine the menu. . . . No one watching this woman . . . could know how her thoughts are thronged by our absence, or know how she does not watch, does not listen, does not wait, does not hope, and always for me and Sylvie. (218)

Simply by describing such a scene, Ruthie suggests its possibility; by using negatives she suggests at the same time that this scenario is not happening. In the last passage of the novel, Ruthie is a ghost who lives in a world where the impossible and possible exist simultaneously, where she has become a memory in Lucille's mind, as her mother had been a memory in her own. She has finally joined her mother, grandfather, and grandmother as ghosts haunting a restaurant, as stories in a woman's mind. Like Hong Kingston's
knot-maker, Ruthie weaves her stories into a connection of visionary webs. No longer are her memories "fragments to be knit up finally;" they are her reality, since she lives among them even while among the living.

The ending of Housekeeping suggests a monumental revolution for women's texts, since it changes the meaning of "ending"; instead of offering an unrealistic closure in order to create a fictive understanding of the world, Ruthie's narrative permits a continuation of story. It demonstrates what Bakhtin calls the socio-historical condition of heteroglossia by calling attention to the tension between dominant structures of tale-telling (such as linear, monoglossic plot, and concise, closed endings) and the multivoiced, decentering, open-ended narrative that appears here. From this perspective Housekeeping and The Woman Warrior share similar tasks; Hong Kingston's five stories told in different voices, each relating to a single narrative, also reflect a movement away from traditional plots. As might be anticipated, these authors neither accept nor adhere to the limitations and illusions of a happy ending through marriage for female characters, and neither accepts the concept of "ending" at all, much less that of being "happy." Instead of restricting their ideas to the patriarchal linear form of previous texts, with Aristotle's imposed beginning, middle and end, they write "beyond the ending" (Blau DuPlessis) of their texts, opening their ideas to further development. They reject a single, pre-scribed authoritative "answer" to the questions raised in
the text.

*Housekeeping* offers the reader something unique which takes the place of authoritative structure; through Ruthie's unusual method of re-visioning, it offers witchcraft. Ruthie's incantation to draw her reader into her worldview, her ability to perceive the unperceived, Sylvie's and her rituals of housekeeping and of birthing, the hauntings of the children's ghosts and then of Sylvie and Ruthie, the webs of connections between words and dreams, the bridge, the symbolic suicidal/sacrifice, the mystical relationship to land, water, air: all are used by the narrator to change her past, herself, the world as she perceives it. Not only does she reject the authoritative voice of the patriarchal society, but she replaces that voice with an even stronger power, that of female witchcraft, subverting authoritative discourse by putting reality through a metamorphosis of re-vision.
ENDNOTES FOR CHAPTER 2

1. Bakhtin tells us that "laughter and the literary devises of parody and the carnivalesque [are] devises through which what is 'high' and 'superior' is made low and laughable" (207). Robinson uses laughter to subvert the dominant culture by making subtle fun of it. When the people of Fingerbone intrude into Sylvie's and Ruthie's lives, she presents them in a slight but noticeably mocking light. She describes the patriarch of Fingerbone, the sheriff, as an embarrassed, powerless-looking man:

   He was a tall, fat man who stood with his chin tucked in and his hands folded beneath his belly and his weight on his heels. He was dressed in a gray suit with hugely pleated pants and a jacket that was taut as upholstery in the back and upper arm . . . . Everything in his manner suggested embarrassment. (176)

   This ridiculous man tries to threaten Sylvie, but instead he becomes threatened by her. Robinson describes him leading the town parade as if he deserved admiration, but she concludes the description with those who immediately follow him in the parade: the various distant relatives of the chief of the Fingerbone tribe, "his half-Irish stepdaughter, and the oldest children of her first marriage. Then came the majorettes" (Robinson 176). She's mocking him by describing him as the leader of such a ridiculous motley group of people; in thus belittling him, she renders him powerless.

2. Yaegar bases her argument of the power of the novel's interruptions on a discussion from Virginia Woolf.
Chapter 3

Re-Vision for Context in
Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*

Like the heroines of *The Woman Warrior* and *Housekeeping*, *Cat's Eye*'s Elaine Risley narrates her childhood and adolescence from the perspective of adulthood in order to re-vision her understanding of the past. Although Elaine is neither an Asian-American nor an abandoned daughter, as the previous narrators were, she experiences a dreadful childhood that scars her emotionally; her childhood girlfriends abuse her psychologically and sometimes physically, so that she blocks out parts of her memories, which come back to haunt her as an adult. These fragments of memories prompt Elaine to question her past so she may understand why the haunting figures of her childhood persist and drive her to attempt suicide. Although her ability as a painter allows her to explore images of her past, isolated images on canvas provide no context for her childhood. Instead of filling in gaps from her memories, her paintings only illustrate the memories which haunt her imagination, like disembodied images rather than whole stories. Narrating her childhood, though, provides the context she cannot achieve on canvas. By describing the events of her past while continually returning to descriptions of her paintings, Elaine begins to apprehend the context of her haunting memories. Unfortunately, though, she is never able to share this understanding with the chief character of her past, her friend Cordelia, so she feels as though her
reconciliation with the past has not reached completion.

