

TESIS DOCTORAL

Fay Weldon's Gendered Satire: a Neo-Gothic Perspective

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INTRODUCTION:

The Gothic has been and remains necessary to western culture because it allows us in ghostly disguises of blatantly counterfeit fictionality to confront the roots of our beings in sliding multiplicities (from life becoming death to genders mixing to fear becoming pleasure and more) and to define ourselves against these uncanny abjections, while also feeling attracted to them, all of this in a kind of cultural activity that as time passes can keep inventively changing its ghosts of counterfeits to address changing psychological and cultural longings and fears. Jerrold E. Hogle.

At the start of this thesis I would like to point out that a proper understanding of Fay Weldon's work, resultant from applying the right perspective in order to analyse it, would easily belie the generally-held statement that Fay Weldon is a controversial writer in many senses. Although no one can deny her mastery of language and the witty and, on occasion acerbic, satire and rich inventiveness that characterise her work, only her first novels have been adequately valued and analysed, whereas the bulk of her recent production is not infrequently dismissed as light literature on account of its ostensible commercialism. Similarly, she is vaguely revered as one of those innovative writers of feminist fiction of the seventies, despite the fact that most of her recent novels cannot be entirely classified as such. In addition, and to her readers' chagrin she has never received the Booker Prize and this is one of the reasons why many of them are under the impression that there is a conspiracy to underrate her narrative and place it on a par with *chick literature*, to which the girlie covers of some of her recent books have in no small degree contributed. In this regard, Fay Weldon herself explained in the presentation on her novel *Kehua!* in the 2010 Edinburgh Book Festival that people had confessed to being embarrassed when caught reading her books. Plenty of factors may have led to this sad and unjust state of affairs, among others, the lack of appropriate critical approaches to her narrative or her colloquial and down-to-earth style. In the face of this seemingly

absence of proper evaluation of her fiction, my intention in this thesis is to adopt a perspective and frame of reference which may prove adequate so as to analyse a narrative which by its very characteristics may have misleading resonances of pulp. For instance, we need only think about *Kehua!*, her last novel: the appearance in it of a character that has become famous after playing the role of a popular vampire in a series of hit films baffles all our expectations of what good literature should be about. The apparently shocking fact that she has no qualms in gleefully including vampire films in her novels at a time when they have become suggestive of teenage illiteracy must not come as a surprise to us, since it is in complete accordance with the nature of her writings. However, this constant absorption of popular material, the seemingly unscrupulous adaptation of her fiction to market tastes may be accounted for as a question of aesthetics or, more specifically, as I will try to show, as a feature her work shares with the gender it readapts: the Gothic.

When the literary critic Richard Bradford alludes to Fay Weldon in his book *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction*, he mentions that “aside from the general question of whether literature per se is diminished in quality when used as a vehicle for doctrine Weldon’s creations are extravagances testing credulity and battling to avoid self-parody” (Bradford 2007: 121). I will try to contest Richard Bradford’s opinion regarding three unfavourable claims: firstly that Fay Weldon’s novels are “a vehicle for doctrine”, secondly that they constitute mere “extravagances”, and thirdly that they are all alike, thus advancing some of the arguments that I intend to develop in this thesis in order to better understand the nature of Weldon’s fiction. Regarding the last observation, that of repetition, if we were to accept his assessment calling our attention to a certain degree of reiteration in her books, we would *per force* have to consider the

fact that we are referring to an extraordinarily prolific writer who invariably publishes at least one novel per year to the extent that many women have come to associate specific novels by her with a given period of their lives. Fay Weldon has cleverly and perceptively depicted the complex changes in the conditions of women's existence since the end of the sixties, and, furthermore, as I will try to prove, her novels, blatantly displaying scorn and even abhorrence towards the two extremes of behaviour that women and men are culturally driven to adopt: victimism and bullying, have represented a positive influence on many lives. Thereby, I will also underline the therapeutic effect of her work as well as the way her engaged narrators seem to reach out towards the reader, as corresponds to adaptations of a genre in which exacerbated feelings and a penchant for excess clearly dominate over rationality. Hence, despite the fact that her uncompromising irony and incisive satire do not spare women from criticism –we are unmercifully portrayed, “with warts and all”, –several generations of her readers have identified themselves with her heroines' fears and anxieties duly suffering chastisement for their ingenuity and blindness and experiencing relief alongside the protagonists of her stories. Not only do her books offer us a reflection of women's predicaments reduced to laughable material, they also represent a scornful mirror to those ingrained attitudes in women and their male counterparts which spark all kinds of power conflicts and ensuing unfair situations, between them, in the first place. As Ángeles de la Concha explains: “A los –es decir “las”– débiles las disminuye aún más y, así, las envilece y a los fuertes les refuerza su egocentrismo, favoreciendo actitudes de abuso y de explotación” (in María R. García Doncel, 150). On contemplating themselves in the familiar satiric vignettes which constitute the dialogic scenes of her novels, her readers are encouraged to take the moral action required to escape their unfavourable

circumstances. Incidentally, in pursuit of this goal, her narrative has become a filter to the prevalent mores and manners of the society she lives in and through them some five decades of British life have been brilliantly depicted. This close and uninterrupted association with her readers may be behind the decision to award her a CBE in 2001, a public recognition obliquely and somewhat ironically acknowledged in her novel *Chalcot Crescent*, when its narrator, one of Weldon's literary *alter-egos*, refers to herself as a "national treasure" (2009: 16).

The extraordinary circumstances mentioned above contribute to add another dimension to her literature and cannot be ignored when analysing her work. Fay Weldon's literary production has always been about and turned around women, but by no means does that turn her fiction into "a vehicle for doctrine". Actually, we should always bear in mind the fact that her treatment of the topic-woman has varied at a pace with times and circumstances. Indeed, she is an extremely prolific writer; the ratio of her literary output can be as high as two novels per year, and we are talking of a novelist whose first work dates back to the end of the sixties and is still writing. Most of her first novels do not display single heroines as their main characters but rather a *communitas* of women. Accordingly, they are addressed to women in general and deal with women's ordinary life struggles, particularly their conflict-ridden and clashing relations with men, which, established within an overall patriarchal culture, reduce their existence to the condition of a mere fight for survival. Nonetheless, the way her long-spanning output, which covers at least four decades, evolves in the tackling of the subject of women constitutes an accurate account of the impact that the feminist revolution has made on a previously highly chauvinistic society. Edna, the taxi-driver in *The Shrapnel Academy*, for example, rightly ponders about these alterations —though her last thoughts may

appear somewhat deflating and produce certain bathos, subtracting sociological value from her assessments of so serious a subject-matter: “How fast the world changed. One moment women stayed at home and baked steak and kidney pie; the next they drove taxis, published newspapers, and beef was bad for you and pastry worse” (*SA*, 32). Similarly, in *Big Women* we are offered a depiction of the feminist vindications that went into the momentous creation of the successful publishing house Virago —Medusa is its fictive counterpart— only to be eventually sold to a bigger concern with no gender claims. Thus, Weldon’s prolonged literary production becomes a record of the transformations that have taken place in the world of women and in the relationships between the sexes. She chronicles what she sees “moving over time as a landscape and noticing the changes” (*Mantrapped*, 180). This is probably the reason why the war of the sexes could be said to be no longer the main issue in her last novels, where, on account of better circumstances brought about by their brave predecessors, present-day women are no longer required, like the forerunners of feminism, to accomplish the virtually heroic task of changing “the world, because it seemed simpler than changing themselves” (*Big Women*, 346). Therefore, the emphasis in her most recent fiction is put on women’s self-examination and subsequent self-development, which has never ceased to be a constant concern in Weldon’s narrative, as she puts in *The Shrapnel Academy*: “For what is the point of fiction except self-discovery?” (1994,70). In view of this, it is no wonder that in 2006 she published a kind of self-help book, *What Makes Women Happy*, in which generalities about how to lead more rounded and desirable lives intermingle with short stories to illustrate them.

As for Richard Bradford’s designation of Weldon’s creations as “extravagances testing credulity”, we may well reverse the intention of the remark regarding it as

positive and then he would not be so far off the mark. The moment we label Weldon's works as extravagances, we are laying emphasis on the quality of exceeding the boundaries of decorum and probability, and automatically linking them to a genre characterised by its immoderateness: the Gothic. This genre, which invites us on a journey of irrationality, constitutes the perfect vehicle to convey the drastic message underlying Weldon's satire: the urgency for change and regeneration in the face of unfulfilled and incomplete lives. In the second chapter of this dissertation, among other things, I intend to examine some of the main features of this Gothic conception and its origins and I shall argue that Fay Weldon's novels are to be linked to what Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik have described in their book *Gothic and the Comic Turn* as a quite extended humorous tendency already present in the hybrid beginnings of the Gothic genre.

Throughout this work I shall attempt to show how Weldon's feminist concerns are channelled through a very fresh and uncommon medium, how her narrative involves a game of constant refashioning and humorous reproduction of Gothic patterns with satiric intentions and how, accordingly, a conception of life pertaining to a genre whose origins date back to the second half of the eighteenth century is projected over the present-day humdrum lives of discontented housewives in her first works and professional women more or less naive in the later ones, thus creating a "mock-Gothic" effect. Their plights are transformed into labyrinthic structures and their predicaments muffled by the discordant effects produced by the fakery and the repetition of what, were not the Gothic a still performative genre, might become lifeless motifs and empty devices.

Part of the quotation introducing this dissertation¹ encapsulates perfectly well what the Gothic experience entails: “it allows us in ghostly disguises of blatantly counterfeit fictionality to confront the roots of our beings in sliding multiplicities (from life becoming death to genders mixing to fear becoming pleasure and more) and to define ourselves against these uncanny abjections” (2008: 16-17). The terror issuing from the confrontation with that which is outside prescribed limits invariably triggers abrupt and unexpected reactions and the attendant pressing change or remodeling of identity necessary to adapt to newly created conditions. As we will see in the course of this dissertation, the resilience shown by heroines when a transformation of identity is required of them as a means to adjust to altered circumstances, in most cases ultimately provoked by themselves but sometimes forced upon them, constitutes a constant subject in Fay Weldon’s fiction. In this regard, the title of one of Weldon’s most well-known novel, *Praxis*, is meaningful, since, as I will attempt to illustrate, it may be taken as a postulate of what Weldon’s narrative involves, *praxis* as “inseparable from becoming” (Gibson 1999: 103), as constant experimentation and avoidance of clichés. Taking into account that the two most relevant and influential events in the story are taboo: incest and infanticide, we are referring to a novel which, in spite of appearances, can hardly be described as a *Bildungsroman*. It would rather deal with what Andrew Gibson would classify as *entbildung*, the destruction of all that has been previously known and accepted. But, considering the fact that most of Weldon’s heroines are dissatisfied with their existence when the novels begin, this concept of destruction acquires positive connotations. The morbid Gothic subject of physical and psychical disintegration becomes associated with renewal and the attainment of a stronger and happier

¹ It has been taken from the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* written by Jerrold E. Hogle

personality. A good example of this is *Splitting*, where Angelica, the protagonist, is on the verge of dissolution before her positive transformation into a divorced woman. The dismantling of identity in Weldon entails long-needed action, the character's finally taking measures to lead a more desirable life by dint of confronting *abjection* –i.e., that which we have repressed in order to live, that which attracts us but which, were we to embrace it, would entail the disintegration of our being, the loss of those elusive features which make us human. If we change here human for feminine and consider the rigid norms that go into gender formation we would find it liberating to confront this engulfing abyss, to come face to face with that which threatens us with forfeiture of identity/femininity through a game of sliding personalities in a parodic and Postmodern refashioning of the Gothic mode.

As I will try to emphasize, in her first writings, Weldon herself may be said to have come face to face, Gothic-fashion, with a social taboo, i.e., that of the female body and the misconceptions surrounding it, thereby encouraging women's acceptance of their physicality at all times. Accordingly, in underlining the gendered character of Weldon's writings, we should bear in mind the fact that physical essentialism flourishes and is daringly brandished when she broaches the unadorned depiction of women's day-to-day existence. In Weldon's humorous Postmodern reproduction of Gothic patterns women are forced to abandon the sphere of the proper, which consists in a tacit acceptance of the ungovernable character of their bodies, and are subsequently bound to face up to "the horror" that their bodies have come to represent so as to overcome their fears and inhibitions and learn to have control over them. Women's bodies are seen as out-of bounds, not governed by coherence and rationality. They seem to exist in order to contradict their wishes by making their worst nightmares become true in what may

appear sinister tenacious patterns. This can be seen clearly in a frequent image employed in Weldon's novels: that of the maternity-wards riddled with paradoxes and frustrated women. The identification of women with their bodies places them in an asocial status, *abjects* them from culture and society. Paradoxically, physiology is not only avoided, but it rather constitutes a much-relished subject in the descriptions Weldon renders of women: "Their lives are "womb-centred, messy, uncontrollable" (*Remember Me*, 106). In this respect, we should not overlook the way in which in *Puffball* the metaphor in which pen-penis stands for literary creation is replaced with that of gestation. We should also do well to keep in mind the fact that the penis has been wielded as the "sign of difference...as the supreme weapon in the devaluation of the feminine" (Waugh 1989: 53), and in *Puffball* the pen-penis metaphor is reversed and subverted. The whole book is devoted to a pregnancy and the giving of birth in scientific terms as well as in fictive ones. In the novel parallel chapters to those of the main plot deal in a treatise-like way with the workings of a female body during pregnancy, thus, according to Olga Kenyon, giving dignity to the subject (Faulks 1998: 42). These chapters are called "Inside Liffey" and show us the "hidden" side of pregnancy. This celebration of biologism, which may seem "oppressive" to some women, is in line with the rest of Fay Weldon's literary production, and probably a good antidote to combat that same biological determinism which was used for the oppression of the "weaker sex".

Although feminism in Fay Weldon's work responds more to an attitude of survival than to a proselytizing endeavour on her part, the first chapter of this study will be grounded on feminist criticism. We must bear in mind that the fact that she started writing at a time when circumstances were truly unfavourable and hostile for women lies behind the subversive and destabilizing nature of the literature she produced in what she

considers a pre-feminist age. There is no doubt that the moral stance adopted in her novels is one of ambivalence and even of provocation, since attitudes of self-righteousness are mockingly laughed at —after all, “the self-righteous seldom smile” (*Darcy’s Utopia*, 136). Nonetheless, as we will try to show, this does not deter her narrative from offering the reader a distinctly ethical perspective which in her first novels happens to be in accordance with feminist concerns. Whereas traditionally “the power relations inscribed within our literary inheritance reify the encodings of those same power relations in the culture at large” (Showalter 1992: 147), the opposite is intentionally sought in Weldon’s novels. In fact, when we have her opus in hand we are confronted with the unveiling and decoding of those same power relations. Moreover, she unhesitatingly aligns herself with the minority and marginal groups, with those who are “on the wrong side of the swinging green baize door” (*Auto Da Fay*, 169) and particularly, and as mentioned above, with women. In fact, she grew up in New Zealand with her mother, her sister, and her grandmother, and, in this regard, the often quoted statement that during her childhood she thought that the world was peopled by females, may help explain the pivotal role women play in the universe she recreates in her novels. She also tells in *Auto Da Fay* how she shared accommodation with her mother when the latter was working as a servant in a house in London. Both of them were living behind the “green baize door” that separated the prosperous half of humanity from the other half, that of the dispossessed. This is a topic quite recurrent in her fiction, in fact, she wrote the pilot episode of the TV series *Upstairs Downstairs*. Likewise, in *Kehua!*, her last novel so far, Fay Weldon, acting as a writer-narrator, appears working downstairs in the basement of Yatt House surrounded by the ghosts of servants somehow resembling the protagonists of the series.

The division of this thesis in two parts may appear artificial; however, and for practical purposes, in the first chapter I will focus on some of the most obvious aspects of her work, above all, her earliest one. Feminist criticism and those indispensable works specifically focused on Weldon, like Finuala Dowling's *Fay Weldon's fiction* or the one edited by Regina Barreca: *Fay Weldon's Wicked Fictions* will serve as the groundwork for these two first chapters. Dowling, whose book is fundamental when undertaking the analysis of Weldon's narrative, singles out those novels marked by an unquestioned feminist orientation as is the case of the earliest ones and also, for instance, *Splitting*. In her opinion, others like *Trouble* do not reach the same literary standards because of, among other things, authorial exhaustion. Barreca, for her part, insists on Weldon's humour as the weapon which impels women to react and take control of their lives. I found the article by John Glavin "Fay Weldon: Leader of the Frivolous Band" belonging to the second book above mentioned especially interesting insofar as it strongly emphasizes the frivolous aspect of Weldon's narrative, which, as I will try to show, being in accordance with the only possible sustainable ethical attitude one might adopt, is one of the major assets of Fay Weldon's fiction.