Narration in Cat's Eye, as in The Woman Warrior, is non-linear. Elaine narrates the text during a single weekend while supervising a retrospective showing of her paintings in Toronto; but between brief descriptions of this "present," Elaine relates stories about her childhood and adolescence, which becomes the body of the plotline. The plot, then, doesn't follow simply from Elaine's past to her present in a chronological line; instead it consists of tales from the past, interrupted repeatedly and consistently by the narrator's stories of the present. In this aspect, both The Woman Warrior and Cat's Eye produce similar effects on the reader: Hong Kingston's narrator's confusion regarding the roles of women in her familial and cultural history is presented in a non-linear (perhaps confusing) narration. Because she offers her autobiographical narrative in separate sections, each emphasizing the roles portrayed by different models who sometimes contradict each other, her narrative style expresses inner feelings of fragmentation and confusion regarding images of women in her life similar to the ones developed in Atwood's text. Cat's Eye's Elaine also faces the task of linking or connecting the relationship among her childhood experiences, her adult reactions to those experiences, and her art. She too has a complex narrative structure to represent these relations.

Elaine establishes this non-linear narration by beginning the text with a treatise on time:
You don't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away. (3)

From the very beginning of the text, Elaine lets her readers know that memories are of paramount importance to the narration of her life, just as they are to *Housekeeping's* Ruthie. Like Ruthie, Elaine stresses her awareness of the arbitrariness of memories, their tendency obstinately to "rise to the surface" of her imagination when she doesn't want them to, yet refusing to appear when she needs them. Elaine thus foreshadows the technique she uses throughout the text, for narrative segments in this text rise to the surface like images rising to the playful surface of the water, separated by blank spaces on the page. The text's form reflects these fragmented memories, which further leads the reader into Elaine's fragmented, imagistic memories.

After her exposé on time, Elaine jumps to the narration of an event in her teenage years, introducing Cordelia, the character whose image and voice haunts her throughout her life. Unlike the narrators of *The Woman Warrior* or *Housekeeping*, who focus on their mothers or other older female mentors in the process of narrating and re-visioning their lives, Elaine develops her sense of identity in relation to Cordelia, her childhood friend and peer. She narrates the initial part of the section from the past as a memory, but then she reminisces in the present, letting her audience know that she hasn't seen Cordelia since their adolescent years.
Tucked into this musing are bits of narration that reveal the extent of Elaine's disturbing obsession with Cordelia's image:

[Elaine] can hardly walk down a street without a glimpse of [Cordelia], turning a corner, entering a door. It goes without saying that these fragments of her—a shoulder... the side of a face, the back of a leg—belong to women who, seen whole, are not Cordelia. (6)

As Ruthie is haunted by fragments of images of her drowned mother and Hong Kingston's narrator is haunted by old myths and family stories, Elaine too is haunted by images of the people from her childhood, particularly by Cordelia. Indeed, Elaine's "memories of her 'girlfriends' and a gothic childhood and adolescence in Toronto are her ghosts" (Wilson 226).

Elaine hints at the "gothic" characteristics of her relationship with Cordelia:

if I bumped into her by accident... would I ignore her, given the chance? Or would I go up to her wordlessly, throw my arms around her? Or take her by the shoulders, and shake and shake. (8)

This passage suggests some unfinished business between Elaine and Cordelia, some processing that needs to be completed in order to resolve the ambiguous, problematic sense of their relationship. Elaine also hints that whatever was bothering her during her childhood is haunting her again: "I can feel my throat tightening, a pain along the jawline. I've started to chew my fingers again. There's blood, a taste I remember" (9). Through these unexplained details, Elaine sets up something like a mystery: we know that she had a troubled past and that her memories haunt her as an adult. More disturbingly, her opening comments about Cordelia stir up a
confusion, a turmoil within her, highlighting a troubled relationship between the two girls, rather than a comfortable sisterhood. She begs us to ask, What happened during her childhood? Why is she bothered by her memories at this point in her life?