Consequently, in "Gendered Satire" I will try to offer an overall view of her narrative in order to see how it keeps track of the relations of power established between heterosexual couples and how, especially, her first works reveal a very unbalanced situation. As can be inferred from reading Weldon's stories, this inequality is of a more elusive character than may superficially appear, since it is caused by attitudes ingrained in men and women whose identities have been constructed according to rigid gender paradigms. In this regard, reading *The Reproduction of Mothering. Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978) by Nancy Chodorow may prove illuminating when

analysing why emotionally dependant female characters cling to estranged and indifferent members of the opposite sex. It is evident that, above all in Weldon's earlier work, we obtain a grim portrait of what has been described as the conventionally established heterosexual sadomasochistic relationship, to which the traditional division of the public and domestic spheres of action between males and females and consequent pre-eminence accorded to the former greatly contributed. We also see rather confined women trying to ineffectually channel all their efforts in a very reduced and secluded domestic environment where their sadistic husbands are bent on making their lives as nightmarish and tortuous as they possibly can. And, even in later novels reflecting times in which the professional circumstances of the sexes have been modified, we can still see feckless and insignificant men abusing women who, in spite of being far superior to them in most matters, let themselves be bullied, as there are still sequels to a historic inequality which has derived in deep-seated habits and conceptions difficult to erase. Males are considered as subjects in their own right while women are reduced to the status of other, to the extent that "take this bimbo off my hands" (*The Cloning of Joanna May*, 12) is the request one of her male characters makes to another. Likewise, it is interesting, when considering how Fay Weldon handles the description of power relations, to bring up the topic of domestic work. As Pilar Hidalgo has remarked: "Weldon introduce la variante de la opresión mediante el trabajo doméstico" (Hidalgo 1995: 183). I would go even further and quote Fay Weldon herself "The domestic was evidently not a fit subject for literature" (*Auto Da Fay*, 199) before she left her imprint on it. However, we must never lose sight of the satirical, and, accordingly, corrective aim of her narrative, which, among other things, may be held as an explanation for her characters' being described as "one-dimensional figures in a feminist cartoon strip"

(Dowling 1998: 18). Her work shows a series of constant features from one book to the next so that characters may seem the end-result of a heap of exaggerations, of deep-rooted attitudes put together and bordering on caricature. Somehow, what we get in Weldon's novels, even if it sometimes may seem grotesque, is exclusively "the product of an uncensored vision" (Barreca 1994: 177) where the sanctioned power relations are humorously dealt with only to be abused. Since a double vision is required in order to grasp the absurd patterns of behaviour produced in the interactions between women and men who follow culturally created conceptions of masculinity and femininity, it is no wonder that irony and satire are employed in order to urge women to desist from the victim status to which they tend to adhere.

Another prominent feature in Weldon's narrative that I will underline in this first chapter is that of her heroines' constant change of identities, which, considering women's social position of invisibility comes quite naturally to them. In this regard, the title of the song "The Lady is a Tramp" could be applied to some of her protagonists insofar as their lives stop being ruled by rigid norms. In fact, Fay Weldon accompanied the photographs of a book called *The Lady is a Tramp: Portrait of Catherine Bailey* with brief written commentaries describing different aspects of the model and photographer's wife under headings like nudes, fashion, pregnancy or beauty. Women's traditional forced lack of identity at most levels is the cue Weldon takes in order to endow her heroines with a sweeping display of identities. It is quite obvious that the dominant concept of indivisible humanist subjectivity, which in Weldon's novels is basically reinterpreted as an autonomous white male ruthlessly holding sway over a small household or, rather, over the woman who may be identified with it, is called into question in Fay Weldon's works in several different ways. In her first novels, for

example, the main characters are a group of women, thus doing away with just one protagonist standing for a single-unified identity. Likewise, in her subsequent fiction many of her female main characters are name-shifting and, consequently, identity-shifting women in the long-established tradition of females who change their name according to their marital status. This is one of the main topics in *The Bulgari Connection*, and we also get an inkling of how this works in Fay Weldon's autobiography, *Auto Da Fay*, in which she reflects about the different identities she has adopted in the course of her life. She has been known as Franklin Birkinshaw, Fay Franklin Davies, and Fay Bateman before finally becoming Fay Weldon. In a somewhat similar way, Ruth in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* goes through the following identities: Vesta Rose, Polly Patch, Georgiana Tilling, and Marlene Hunter only to end, with the help of some surgery, as Mary Fisher. Likewise, we find Sandra Harris, Sandra Sorenson, or Starlady Sara in *Leader of the Band*, SS, as she calls herself, because she is the daughter of an SS official – every small detail is inextricably connected to the whole in Fay Weldon's novels in what I will describe as her oppressive mock maze-like plots–. However, this subversion of the concept of undivided subjectivity, this deconstruction of “the master narrative of the Subject” (Becker 1999: 7), as we shall see, is even more overt and explicit in novels like *Splitting* or in *The Cloning of Joanna May*, which reflect Weldon's interest in current issues and, in the latter case, in reproductive techniques. Another factor which should also call our attention in Weldon's novels is the proliferation of witches –like Mabs in *Puffball* –, devils or evil characters –like Ruth in *The life and loves of a She-Devil*–, or angel-like characters mockingly described in poetic terms –like Mary Fisher in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* or Lilith in *Remember Me*. And if we do not want to proceed any further we can explain away these

quaint presences as a mischievous exercise of satire aimed at playing havoc with stereotypes.

Nonetheless, a description of Weldon's novels in terms of gendered-satire, even if it can be done, as I will try to do in the first chapter of this dissertation, will be clearly lacking in depth. We must consider that the fact that a novel invariably becomes subversive when satire is involved may prove misleading when working with Weldon's writings, since satire alone might account for the constant exercise of demystification they entail. However, it would not suffice to clarify the noticeable degree of stridency that characterises them. Thereby, it is imperative that we introduce an appropriate method for the analysis of her fiction; otherwise we will inevitably come across a dead-end and overlook the function of some of the main features of Weldon's narrative. Besides, we will inevitably fail to entirely appreciate the essence of that seemingly frivolous spirit based on an attitude of moral ambivalence pervading the structure and the narrative techniques of her fictions but, paradoxically, enriching them with ethical values. On the other hand, if we describe Weldon's works as Gothic parodies, that is, parodically adopting the clichés and conceptions of this genre, we will establish a new broader ground to sensibly justify, for instance, the constant changing of identity of Weldon's heroines or the introduction in her novels of these hyperbolically artificial characters with the aim of contesting the narrow conceptions which contribute to gender formation. As I shall argue throughout the development of this thesis, the only plausible method of analysis when dealing with Weldon's narrative is its inclusion in a Gothic framework. We must, after all, bear in mind that the Gothic has, after a long tradition, become an appropriate vehicle to handle all those restrictions pertaining to a construction of personality based on gender parameters.

In line with this, Avril Horner, when referring to Weldon and Angela Carter's protagonists, speaks of "heroines within Gothic works which offer a [...] robust treatment of social constructions of identity" (in Mulvey-Roberts 2009, 183). The constant mutation of personality experienced by Weldon's heroines harmonizes with an intentional and unrelenting deconstruction of the ideal of femininity, which has held women captive throughout the centuries, in an attempt to free it from those injunctions hindering women's proper development as human beings. Thereby, it becomes evident why an inclination towards biologism is favoured in Weldon's narrative, why it becomes a vehicle to extol women's unruly bodies instead of suppressing and veiling any mention about their ungovernable nature, as has traditionally been the case. In *The Lives and Loves of a She-Devil* we are witness to the painful surgical operations to which Ruth has to submit in order to have a proper feminine body, to the extent that her case is compared to that of Christian Andersen's little mermaid who changes her tail for legs: "and after that every step she took was like stepping on knives" (1983, 159), since the latter also involves an excruciating adaptation to a medium completely alien to her. This proves the distressful and unnatural character of the inscription of the values of femininity on female bodies. In the awakening experience entailed in Weldon's works women are required to reincorporate once more all those constitutive aspects of their beings previously rejected or, in Kristeva's terms, *abjected* during a strict process of personality formation artificially contrived in order that they might accommodate to approved patterns of what has historically been considered proper womanhood. In Weldon's novels a reversed course of action is undertaken, among other things, protagonists will have to come to terms with those bodies which are in blatant contradiction to the rigid norms that rule femininity, thus, easily placing them out of the

bounds of the socially sanctioned. In this regard, in *The Fat Women's Joke* (1967) Esther, the first of Weldon's heroines, may be said to commit a kind of physical suicide the moment she focuses her whole attention on her body urges. For a time she is rebelliously bent on gorging all kinds of food, thus contravening the rules of contention and restriction governing femininity. She adopts this defiant attitude on account of her husband's infidelities and, paradoxically, she wins him back without losing her dignity, in spite of her rivals' stylised and disciplined bodies. This is an extreme instance, nonetheless, the unfolding of Weldon's novels is invariably accompanied with intimations of the psychical and physical disintegration threatening the characters if they trespass the limits of accepted behaviour only to be denied when they become strengthened by this very activity. It is significant that *Rebecca West*, Fay Weldon's biographical portrait of the successful writer and stateswomen, is just centered on and tries to evoke the episode of Rebecca West's youth in which she gives birth to an illegitimate son by H.G. Wells. This incident of social disgrace depicted as a moment of disorientation amounting to Gothic terror triggered by the mysteries of maternity is presented as a decisive turning point in the career of this famous novelist in a very particular recreation of her life.