Chapter two promises answers to these questions. After a brief explanation of what she's doing in Toronto, setting up the "behind the scenes" plot for the story, Elaine commences a lengthy narrative of her childhood. Until her eighth year, her father researched the spruce bud worm, apparently for his doctoral degree. So Elaine treks with her father, mother, and older brother across the forests of northern Canada in search of "a classic infestation." World War II, coupled with Mr. Risley's unusual occupation, forces Elaine and her family to live in tents and motels, eating bread and Spam on the roadsides. With only her brother Stephen for companionship, she grows up with mixed gender roles, playing the games of boys yet acting a subordinate role:

Stephen gives me a gun and a knife and we play war. . . . I am the infantry, which means I have to do what he says. He waves me forward, motions me back, tells me to keep my head down so the enemy won't blow it off. "You're dead," he says. "No I'm not." "Yes you are. They got you. Lie down." There is no arguing with him, since he can see the enemy and I can't. (25-26)

Instead of imagining herself as a dead war-victim, Elaine wants to imagine herself alive, but her brother won't allow it. Because she spends almost all of her first eight years with the companionship only of her brother, playing his
war games that subordinate her, she seems to establish a belief that there are things in reality which she can't understand, which she can't see but others can. She establishes a belief in her inferiority and even invisibility which makes her easy prey later as she encounters other socializing forces, forces which become the unseen enemy, the troops that constantly watch her.

While traveling with her family, Elaine learns through her school books that little girls in other parts of the world live differently than she:

[her book] is about two children who live in a white house with ruffled curtains, a front lawn, and a picket fence. The father goes to work, the mother wears a dress and an apron, and the children play ball on the lawn with their dog and cat. Nothing in these stories is anything like [Elaine's] life. (30)

Images in Elaine's texts "have an exotic appeal for [her]" (30); they are so unlike her life that she grows to worship them, drawing pictures of girls and imagining "what [she] might say to them if [she] actually met some" (31). They become her socialization to girlhood, instilling in her imagination the idea that the domestic is exotic, partly because it is so foreign to her lifestyle, offering her mysterious alternatives in relationships with other people.

These images from her texts and Stephen's obsession with wars create in Elaine yearning for female companionship where there is promise she will be treated as an equal. She therefore develops a desire for things which represent the normal life to her, such as a "white [house], with a picket
fence and a lawn, and window curtains" (33). At this early age Elaine's desires are similar to Lucille's motivation in *Housekeeping*: both appear to be characters compelled by a longing for a "normal" life, for a sense of security lodged in the traditional, subordinate female roles and values assigned by the culture.

Unlike Lucille, Elaine does not have to leave her family to achieve a different lifestyle, because when Mr. Risley takes a position as a teacher at the University of Toronto, he and his family buy a house and move to the suburbs. Unfortunately, the move stimulates a chain of events wherein Elaine's long line of disappointments with reality begin. Her new life disturbs her because her new house is so unlike the ones in her reader; it's only half finished and "surrounded by raw mud." Elaine's new awareness of how different her family is from the families she meets in Toronto adds to her uneasiness. While her mother walks in the forbidden ravine, picking wild flowers and wearing pants, other mothers wear housedresses and provocingly mysterious rubber gloves while they wash the dishes (Atwood 54). Even Elaine's father seems inadequate, since he works in a building with ox eyeballs and lectures about the fate of the planet at the supper table.

This awareness of her parents as different from others leads Elaine to look to her new friends as models of how to act in this new life. They surprise her, though, with their foreign lifestyles; they introduce her to a world of coat trees, cold waves, and twin sets. She admits that she's unsure of herself
in this new world:

I'm not used to girls, or familiar with their customs. I feel awkward around them, I don't know what to say. I know the unspoken rules of boys, but with girls I sense that I am always on the verge of some unforeseen, calamitous blunder. (50).

Because she enters the female social world as an outsider, she constantly is made to feel like she's at the mercy of her omniscient friends. Instead of meeting the girls in her school books and becoming close to them, she remains at arm's length.

Although Elaine doesn't know it, her friends aren't the best models for living in the suburban world that she could find. Grace Smeath's family may be poorer than the rest, which seems to add a tension in the Smeath household which affects everyone there. Furthermore, Mrs. Smeath holds extremely conservative views concerning religion and "proper" behavior for little girls. Cordelia's parents seem to be well off, but they foster an unhealthy competition between Cordelia and her older sisters, disapproving of Cordelia's actions and even perhaps psychologically abusing her. These slightly dysfunctional family situations seem to motivate Elaine's friends to take advantage of her. As some children are prone to do, they imitate their parents' behavior towards them, taking out their frustrations on their friends. Elaine's naivete concerning social relations and her vulnerability as an outsider to the culture around her make her more susceptible to abuse by her friends. An extraordinary instance of abuse occurs after a day of playing dress up and
putting on plays; Grace, Carol, and Cordelia bury Elaine in a hole in her backyard and leave her there. While in the hole she experiences "the point at which [she] lost power" (Atwood 113). Her loss of power is related to her loss of the ability to distinguish between the role she plays in her friends' games and the role she plays as a friend in real life:

When I was put into the hole I knew it was a game; now I know it is not one. I feel sadness, a sense of betrayal. Then I feel the darkness pressing down on me; then terror (112).

Elaine doesn't realize that she can remove herself from games with her friends, that she can step out of her roles, as Carol does by crying, whenever she feels uncomfortable with them. While playing war with her brother she was powerless as well, but she knew then that they were only playing. But because she's unsure of the mores of girls' games, she blurs this distinction, putting herself in the hands of her malicious friends.

Partly because of this misunderstanding, Carol, Grace, and particularly Cordelia take advantage of her; they wield power over her mainly because they leave her in the hole, thus leaving her in a role they made for her. Their constant critiques make her painfully conscious of how her actions and speech appear to others around her. She's constantly aware of being judged and of transgressing social boundaries. After nearly two years of feeling worthless and terrorized at the hands of her power-wielding friends, Elaine finally understands that she doesn't have to do what they say. She
doesn't come to this conclusion, though, until Cordelia, with the support of Grace and Carol, nearly kill her. They send her into a frozen ravine to fetch her hat, and she slips through the ice. Her "friends" flee, leaving Elaine to struggle to save her own life through an inspiring hallucination.

As soon as Elaine gains new friends, she forgets her bad experiences; her old friends "are like the names of distant cousins, people who live far away, people [she] hardly know[s]. Time is missing" (Atwood 213). Forgetting them does not mean that she has not been affected by them though, for her experiences as a tortured victim of Cordelia, Grace, and Carol determine her relationships with other females. She is never again willing to establish a close relationship with another female for the rest of the narrative. She does, however, maintain a tie to Cordelia, whose personality changes through adolescence and whose relationship with Elaine changes as well. Cordelia's image as a child, however, constantly haunts Elaine into her adulthood.

Unlike Hong Kingston's and Robinson's narrators, who see their mothers and mother-like mentors as reflections of who they are and who they may become or as models whom they may revise, Elaine sees her reflection primarily in Cordelia's eyes. As a child, Cordelia, Grace, and Carol watch her constantly, always reporting to each other and to her what she looks like from the outside, how her image portrays and betrays her to other people. Cordelia even "brings a mirror
to school" with which she may taunt Elaine:

She takes it out of her pocket and holds the mirror up in front of [Elaine] and says, "Look at yourself! Just look!" Her voice is disgusted, fed up . . . . [Elaine] look[s] into the mirror but . . . see[s] just [her] face, with the dark blotches on the lips where [she's] bitten off the skin. (Atwood 169)

Elaine sees herself only from the outside, from the perspective of other girls who view her as worthless. Of course this relation with females becomes a problem for her later in life, for she feels that women are always watching her, judging her according to her outward appearance and socially constructed self. As an adult at a meeting for women's consciousness raising, Elaine admits that she feels nervous:

[She] feels as if [she's] standing outside a closed door while decisions are being made, disapproving judgements are being pronounced, inside, about [her]. At the same time [she] want[s] to please. Sisterhood is a difficult concept for [her], [she] tell[s] [her]self, because [she] never had a sister. Brotherhood is not. (361)

Elaine can't separate her reactions to her childhood friends from her reactions to adult women, so she feels alienated by potential sisters/friends, always afraid that "whatever [she] say[s] might be the wrong thing" (361). As an outsider to the female world, Elaine is forced to turn to men, whom she feels she understands because she has a brother. Yet Elaine is confused by male social customs as well. During her first years at University, she rejects the feminine appearance and manners of her peers, adopting instead a demeanor which allows her to be accepted by the male
painters. At first Elaine feels "privileged" (Atwood 294) to be an exception to the other women, but she also feels irritated when the men give their attention to a female painter whose comments "come out like a cat rubbing against a leg, an admiring hand on a bicep" (Atwood 296). Like Hong Kingston's narrator, she wants the autonomy and acceptance of being accepted in the male world as a male. She gives up her femininity to do that. But she also recognizes that males prefer to share their world with sexy, feminine women.

Elaine's sexual encounters with men further complicate her understanding of gender relations. Her first lover, Josef Hrbik, sees her as "a slim woman with cloudy hair, pensive eyes in a thin white face" (320), or in other words, a ghost who floats in and out of his life without any individuality, a mirror image of her self but not her real self. When his other lover gives herself a dangerous abortion and he fails to understand her view, Elaine finally leaves him (Atwood 338). In the beginning of her relationship with her next lover, Jon, she feels that she might have a more equal relationship, since he insists that neither of them does the housework while they both concentrate on their painting. However, as soon as Elaine becomes pregnant and the family needs money, Jon expects Elaine to abandon her talent in order to help support the household (Atwood 362). She leaves him as well.

Elaine's relationships with men, therefore, are more complicated than those of Hong Kingston's and Robinson's narrators because Hong Kingston's narrator sees the male world
as her key to freedom from gender repression; she imagines that if she could break into the public sphere through the business world, then she would no longer face gender-related problems. On the other hand, Ruthie is totally alienated from men; as a child she lives among women in the matriarchal households of her grandmother, great-aunts, and aunt Sylvie, and when men attempt to intrude into her life she escapes from them, again entering a world made by her own needs, not those of the patriarchy. Elaine, though, cannot escape into a world of women; e feels constantly threatened by them because of her tormented childhood in the hands of little matriarchs. However, when she seeks a place in the male world, as Hong Kingston's narrator does, she cannot find a place for herself. She's either treated as an "exception" by the men, which means as a nonentity, or she's subordinated as a sex object or a household commodity. She not only evades a categorized gender role, but she feels uncomfortable in the in-between roles she's been forced to play. Indeed, Elaine is caught in a trap, unable to act as an androgynous person.