Susanne Becker in *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions* speaks of a neo-Gothic literary trend and offers "Fay Weldon's comic-ironic bestsellers" as a British example of this new current. Consequently, the second chapter of this study is fully devoted to analyzing Fay Weldon's narrative, following Gothic parameters, as well as to showing how this perspective enhances her work. I shall insist during the course of this dissertation on the idea that Weldon's novels represent a constant remodelling and reworking of the Gothic mode, a fact that, paradoxically, has not been emphasized

enough. Only the assumption of their parodic vein can help clarify the harsh and flashy tenor of, what otherwise would be, for instance, the quizzical and enigmatic last chapters of *Splitting*, a novel in which a loose correspondence is established between the divided personality of the protagonist and Lodestar House, the “Tuscan-Gothic” building filled with rooms representing “different aspect[s] of the self” (1996: 260) and turned into a brothel towards the end of the book. Lodestar House, with its garish decorations based on a combination of “erotica and strong colours” (*Splitting*, 318), becomes the perfect backdrop for transgressive sexual adventures allowing individuals to slide unobtrusively in a genderless flowing continuum in which the divisions established on account of their sex no longer hold. Furthermore, since strange presences like Bedouins, Communards, Peter Pan’s Tinkerbell, all of them figments of the imagination of a character, join the spirits of previous residents of Lodestar House in the activity of voyeuristically witnessing the sexual prowess of the guests and clients of the new enterprise, the boundaries between life and death and between reality and fiction are trespassed. Interestingly enough, the dismantling of the personality of the protagonist sustained by the fantastic medium offered by the suppression and opening of socially created barriers runs parallel to the deconstruction of identity according to gender criteria. This constant tactic of deconstruction of personality and the existence of the odd counterfeit witch and the comic ghosts are contextualized the moment we accept the fact that Weldon’s works entail a parodic appropriation of Gothic motifs. Once we accept this assumption, the intertextual references to *Frankenstein* in *The Lives and Loves of a She-Devil* or the allusions to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in *The Bulgari Connection* are readily accounted for; so does the release of tension on the part of the reader after going through experiences amounting to terror. These and some other features can only make sense

taking into consideration the ascendancy of the Gothic over Weldon's fiction.

Thereby, in the second chapter entitled "Under the Spell of the Gothic", which is the core of this thesis, I will set out to prove that the label of black-comedies with a satiric bent usually assigned to Weldon's work, though appropriate, does not entirely do justice to her narrative. Accordingly, emphasis will be made on those distinctive aspects which can only be clarified if her fictions are classified as Gothic parodies like, for instance, the lack of imposition of closed moral principles, a feature in Weldon's satiric fiction which impresses it with its characteristic –and sometimes misinterpreted– frivolous stamp. Actually, one of the reasons for this present-day Gothic revival may be attributed to the fact that the ambivalent and relative values prevalent in the moral universe of the Postmodern era coincide with those approved by the Gothic mindset which, following Claire Colebrook in *Irony* (2008), have their origins in a Western epistemology ultimately grounded in irony. *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel* (1999) by Andrew Gibson will also constitute a referential book in this chapter. He evaluates the ethical richness proceeding from the disruptive structures of Modern and Postmodern novels. As I hope to demonstrate, this compositional element of dissolution finds its equivalent in Weldon's labyrinthine plots. The figure of the double which goes hand in hand with Gothic fiction, as shown by studies like *Narciso y el Doble en la Literatura Fantástica Victoriana* (1998) by Antonio Ballesteros or Karl Miller's *Doubles: Studies in Literary History* (1987), for instance, apart from giving another dimension to the image of the twin sisters in the short story of "Moon Over Minneapolis" –if we are to contribute with an example of a very obvious nature– it helps explain the constant interplay of doubles characteristic of Weldon's fiction.

Similarly, I shall insist in this work on how this Gothic lack of limits which is

behind the constant multiplication of personalities pervades at all the levels of Weldon's work. For example, Weldon employs women's proverbial pliability, their traditional indefiniteness, for a constant reformulation of personality in line with a creative ethics based not on set values but in a continuous process of active self-formation. Likewise, the constant border-crossing of the Gothic genre affords her poetic licence to freely and indiscriminately roam from reality to fiction to the extent that in *Kehua!*, she herself appears as the writer working from her basement. However even if Weldon is introduced explicitly and unequivocally as the writer in *Kehua!*, Beverly, another of the main characters, may also be said to be a reflection of her, thus constituting one of the instances of how the image of the double, or of multiple personality, is also applied to the depiction of narrators in an "unending mirroring process". This occurrence, repeated in different ways in her latter novels, conforms to the Postmodern taste of assimilating representation to an activity of deferral and postponement from whence no definite meaning can ultimately be obtained. This constant evasiveness of definite meanings resulting from a refusal to hold on to moral determinacies at the expense of experience, which constitutes, as I will try to show in this dissertation, the moral stance adopted in Weldon's novels, is the only feasible and sustainable ethical attitude to adopt. It is based on embracing the erratic and contingent and on taking action in the face of injustices in agreement with a fertile conception of ethics ultimately founded on paradoxes.

In sections of the third chapter I will analyse and look closely at some of Weldon's novels from a Gothic perspective. Adopting Weldon's parodic subscription to what Miller would describe as "the Gothic account of human nature" (Miller 1987: 426) as a working hypothesis to examine her narrative will shed light on some intriguing aspects of her fiction like the nature of the relations between some narrators and the

protagonists of their novels or, even, on Weldon's forced happy endings. As we know, the strong element of realism in Weldon is as noticeable –according to John Braine “her attention to detail” is remarkable (Faulks 1998: 6)– as it is misleading. I shall insist once more that, although her books may be taken as a catalogue of mores and manners and its variations according to the different decades, it would be unwise to measure Weldon's narrative following the criteria of realist texts. Codes that are relevant to them would be out of place in reference to her fiction. The fantastic element, or, invariably, a very kitsch interpretation of it purposely smacking of fakery, is conjured up on occasions in order to emphasize the crushing environment provoked, above all, by the insurmountable strains common in heterosexual relationships. These frictions are triggered, among other factors, by the disparate character of women and men's upbringings. In addition to it, the usual power structure is riddled with complexities: it is not only men who are to be found at fault for this state of affairs; women have some involvement in it as well. “While women adapt, and adapt and adapt, men will continue to get away with everything” she has Sonia say in her novel *The Heart of the Country* (1987: 186). Still more interesting is the way in which women's assimilation of their inferior social status lies at the heart of the malevolent rivalries and disputes sparked among themselves and which also contribute to intensify the ludicrously oppressive atmosphere that finds its equivalent in Weldon's absurd labyrinthine plots. In this regard, we are made aware that if the atmosphere recreated in her novels is asphyxiating, it is preposterously so –the inescapable mazes enclosing the heroines are just a fragile equilibrium of hypothetical *What ifs* which Weldon has avowedly and metafictionally recognised to employ in the narrative process–. The seemingly fictional acceptance of the matter recounted is deceiving and, under no circumstances, to be taken at face value.