Throughout Elaine's narrative of her adolescence and young adulthood, she interrupts her tale with "on-the-scene-reports" from her weekend in Toronto where she witnesses her paintings' retrospective. As museum curators review Elaine's paintings and interview her about them, she gives herself her own retrospective, reviewing her feelings from the past and interviewing herself about them. Her obsession with Cordelia plays a prominent role in her narrative. She hasn't seen her
"friend" since they were in their early twenties, when Elaine refused to spring Cordelia from a mental hospital. Elaine's compulsive musings about Cordelia intermingle with descriptions of her paintings as she encounters them during the business of supervising her retrospective. The juxtaposition of Elaine's art with her memories reveals the extent to which her art recreates images from her past. If we return to Elaine's narrative from when she was buried in the hole and "lost power," we discover the psychological relation between her paintings and her memories:

I need to fill in the black square of time, go back to see what's in it. It's as if I vanish at that moment [when she knows she's trapped] and reappear later, but different, not knowing why I have been changed. If I could even see the undersides of the boards above my head it might help. I close my eyes, wait for pictures. (113)

Since Elaine needs to illuminate the gaps of her memory, and since painting's greatest task is to create light on canvas, she paints her memories, thus re-creating the images she lost. A study of the evolution of Elaine's painting career helps us understand the limitations of her art in terms of its ability to provide a context that can help her solve her troubled connections with the past.

As a young girl in University, Elaine begins by painting reproductions of everyday objects, painting "nothing that doesn't look like a sampling from the Housewares Department of the Eaton's Catalogue" (Atwood 344). As we know from her narration of her past, Elaine used to cut and paste pictures of houseware items from the Eaton's catalogues when she played
with Grace and Carol (Atwood 36). By painting what she used to play with during childhood, she reenacts the past through her art. She seems to use art during this period for stability, for a sense of truth (this was the time during which she was sleeping with both Josef and Jon and feeling confused about gender relations). Like Housekeeping's Ruthie, Elaine is driven to connect images in her imagination, to paste them together on canvas and in narrative, in order to form a whole from fragments. Elaine seems to resist creating any images (as Hong Kingston's narrator does) to fill in the gaps between the fragments; she wants to conjure these images from her memory instead.

As soon as Elaine paints all the objects she sees, she begins painting "things that aren't there," objects from her past which have no apparent significance, such as sofas and washing wringers. Yet she admits that these objects haunt her through this need to paint them:

I know that these things must be memories, but they do not have the quality of memories. They are not hazy around the edges, but sharp and clear. They arrive detached from any context; they are simply there, in isolation . . . . I have no image of myself in relation to them. They are suffused with anxiety, but it's not my own anxiety. The anxiety is in the things themselves. (353)

These objects are from her childhood, images with which she associated her torture while she was experiencing it. The couch which reappears on her canvas was the one on which Mrs. Smeath lounged while she was having migraines, and the wringer served as a fleeting escape through suicide in Elaine's
imagination as she despaired at the hands of Cordelia. As an adult, these memories force themselves back on Elaine, compelling her to reproduce them, to examine them in the semi-objective light on the canvas so that she may discover what they mean to her, so she may shed light on the connections that draw these objects into a significant whole.

Painting old objects from her past leads Elaine to paint people from her past, and Mrs. Smeath appears mysteriously on her canvas:

One picture of Mrs. Smeath leads to another. She multiplies on the walls like bacteria... following [Elaine] around with her many eyes like those 3-D postcards of Jesus you can get in the cheesier corner stores. Sometimes [Elaine] turn[s] her faces to the wall. (353)

Although paintings of Mrs. Smeath are indeed images from the past, they are merely images, without the context that Elaine needs to fill in the spaces of her memory or lead to self discovery. Painting is an illusion that something of life has been captured; it's an attempt to hold life onto the page—to have it--to own it. Even though a painting can be fluid and filled with movement, there's something static and fixed about it. It doesn't portray the life of the subject. Both Elaine and her paintings remain objects, without subject matter.

In Elaine's case, her paintings don't reveal heteroglossia as a condition of the events of her past. They reveal only static, monoglossic images, such as the hatred Elaine associates with Mrs. Smeath. She paints "her scrubbed face... white and strangely luminous in the dim space, like a
phosphorescent mushroom" (62). "Each pallid leg, each steel-rimmed eye, is there as it was, as plain as bread (427). She emphasizes Mrs. Smeath's "self-righteous eyes," showing the world the pitiful state of hatred the woman was always in. The paintings, however, don't reveal the reasons why Mrs. Smeath hates Elaine, and why Cordelia tortured her.

This need to understand the context surrounding her past, to fill in the gaps that even her paintings leave vacant, motivates Elaine to narrate her past. According to Bakhtin, the prose writer (or narrator, in Elaine's case) can reveal context through narration:

Instead of the virginal fullness and inexhaustibility of the object itself, the prose writer confronts a multitude of routes, roads and paths that have been laid down in the object by social consciousness. Along with the internal contradictions inside the object itself, the prose writer witnesses as well the unfolding of social heteroglossia surrounding the object. (278)

For Elaine, the "object" to which Bakhtin refers is the hatred she encounters in the relationships of her past. Although her paintings merely reveal and explore the depth of this hatred, her narration reveals the context surrounding the hatred, the reasons why it was present.

Near the end of her narration, during the actual retrospective which serves as a climax for the text, Elaine looks at one of her paintings and "resees" it, with the help of the awareness of the heteroglossia which narrating her past has afforded her. Instead of seeing Mrs. Smeath only as an Other, as a victimizer, she sees Mrs. Smeath as a victim as
well:

I used to think [her eyes in the paintings] were self-righteous eyes, piggy and smug inside their wire frames; and they are. But they are also defeated eyes, uncertain and melancholy, heavy with unloved duty. . . . Mrs. Smeath . . . was a displaced person; as I was. (427)

As soon as Elaine sees Mrs. Smeath as a victim, she becomes aware of herself as the Other in Mrs. Smeath's eyes:

Now I can see myself, through the painted eyes of Mrs. Smeath: a frazzle-headed ragamuffin from heaven knows where, a gypsy, practically. . . . I was unbaptized, a nest for demons: how could she know what germs of blasphemy and unfaith were breeding in me? And yet she took me in. (427)

Seeing herself through Mrs. Smeath's eyes allows Elaine to understand why Mrs. Smeath hated her, since she represented something foreign and threatening to the Smeaths' ideologies. She decides that Mrs. Smeath may have been kinder to her than other people simply by allowing her to enter the Smeath home.

By seeing through this new perspective, Elaine is able to understand Mrs. Smeath as well as her own hatred, since she can now see herself as Other. Bakhtin explains that this awareness of oneself in the midst of other voices helps a narrator generate a greater awareness of herself:

These [alien] voices create the background necessary for [the narrator's] own voice, outside of which [the narrator's] prose nuances cannot be perceived, and without which they "do not sound." (278)

Before she becomes aware of Mrs. Smeath's view, before she "hears" Mrs. Smeath's voice through her paintings and narrative, Elaine's voice is solitary; it projects only hatred, not understanding. However, an awareness of why Mrs.
Smeath hated her leads Elaine to understand why she hated Mrs. Smeath:

Some of this [painting] must be true. I have not done it justice, or rather mercy. Instead I went for vengeance. An eye for an eye leads only to more blindness. (427).

Her paintings are an act of vengeance in that they put Mrs. Smeath in all her domesticity and ugliness in the public eye, but in enacting vengeance, Elaine made herself deaf to Mrs. Smeath's voice, to her view of the world. While she was hating Mrs. Smeath, she wasn't able to see her point of view, or to understand that Mrs. Smeath was a victim of cultural stereotypes as well as herself.

Although Elaine does not directly explain to her audience Mrs. Smeath's point of view, she does reveal through the narration of her past that poverty, strict obedience to a patriarchal God, and even an unhappy relationship with her husband all may have left Mrs. Smeath in an environment where she had little control over herself or her family. Elaine's family's seeming unconcern for wealth, their freedom from a tie to a god, and their more egalitarian gender relationships may serve as a reminder to Mrs. Smeath of her unhappiness. They may also be a constant threatening thorn in her side, for they show her that she may free herself from her limited situation (although she hates her life, she may hate the instability of change more). Elaine's presence in her house, then, threatens Mrs. Smeath. Elaine seems to compile all of this information from her past while she narrates it, and
studying her painting at her retrospective simply brings an awareness of Mrs. Smeath's life to an epiphany. Finally she can understand her destructive and blind hatred, and thus abandon it.

Unfortunately, an imaginative reconciliation with Mrs. Smeath does not reconcile Elaine with Cordelia, whose image haunts her more fervently than Mrs. Smeath's ever did. Although she comes to understand Mrs. Smeath's perspective without actually confronting her, she cannot do so with Cordelia. She and Cordelia share changing lives; as Cordelia swam in and out of roles and identities, she and Elaine grew even farther apart. Their last visit ends as Elaine abandons Cordelia in an asylum, and Cordelia vanishes into the past, "address unknown" (Atwood 378). Elaine's life, therefore, is wound together with Cordelia's too tightly for her to achieve an understanding without her present as well.