Through this approach of use and abuse, of installing and withdrawal the readers obtain enlightenment through laughter at a pace with Weldon's heroines. One of these protagonists-cum-narrators –and the significance of this must not escape us– whose progress from a self-deceived existence into a freer and more fulfilled one the reader follows is Chloe in *Female Friends*. We see her finally acquiring the moral strength necessary to disengage herself from the arbitrary and absurd demands imposed upon her by her husband and which constitute a hindrance to a more satisfactory life. By the end of the book, she is finally fully conscious of the magnitude of her husband's stupidity and, above all, hers on account of having acquiescingly submitted to his every whim. She is eventually at one with the rest of the world, with, among others, her sisters-in-law who had laughed at her husband's pretentious film in contrast with her, who had repressed any reaction remotely resembling disrespect. At the climax of the novel she wonders employing the third person for the sake of detachment: "Is she laughing at him?" and the conclusion she reaches is "Yes, she is" (*Female Friends*, 205). In serious Gothic literature this would correspond to the moment of insight, of the "negative sublime," that is, of realisation triggered by horror through which the unbridgeable gap between things as they incomprehensibly are and things as they should be is finally fathomed. However, in *Female Friends*, as in most of Weldon's novels, recognition is forced upon the characters when they eventually manage to comprehend that their situation is absurd beyond limits. The discovery that Chloe has been a willing victim of her husband all along signals the moment of convergence between her two selves: Chloe, the focalizer of a story of unnecessary endurance in the face of her husband's bullying behaviour, is at last able to see things on the same terms as Chloe, the ironical retrospective narrator. Chloe, the raconteur, has been echoing her previous self in order

to distance herself from the horror she has so ridiculously submitted to. This, like most of Weldon's novels, is a tale of self-revelation and experimentation in which the heroine has to cross borders, has to transcend herself in order to reach a fulfilling life.

Considering that in the Gothic genre the sorting out of internal and external obstacles is all-important, those who do not succeed, those who have not been capable of moral action in life, as I will try to show, will reappear as ghosts, as in the case of Madeleine in *Remember Me*, Wendy in *Darcy's Utopia* or Audrey in *Growing Rich*. Likewise, unresolved conflicts may surface as psychosomatic illnesses in some of Weldon's female characters. They are sometimes surmounted by the agency of a play of doubles or, in some cases, a proliferation of identities. For instance, Jocelyn, the mysterious narrator of *Down Among the Women*, suffers from general clumsiness, but the reader is not aware of who she is until the book comes to an end. In this regard, we might be referring here to another clear case of duality: the former Jocelyn, the one who is too ashamed to acknowledge herself, and the second happy one who has finally left her unpleasant husband, met a different nice man, recovered from her clumsiness and, by the end of the novel, willingly confesses to her identity. This proves to be one of the instances showing that the existence of narrators in Weldon is in consonance with the idea of non-stop experimentation and of persistent becoming. In this regard, it has been said of the Gothic that it is an "affective genre" (Becker 1999: 8) and in Weldon's remodeling of this genre the narrators respond to this emotional pattern. They feelingly address themselves to the reader, but, most importantly, far from being detached observers of what goes on around them, they are victims to their milieu and, let us bear in mind that being a victim is a characteristic proclivity of characters in the Gothic mode. Three clear examples of these committed raconteurs are Maya, in *The President's*

Child, who is blind because of her husband's unfaithfulness; the narrator in *Growing Rich*, Hattie, who has become a "cripple" after a bungled abortion; and Sonia, the histrionic narrator in *The Heart of the Country*, who writes from a psychiatric ward. We could say that they constitute the heroines' sensitive *alter egos*, their uncanny extensions. In *The Heart of the Country*, Sonia, an officially declared insane woman, plays the role of conscience to Natalie, a pretty deserted wife. In *The President's Child* the narrator's blindness is a physical reflection of the one which figuratively afflicts the heroine, incapable, as she is, of realizing that her four-year-long husband is a politically appointed secret agent who has been spying on her and her son from, obviously, a very close range. As for Hattie, the disabled narrator in *Growing Rich*, she reflects and stands for the inaction of the forsaken place which Carmen inhabits and which hampers the latter's attempts at excelling. Only when the heroines finally manage to solve their conflict, do the raconteurs recover their health.

Along these same lines, another of the ideas I will propose in the course of this dissertation is that if we classify Weldon's fiction as intentional remodelings of the Gothic genre the black humor that runs through her novels and which, in its aggressiveness, represents an admonitory signal that self-assertion and self-defence are pressingly required on the part of the heroines, can be considered tantamount to the luridness employed in Gothic works to arouse intense emotional response from their readers. Similarly, from the following reference by Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik as to the emergence of the Gothic novel we can infer its penchant for the sensational: "It is perhaps no coincidence that the Gothic novel emerges at about the same time as opera, melodrama and the circus, since all evoke a highly emotional response to the modern world which includes laughter as well as fear" (in Mulvey-Roberts 2009: 109). The

Gothic novel, originally conceived as spectacle and diversion, represented a divergence from classicism, from the mainstream highbrow culture. Similarly, Fay Weldon in her parodic neo-Gothic reproductions has never avoided its commercial aspect and its initial spirit of entertainment still lingers in novels characterized by their slight inclination towards the kitsch, their bizarre and theatrical endings and even their topsy-turvy plots. Weldon's garishly designed novels, the extreme extravagance of her plots and their sought-for dose of sensationalism are a perfect vehicle to provoke strong emotions in its readers. The neo-Gothic fictive representations Weldon offers us are not stylized and charged with symbolism, but rather consist of Gothic motifs superimposed over a reality towards which the reader must not remain impassive. The sharp contrast between the mundane character of the topics treated in Weldon's novels and the grandiloquent genre she applies to them creates a style which Ángeles de la Concha rightly describes as strident. For instance, in *Trouble* a cosmogony anachronically divided between heaven and hell is taken as a starting-point to describe Annete's initial blissful and Eden-like relation with Spicer and her subsequent disappointment or fall from grace, thus parodying the techniques of chiaroscuro of a literature dominantly coloured by feelings.

Paradoxically, notwithstanding the fact that Weldon's plots are highly diverting, no one could deny their subversive and disruptive nature. In the development of her novels commonplace subjects concerning women like births, children, love, relationships, female friendship and rivalries, jealousy, divorce, alimony, first wives, second marriages, and so on and so forth acquire sombre overtones and become a source of terror the moment they appear devoid of their familiarity. Any of these events or situations regarded as commonplace in a woman's life, turn sour and uncanny all of a sudden. Out of the blue, we are plunged from seemingly neutral and safe territory into

hidden unexpected psychological depths. We see heroines in undesirable plights because all those elements of themselves which they have *abjected* or suppressed in the course of their lives come back to torment them. However, contrary to what might be expected, the treatment of so grim a subject-matter is highly humorous. As soon as we open one of Fay Weldon's novels, we are in for a spell of amusement in which our emotions will be played upon. We are introduced into "a Bridge Over Tacoma Narrows situation [where] the bridge is about to shake itself to pieces" (*The Bulgari Connection*, 99), and everything is turned upside-down without winking and without pity. Consequently, the symbolic order, based on socially sanctioned values, is overturned and suspended for a while. To this end realism is discarded and humour gains the upper hand, thus contributing to help women recover, in the words of Barreca, the "genuine centers of pleasure" from which, incidentally, they have been driven too far (Barreca 1994: 173). In the face of incongruity, Weldon's heroines' unfulfilled and repressed desires are given full vent allowing them to soar fancifully above the obstacles hindering their way to success, a gratifying experience which the readers vicariously share with them. To describe Weldon's plots, I would use the sentence at the beginning of *Life Force*, which, recurs in her work with slight variations, "Nothing happens and nothing happens, and then everything happens".

In this regard, these fantastic flights in the face of a constrictive environment play an important role in the literature of duality or the divided mind. Similarly, it would be interesting to consider the fact that this kind of writing is associated with a definite "openness to the world" since the Romantic age (Miller 1987: 311), which might also have to do with the enthusiastic reception of its readers in accordance with the nature of an art which is in constant transaction with the full array of banalities and mundane

matters which cram everyday existence —Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* greatly influenced by and influencing Gothic novels of its time constitutes an example of the fluid interaction established between Gothic literature and, for instance, political events since the inception of the genre. Keeping abreast of current matters is all important for Weldon and I will try to analyse the ethical import of the effect obtained out of interweaving reality and fiction, which may be basically interpreted as the cracks produced in a closed fictional system by the irruption of authentic facts in her narrative, thus emphasizing the artificial and parodic character of her writings. A mimetic representation of reality is thereby precluded by means of an explosive mixture of fact and fiction steeped in sensationalism and luridness. Incidentally, that Fay Weldon revels in the notion of fact imbricated in fiction and that this might even be a two-way-street may be inferred from an anecdote told in *Kehua!*, and which she has mentioned on other occasions. Remembering the negative reaction of her editors to the apparently preposterous episode of *The Hearts and Lives of Men* in which a three-year-old girl who was sitting at the wing of the plane is one of the only two survivors in an air crash, she mentions how a couple of months later a similar incident happened in real life, just as had just taken place many years on when writing that anecdote in *Kehua!*.