Elaine needs to contact her "friend" so that she can show Cordelia her view of their childhood, so she can make Cordelia listen to her language. She knows that Cordelia experienced a different version of their childhood:

[Elaine] could give [Cordelia] something you could never have, except from another person: what you look like from outside. A reflection. This is a part of herself [Elaine] could give back to her. [They] are like twins in old fables, each of whom has been given half a key. (Atwood 434)

Elaine's half-key is her own voice, her view of Cordelia from the outside, and Cordelia's half-key is her voice, her view of Elaine from the outside. Elaine attempts to "reunite" the
keys though her narration by bringing Cordelia's voice back to life in the text. Only by hearing Cordelia's voice, by presenting herself in her narration through Cordelia's eyes, can Elaine understand herself in full.

Although Bakhtin asserts that through narration one can reach this understanding of one's self as Other (364), Elaine cannot come to this understanding even through her narration, for she must have Cordelia present in order to glean Cordelia's views from her dialogue. Again, Bakhtin reminds us that it is "impossible to reveal, through a character's acts and through these acts alone, [the character's] ideological position and the ideological world at its heart, without representing [that character's] discourse" (Bakhtin 335).

Elaine can recreate Cordelia's language from what she remembers Cordelia saying to her, but this recreation is only an imitation; it can never truly reveal Cordelia's own voice. She longs to meet Cordelia again as an adult to confront the other and put an end to her questions and doubts.

By the end of the text, Elaine realizes that she and Cordelia will never meet (she becomes famous in a small way because of the retrospective and hopes that her fame will draw Cordelia to her), and she becomes extremely depressed. She imagines herself growing older until death, never learning Cordelia's side of the story:

I'm headed for a future in which I sprawl propped in a wheel-chair, shedding hair and drooling . . . . While Cordelia vanishes and vanishes. . . . I've been prepared for almost anything; except absence, except silence. (434)
Without Cordelia's viewpoint, she will never be able to see herself as whole; she needs the "other half of the key" to complete her self. She draws her narration to a close by mourning over an understanding relationship with Cordelia, for the potential experience of a shared closeness with another woman: "This is what I miss, Cordelia; not something that's gone, but something that will never happen. Two old women giggling over their tea" (446). If she never finds Cordelia, then she can never reconcile their friendship.

In the final section of the text, Elaine hints that she may still search for Cordelia even after her retrospective. She muses about the nature of the light from stars and then emphasizes the affirming nature of that brilliance: "It's old light, and there's not much of it. But it's enough to see by" (446). Perhaps this "old light" will help Elaine continue to search for aspects of her past which would help her understand herself and her relationships. Perhaps it will also help her search for Cordelia.

Like Hong Kingston's and Robinson's narrators, Elaine creates a metaphor which describes her role in relation to the scraps of memories and images which so dominate her life:

With a slight push, a slip over some ill-defined edge, I could turn into a bag-lady. It's the same instinct: rummaging in junk heaps, pawing through discards. Looking for something that's been thrown away as useless, but could still be dredged up and reclaimed. The collection of shreds, of space in [the bag-lady's] case, time in mine. (406)

She identifies herself in relation to her act of collecting shreds of time, memories from her past and stories about the
people for whom she cares, and reproducing these shreds in her paintings and narration to complete her sense of self. All three narrators identify their need to complete themselves from bits of other people; they are all knot-makers, knitters, and bagladies, knotting, knitting, and collecting shreds into the knots, quilts, and bags of their selves.

The narrator's collection of fragments and shreds is connected with the idea that they all need another woman's presence in order to ensure their own. While Hong Kingston's narrator looks to her mother's actions and stories (and the actions of the heroines in those stories) for models for her own identity, and Robinson's Ruthie searches first in her mother's life and then in her aunt's for similar models, Elaine must associate her life with Cordelia's in order to feel whole.

Perhaps these narrators reflect a greater tendency among contemporary women to view their lives in relation to other women's lives, to seek models of female traditions that might work, and to reject the idea that a person acts independently of people surrounding her. The narrators reveal that identities are not secluded, self-encapsulated entities; they are formed in connection with other identities; they are influenced by them and thus dependent on them for their continuing sense of self. These relationships constantly remind the narrators (and other women) who they are from the outside, which gives them an awareness of the heteroglossia surrounding their every act. Women may therefore always
remember that alien voices are a part of reality, that they affect the authoritative discourse whenever they speak.
ENDNOTES FOR CHAPTER 3

1. Illustration #1 on page 98 reveals a spatial view of the chronological progression of the narrative.

2. Elaine does re-vision stories and memories by actually adding her own version to the ones she's been told, but only occasionally, and only when concerning herself with people whom she admires or loves. Her brother Stephen is the subject of most of her re-visions, perhaps because, as he grows up, she sees less and less of him but would like to guess at the details of his life since she used to be so familiar with them. When Stephen gets arrested as a graduate student, Elaine narrates his actions in graphic detail, even though she gets only "the bare bones of this [story] from [her] parents over the beef stew" (304). Like our previous narrators, she purposefully lets the reader know that she's creating these details from her own imagination, as if the story is a canvas on which she paints. She also reveals that at least some of her paintings later in her career are radical re-visions, like the above narration. One such painting addresses the image of Elaine's brother once more, but this time she confronts his death. She portrays her brother falling from an airplane, which in fact he did do, but she adds to the scene his appearance of being calm, thus giving him a peaceful death. She adds this calm to her narration of his death as well. Elaine thus relieves her anxiety, as if she changes history by portraying what she would like to have happened. Another of
her "re-visioned" paintings is **Three Muses**, which portrays Mrs. Finestein, Miss Stuart, and Mr. Banerji: childhood acquaintances who seemed to relate to Elaine's problems through their own lives on the margins of Canadian middle-class society. Elaine doesn't feel the need to portray them as they really were, in snapshot reality, because she already understands their significance in her life. She can instead go beyond her memory while portraying them, and give something back to them, perhaps another view of themselves as providers of hope.
KEY:

-- vertical axis denotes chronology of Elaine's life
-- horizontal axis denotes chronology of text's narrative in terms of sections
-- squares denote points in the text where Elaine describes her paintings

Note how the narrative of Elaine's past fills in the "gaps" produced by her paintings.
Epilogue

In the course of writing this thesis, I have defined three areas that would naturally develop out of my study: the issue of mother/daughter relationships and how they influence personal narrative, the ways in which women's autobiography overlaps fictional narrative, and the ways in which these texts assert difference in women's lives. These topics deserve further exploration, for although work has been done in individual areas, no one has yet integrated the associated ideas in respect to women narrating the past.

In her text *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, Marianne Hirsch asserts that although mothers may act as negative models for their contemporary daughters, they nevertheless continue to appear in personal narratives by women, thus becoming more active subjects of narrative itself:

> Post modernist plots . . . are based on the heroine's . . . disidentification from conventional constructions of femininity. Mothers--the ones who . . . did succumb to convention inasmuch as they are mothers--thereby become . . . the primary negative models for the daughter. At the same time, however, mothers and other women increasingly appear in these novels as alternative objects of desire, suggesting other possible subjective economies based in women's relationships. (10-11)

In the texts of this study, mothers do indeed appear as negative models for their daughters in some ways, but they nevertheless influence their daughters more complexly than this theory indicates. For instance, although Hong Kingston's narrator sometimes feels threatened by the conventional expectations which her mother places on her and feels further
confused by her mother's tales which portray conflicting images of women, she also gains from her mother the insight and ability to narrate her life, which helps her in producing a firmer sense of her self and her relationship to her mother. Both Ruthie and Elaine have similar relationships with their mothers and other women who influence their lives. Specific study of the mother/daughter relationships in these texts may reveal much about the influence older generations of women have on contemporary women, as well as how female relationships shape narrative.

The topic of how gender influences the genre of autobiography obviously connects to women narrating the past as well. Sidonie Smith has raised questions concerning the genre of women's autobiography and how it relates to the role of relationship in women's life-narratives:

Theories of difference do not effectively account for the source of woman's self-representation through relationship: Is female preoccupation with the other an essential dynamic of female psychobiography or a culturally conditioned manifestation of the ideology of gender that associates female difference with attentiveness to the other? (18)

Because study of *The Woman Warrior, Housekeeping*, and *Cat's Eye* has revealed the extent to which fictive female characters associate their identities with other women, using the narratives of other women's lives to augment their own, I believe that further exploration of women's autobiography in relation to fictive female developments may produce new theories of women's evolving sense of identity and the narrative of this evolution.
Although the above issues focus our attention on parallels in women's personal narrative as ways to understand women's lives and texts, a more important issue is difference. Only after we acknowledge the disparity in women's narratives will we fully realize that there is no one woman's tale, just as there is no one female experience. For instance, although the narrators of my three texts identify themselves as being away from home at the end of their tales, we cannot draw a conclusion from this fact. All three narrators are in different types of flux: Hong Kingston's narrator is dealing with her mother's expectations of her as they conflict with her own understanding of herself; Ruthie is experiencing an entirely different life in a new mother/daughter relationship; and Elaine, although also traveling and far from home, has experienced some closure to events in her life: she can see herself as successful, as having completed her goals with a specific place to go and loving people to whom she can return. Therefore we cannot define a woman's narrative or her relation to it (or even the author's relation to her narrator) simply by studying some narratives and finding parallels in them; Hong Kingstons' narrator's feeling of identity does not apply to the other narrator's feelings, and neither can theirs apply to hers. The very nature of women's lives and texts as fragments inherently refuses any attempt at forced structure or definition. Furthermore, the fact that each narrator desires to re-vision her own history reveals that forced structures are inadequate; as critics, we should try not to
limit these narratives, since attempts to template these texts with forms and formulas only reinforce and perpetuate the same limitation of patriarchal culture the spurred the initial creative act of these women authors.
Works Cited


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