This effect of a connection between fiction and reality is mainly achieved in Weldon's earliest novels through the agency of narrators. In works of the sort of *The Shrapnel Academy*, *The Hearts and Lives of Men*, or *The Heart of the Country*, characterised by obtrusive narrators, as corresponds to a literature with satiric leanings, the "garrulous" raconteurs as often as not address the readers with complicity and

engage in a dialogue with them, it goes without saying that her implied reader² is mostly women –as the narrative voice overtly recognises in *The Hearts and Lives of Men* with comments like “as I am sure many of you know to your cost” (*The Hearts and Lives of Men*, 133). Narrators can become bossy: “Reader, do not skip” (*The Shrapnel Academy*: 44); intrusive to the extent of anticipating the end of the novel: “There! you know already this story is to have a happy ending. But it’s Christmastime. Why not?” (*The Hearts and Lives of Men*, 5); opinionated: “leaving Natalie Harris well and truly in the shit.” (*The Heart of the Country*, 1); or they may tease us humorously: “Your author, genteel reader, is not saying good or bad. Your author is just remarking” (*The Shrapnel Academy*, 92). A deconstruction of the idea of the narrator may be said to be effected in some early novels like *The Hearts and Lives of Men* or *The Shrapnel Academy* insofar as no real presence is purported to be behind its voice. However, as I will try to show in this work, this very activity is transformed in later novels into a game of playful deconstruction of the entity of the author, which in those cases may be interpreted as what according to Miller is a characteristic feature of the literature of the *doppelgänger* (1987: 99). In these latter books, which constitute metafictional exercises of “live writing”, and in the case of *Mantrapped* also “life-writing”, the fusion between reality and fiction is superbly achieved. *Mantrapped*, the novel just mentioned, shows episodes of Weldon’s autobiography intertwined with those belonging to the hilariously captivating story she is in the process of creating. Similarly, in *She May not Leave* the reader is mischievously cheated in what could be described as a game of trickery and chicanery through the intervention of the narrator and her sister, who constitute Fay Weldon’s fictive *alter-egos*.

² Term coined by Wolfgang Iser in his influential work *The Implied Reader* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP. 1974

As for the range of topics she chooses, they seem to be more on the side of reality than on that of fiction to the extent that they sometimes resemble the practical and present-day issues of a woman's magazine. In this regard, a cautious alertness to women's domestic concerns can be seen, for example, in *Darcy's Utopia* when the thoughts of Valerie, the main narrator, turn around the next piece she might write for *Aura*, the magazine in which she is a reporter: "It is astonishing how little a trusting wife can claim as her own should a marriage disintegrate" (*DU*, 198). As in any woman's magazine worthy of that name, there is no skipping advice on sentimental matters, for example, when we are told that "men feel trapped and uneasy if the word 'love' is mentioned especially in proximity to any other word suggesting permanence" (*Darcy's Utopia*, 42). Her novels are also punctuated with fairy-tale motifs which, without further analysis, seem to be there as isolated repositories of the Gothic genre but without any particular function: "You become wicked witch to snow white" (*Rhode Island Blues*, 188), "Who's been sleeping in my bed?" (*RIB*, 312), "like a beanstalk in Jack's morning garden" (*Growing Rich*, 195). All in all, her informal language constitutes a witty vehicle to establish immediate and easy contact with the reader and may seem extremely deceiving when trying to ascribe her novels to a literary trend adapting present-day-fiction to the canons of a genre of long-lasting tradition. As a matter of fact, she started her novelistic career as a woman juggling for time to write following the deadline of one novel per year set by her publishers amid the tasks of child-care, work, and domestic chores. Hence, there are some very conspicuous factors in Weldon fiction which may make us wrongly suspect it of a certain lack of literariness. But the truth is she has a superb ear for colloquial speech and her novels burst with the language we hear on streets, homes, schools to the point that it may be a diverting factor when trying to prove

that we are dealing with a narrative of considerable literary value. She herself plays with the hypothesis that she never gets literary prizes “because of the shortness of [her] sentences, which makes the books appear to lack gravitas” (*Auto Da Fay*, 174).

This insistence on practicality and on what may seem a faithful realist and mimetic description of life may have led critics like Richard Bradford to comment that “her readers from the 1970s onwards would recognize in her fiction versions of the world in which they lived” (2007:119-120). If we did not take the Gothic element into account, we could take Richard’s Bradford assertion at face value. Nonetheless, as I will argue throughout the second chapter of this thesis, the seemingly solid attachment to reality in her works is as misleading as the apparent materiality of those objects that suddenly become impressed with uncanny meanings obtained from the unpleasant experiences occurring in the course of her stories. And, even if her choice of subjects is as mundane as that of a slick women’s magazine –we are told in *Rebecca West* about the importance of publications like *Cosmopolitan* and *Women’s Own* to contribute to enlighten modern women about vital questions, in short, “to help you know what’s what” (1985: 36)– their literary treatment transcends that of the glossies. The current issues which bestow an up-to-date aspect to her yearly publications are not so much employed to obtain a glib depiction of women’s life as a to articulate the concerns to which they are prey. Hence, we must be aware of the extent to which the common ordinary events filling the lives of her protagonists are magnified and of how they acquire the inordinate proportions which a given state of mind confers them. Contrary to all appearances, in Weldon’s fiction we are not so much dealing with outer circumstances as with inner conflicts triggered by them or, vice versa, with a reality obscured by inner strife, that is to say, with “What looms large in the life” (*Auto Da Fay*,

357). Correspondingly, her labyrinthine plots do not respond to a literary mimetic attempt, but, rather, with their surfeit of absurdities they contribute to entrap Weldon's heroines in a ridiculous muddle from whence they are to escape in one piece. Thereby, the climax of these novels is produced when the protagonists realise that their imprisonment is ultimately psychological and, in addition, of an absurd nature. That is the cue to make them react and overcome all those old demons haunting their existence and limiting their experience. In this regard, her novels represent an exorcising experience which Weldon's readers vicariously share with their protagonists. We can also refer to the constant corrective and, in some way, soothing element reflected in a style filled with ingenious aphorisms as corresponds to a narrative contrived to modify women's insidious and inveterate patterns of conduct by means of confronting their ingrained fears and deep-seated misconceptions. As a female character urges another woman in "The Bottom Line and the Sharp End": "Nothing lasts, so you'd better have as much as you can, while you can. And not what they think of you, but what you think of them" (*Polaris and Other Stories*, 122). The narrator in Rhode Island also muses: "things turned out never as good as you hoped, never as bad as you feared" (2000a: 183). Although this last maxim is probably not the best example to illustrate what I am driving at, we can realise how directly she addresses the reader, with whom she sort of strikes up a friendship. In this regard, Regina Barreca mentions that, due to the dialogic character of her novels, Fay Weldon's "readings to crowds of several hundred will result in half that number lining up to speak to her" (Barreca 1994: 3). Thereby, Weldon's works with their accessible themes and language incorporate techniques aimed at initiating a very close contact with their readers, invariably provoking strong reactions in them, and making the reception of her novels all-important. If we emphasize this factor

of the anticipated response on the part of her readers as an integral element in the nature of her novels, we will be still linking them to a genre which from its very inception has purposely sought the approval of its public. We need only think about Mrs. Radcliffe, who was “the most popular and best-paid novelist of the eighteenth century” (Moers 1977: 91) or the subsequent Gothic booms, which have made this genre a marketing phenomenon.

Following the criteria set by Gothic texts, I shall also argue in this thesis that Weldon’s narrative cannot be defined as completely revolutionary. If we were to look for an explanation it would lie in the fact that Weldon’s novels represent reformulations of a genre which in its fondness for ambivalences and relative values is akin to the Postmodern mindset. The characteristic narrative texture of Gothic fiction based on a process of continuous conjunction of polarities, of extremes left “sharply before us and far less resolved than the conventional endings in most of these works claim them to be” (Hogle 2002: 13) is a feature which suitably describes Weldon’s work as well. The unfolding of a novel like *Trouble* which offers the reader the gradual and painful process of disintegration of a heterosexual couple amid psychological and physical torture and the abrupt interruption of a pregnancy contrasts sharply with a denouement in which order is restored by replacing the old unsatisfactory relationship with a new fortunate one as a result of which the protagonist is pregnant once again. Understandably, Julie Nash speaks of the characteristic “‘forced’ happy endings” (in Barreca 1994: 102) in Weldon’s fictions. In this novel, in particular, it may seem that, with the help of the merciless and unrelenting sense of humour we have been made to delve into the untoward, to enter a shaky terrain in which the prevalence of heterosexual relationships in the sanctioned social order has been contested only to be anticlimactically reinstituted.

However, since one of the main concerns of Weldon's narrative is to urge its readers to take moral action against all odds, to help them cope with their anxieties, a sense of fairness and the solution of conflicts play an important role in it. Thereby, with their assimilation of all that is Gothic, Weldon's fiction reproduces a vacillation between revolutionary and conservative poses eventually opting out for seemingly frivolous and easy solutions. It must be noticed, though, that sticking to a radical attitude would be an impoverishing view and would in the end lead to death and dissolution, which are, after all, against the grain of her optimistic and constructive, albeit never complacent, novels. In this regard, it would be interesting to apply to Weldon's work those characteristics that Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik assign to the comic tendency of the Gothic genre referring to the fact that it "does not just function as relief and it is not only negatively deconstructive; it is also dialogic, opening up new possibilities" (2005:166). In Weldon's tales of growth Weldon's heroines can at last cope with their lives when they finally adopt an attitude of nonchalance and blitheness born out of an acceptance of the complex and incongruous nature of their surroundings. Awareness is gained through humour in her novels and her readers would be much the wiser if they could learn to mimic her heroines and, following their example, take things in their stride. There is a note of resignation in Sophia at the end of *Rhode Island Blues* when she learns that her boyfriend's official fiancée, a well-known American actress has turned lesbian for the duration of a year. Sophia seems to strike the right attitude: "It wasn't too bad. A year. One can't expect fate to deliver perfect packages" (2000a: 323).

Therefore, my aim in this thesis will be to prove that the literary value of Fay Weldon's novels goes far beyond that of the mere comic bestsellers they are frequently purported to be. I shall argue that by means of adopting an adequate framework with the

purpose of analysing her narrative very fruitful results will be obtained. Her narrative, once examined under the right perspective and in all its singularity, can no longer be easily discarded as kitsch or extravagant. By categorising her novels as readaptations of the still performative Gothic genre in its comic turn, features like their humour –adapted for satiric purposes–, their ethical values, their stylistic strategies and, above all, their literary quality may be appreciated in all their richness.

1. FAY WELDON'S GENDERED SATIRE: POWER RELATIONS AND IDENTITY

1.1 THE ASYMMETRICAL CHARACTER OF HETEROSEXUAL RELATIONS

It would be unwise of us to discard the following Nora-through-Marion's eyes comment as flippant: "Marriage is easy when the man is taller than the woman: it makes the balance of power, usually in the man's favour, seem a more natural state of affairs" (*Life Force*: 1). The greater height of man in a heterosexual couple could be as good a reason as any to account for that "natural state of affairs" –a normalised sado-masochistic relationship– in which men hold the ruling subject-position of a relationship whereas women are reduced to the position of the other. As such, they acquire object status and subsequently they are entitled to fewer or no rights. After all, we must not forget that "because relationships between men and women are essentially political, they involve power and dominance" (Showalter 1992: 204). The political, and therefore, constructed nature of this relationship, is the core of Weldon's novels.

It could be said that the atavistic organisation of gender characterised by the unbridgeable gap between the public-masculine and the domestic-female spheres still prevails in most societies. This tenacious social pattern, as Chodorow tries to prove, is endlessly perpetuated by the fact that the task of mothering and, by mothering it is meant to be a child's primary caretaker, invariably befalls on women. We also should bear in mind the fact that no special skills or qualifications are required to look after small infants and the consequent lack of social prestige attached to this exacting and mundane

enterprise. Chodorow also shows how this single-handedly mothering by women affects the development of children in a highly significant way. In a nuclear family where the father is constantly absent and where children are reared by women, boys are bound to come across major obstacles in order to fulfil the goals that are to be achieved by the end of the oedipal period, that is, by the age of six or seven. The boy, deprived of affective ties with the father, will have had to suppress his strong pre-oedipal attachment to his mother and adopt the masculine role befitting him without help or support. To detach themselves from the all-encompassing bonds which connect them to their mothers, sons “must engage in defensive assertion of ego boundaries and repression of emotional needs” (Chodorow 1978: 212). Likewise, for the sake of reaching this elusive masculinity they will have to resort to the devaluation and disparagement of the feminine and all that pertains to it. This could help explain why, as we are going to see, men feel entitled to exert control, rule over, and consider meaningless all things feminine. Likewise, whereas men emerge from the oedipal period with their emotional and relational capacities curtailed, these same capacities are a salient feature in women. By the end of the oedipal period girls will have acquired a strong sense of empathy and will be experiencing the needs of others as their own. However, women lack the autonomy, sense of individuation and strong ego-boundaries which characterise men. This is due to the fact that girls have not been forced to interrupt the preoedipally-toned relationship with their mother, and from the latter they have been transmitted feelings of self-depreciation. After all, girls are loved as daughters but not so much valued as bearers of cultural prestige which has been a traditionally male prerogative; mothers tend to see them as continuations and extensions of themselves. Although it may seem far-fetched to briefly bring up here Chodorow’s account of the extremely polarised

development of growing children according to gender, I find her theory really illuminating when dealing with the male-female relationships as reflected in Weldon's novels. In them we see women and men acting at cross-purposes, incapable of reaching an understanding. Men seem to have the imperious need to rule over women, to behave manipulatively towards them and women have traditionally tended to acquiesce willingly to all their male counterparts' whims and commands, which has only made it worse. As we will see, men's impositions increase at a pace with, and are fostered by, women's capacity for submissiveness.

From her very first novel: *The Fat Woman's Joke* we enter a world of relentless domestic war-waging. Esther, the protagonist, explains how, before leaving her husband, she used to busy herself with the ineffectual task of keeping the house perfectly neat so that he wouldn't find fault with it. Her husband, for his part, would invariably check for flaws and, not finding any, he would feel disappointed. Alan, probably unawares, would take upon himself to supervise his wife's drudgery. Esther points out how preposterous this situation was on both sides, all her efforts amounting "to prove a female competence which was the last thing he wanted or needed to know about" (*The Fat Woman's Joke*, 70). We can easily infer from this that some of the main imbalances of power are due to women's economic dependency on men. Paradoxically, women are driven to this dependency by the very qualities they are endowed with. As we have briefly mentioned above, women's relational capacities are outstanding, they can respond and relate to other's needs without feeling their sense of self diminished by it. On the other hand, men assuming the role of the superior member of a hierarchicised heterosexual couple, the political character of which has already been mentioned, require and take for granted women's sacrifice on the altar of their elusive masculinity. The contrast, the imbalance

produced between women's highly developed relational tendencies which can verge on masochism, and men's selfishness and self-centredness is obvious and blatant. In this sense we see the way Nora in *Life Force* interrupts her language degree course and starts a secretarial one in order to go South with her husband, Ed. But at least Ed "had his first in English". The case of Praxis, though a similar instance, is a slightly different matter. Her boyfriend Willy got "an average second" instead of the "double first" required for him to remain at Reading and, consequently, to allow her to stay there as well and proceed with her studies. Praxis invests all her energies in doing domestic and secretarial work for him as well as sacrificing her promising academic prospects, because she is well aware that were she to surpass him, the relationship would be out of the question. If that happened, she fears, "she would presently find Willy in the student's bar investing in the gin and lime which would buy him his next term's sex, comfort, company and secretarial services" (*Praxis*, 100). The case of Praxis also brings to mind that of Chloe in *Female Friends*: where her studies come to an end when she gets pregnant by Oliver. But even before that we are given a vision of her compliant and obliging spirit:

Chloe becomes very thin very quickly. She misses meals at the hostel because she is busy cooking Oliver's, concocting marvels on his gas ring. She is short of sleep, since she seldom gets over the hostel wall and into bed before four in the morning, and Sociology tutorials start at nine. (Oliver has no classes before eleven.) In the evenings, when they are not making love, she learns typing from a Teach-Yourself book, the better to type Oliver's essays. (*Female Friends*, 127)

And more is the pity if Oliver just gets a "Third Class Honours Degree" instead of the First Class one to which he aspired. Moreover, both of them deceptively agree that she gets the best part of the bargain: she stays at home and cooks while he studies on a grant which has been doubled because he is a married student and has to support his

wife. However, Chloe's autobiographical narrative –in which third and first person and past and present perspectives are combined– is not to be taken at face value, one must read between the lines. All those things that Chloe as a character experiences as natural become somewhat ludicrous and preposterous in the pen of the narrator, an older and wiser Chloe, who knows for certain that, contrary to appearances, she was the only one in the couple who made sacrifices, and considerable ones, for that matter. She achieves detachment in her attempts to sound matter-of-fact and the result is an account of the events devoid of the sentimentality which justified and projected them in a better light when experiencing them. Nonetheless, Valerie the author of "Lover at the Gate", the biography of Eleanor Darcy included in *Darcy's Utopia* is more outspoken and sarcastic in her opinions: "She would have to go out to work, it appeared, to see her through college. But at least it was no longer theological college" (1990: 66). The terms "It appeared" and "at least" give us hints of the doubtful character of this arrangement.

1.2 WOMEN'S ECONOMIC DEPENDENCY ON MEN

From the instances above mentioned we get the picture of skilful and competent women becoming a sort of domestic slaves to men who, although not especially outstanding, become comfortably adapted to having the upper hand in the relationship. Likewise, women's economic dependency on men is one of the cues which trigger sadistic behaviour on the part of men to the point that they grow selfish and tyrannical. We see to what extent Oliver subjects Chloe to domestic drudgery: Following his highly developed, supposedly ecological principles she is expected to use an Aga, that is, a wood-burning stove, instead of an electric one, hands instead of dishwashers, or washing

machines. She is also required to cook fresh food that has to be bought daily, as “deep-freezers spoil the flavour of food and denature it” (*Female Friends*, 102), and so on and so forth. In *Life Force* we come across another male character, Vinnie, with similar exacting tastes, although pliable to the fashion of the times, if a different situation arises: “Now that it has become usual for men to share housework, even Vinnie can work a washing machine, will use a dishwasher” (1992b:112). Hence, in this same line parsimony becomes invariably a feature shared by many of Fay Weldon’s male characters as it is the proper means of increasing the pressure, the financial control over their wives. For instance in *Female Friends* Patrick Bates’ wife, Midge, dies after going through times of extreme poverty and destitution because of her husband’s fondness for frugality. Other instances of this economic meanness is Clifford in *The Hearts and Lives of Men* or the doctor, Philip in *Remember Me*, who “as the breadwinner had every right to say just how much butter and how much jam would be spread on each particular slice” ([1976]1992: 33). Also, in *Female Friends* Edwin permanently denies Esther new saucepans because “he controls the household money with stringent care” ([1974]1993: 28) and, as he explains, it would be “unpatriotic” in times of war, as metal is required for the making of guns. Edwin can come up with some very unlikely and preposterous excuses in his attempt to control the money. Weldon masterfully depicts the process by which men gradually come to hold sway in the household, to the extent that not even the smallest detail escapes them: “Oliver, of course, stretching out his control to cover the choice of colour of the spare-room wallpaper, the books in the shelves, the newspapers through the letterbox, the food in the cupboard, the greenfly in the garden, the money in her [Chloe’s] pocket” (*Female Friends*, 66). The watching of husbands over their wives’ chores may acquire sadistic overtones in spite of the fact that it verges on the ludicrous.

Their grip on their wives is tightened to such an extent that the domestic atmosphere created as a result becomes unbearable and repressive. However, what is remarkable is the lightness of tone, the ironic stance employed to describe this increasing encroachment on women's existence and its claustrophobic character. As a consequence, for the sake of survival, horrors set in their right perspective turn into absurdities. Moreover, the constant and unwitting need of men to feel superior, to display their male ascendancy over women produces in the eyes of Weldon's narrators the same degree of hilarity as women's conscious acceptance of their subordination without opposing any resistance. Their wanting to please men against all odds and against their best judgement becomes, accordingly, the butt of Weldon's bitter satire.

The balance of power in relationships turns out to be so unequal that in many instances joint ownership is not even considered. Annette in *Trouble* eventually learns that, having trusted practical matters to her husband, she has no property to her name, and finds herself all the worse for it. The house they share and the money her father had lent them are all in her husband's name. They are not even lawfully married as they never got round to paying a visit to the Registry Office, and, as her mother pointedly remarks, common-law wives have no legal rights. A similarly ludicrous plight is that of Alexandra Ludd who at the end of *Worst Fears* burns the house which by rights belongs to her but to which she is not legally entitled. After the death of her husband she happens to find out that he was a philanderer and, hence, had willed their house to the woman with whom he was having an affair at the time of his death. Moreover, as the plot develops her husband's brother lets her know that Ned's and hers had been a fake marriage, a sham, as Ned hadn't so much as taken the trouble to divorce his first wife, and Alexandra happened to be the third one. Noticeably, in these two cases the two

gullible women affected, in contrast with many a heroine in Weldon's previous novels, have the means of earning their living. Annette has written a successful novel and Alexandra is playing the part of Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. In these instances in which women work out of the home, the patterns of inequality created by heterosexual relationships acquire the status of tenacious and improbable constructs. With women's entrance in the work-force, the superiority of the public sphere and, by extension, of all that pertains to maleness is demystified. Women learn that "Compared to home, in fact, work is a piece of cake. Many women report the same thing. It is easier to please an employer than a family: a liberation to have a job description, a joy to be free of the burden of peace-keeping" (*Darcy's Utopia*, 21). Men are no longer the providers of the household money and women still cling to them for the administration of financial matters and witlessly trust them with their property and money. Furthermore, we know the little concern men accord to their wives economic interests as is clearly shown in the way in which Clifford behaves in *The Hearts and Lives of Men*. He was of the opinion, and the fact that it was the sixties is sarcastically shown as the only possible inducement to such views, that "a man's property was a man's property, and a man's wife serviced it, and was supposed to be grateful for the privilege" (1987: 81).

Another subject related to this economic dependency and vulnerability on the part of women is that of alimony. Lady Angelica fights for it in *Splitting*. In *The Bulgari Connection* Walter thinks of alimony as the "payment for domestic services rendered . . . on condition that after the contract was terminated no further employment was to be sought" (2000b: 77) and the foreseeable comment attached to it is "Very strange". I say foreseeable because it is in full accordance with the characteristic attitude of detachment and thus unveiling in Weldon's novels. We have come to see as natural attitudes which

are not so much so: a woman devoting her lifetime to a man, who can change his mind about his allegiance to her, choose someone else and, if the former wife is lucky enough, make it up for her economically. She, on the other hand, is bared of her identity and has to start her life anew from scratch, and make do as best she can. This instance can give us an inkling of the mechanics behind Weldon's work. In her novels we are forced to look beyond the veil of familiarity and convention. We are entreated to see what is commonly established and held as valid under a different perspective, without its cover of the customary. It is no small wonder that in this line Eleanor Darcy, a character in *Darcy's Utopia*, is bent on writing a Utopia, or rather, on others writing it for her. Thus, things generally taken for granted become easily questioned against a backdrop of utopian thought. Eleanor Darcy renders us a grim picture of a society "where the horrors of TV are the reward for good behaviour, and large sums of money for the sin of usury" or "where we must travel in underground tunnels to get to our place of normally quite unnecessary employment", or also which imprisons "maintenance defaulters who cannot bear to finance their ex-wife's boyfriend, while letting others off who simply abandon all responsibility for their children" (1990: 151).

Returning to the pliability of women, that feature which so naturally comes to them, we see how it backfires as often as not. We are offered another example of the case in point in *The Bulgari Connection*. Grace complains because as she says: "I have lost the art of conversation. Once I was good at it, but after years of living with Barley who always waxed so noisy and indignant if ever I said anything more than yes dear, no dear, I learned the prudence of silence, and in the end he took me for a fool" (2000b: 13). And, of course in the end Barley gets fed up with Grace and falls for a woman to whom he is drawn by her social skills and knack for conversation (*The Bulgari*

Connection, 10). Another clear instance of an obliging woman is that of Evelyn married to the painter John Lally in *The Hearts and Lives of Men*, who has put up with his moods for years, devoted her life to a man obsessed with “death and decay,” and has had four terminations against her will, thus, as our talkative, even garrulous narrator acknowledges, letting “out the sons who might have laughed their father to shame, for fear of her husband’s temper” (1987: 246). After her death John Lally marries again, but on this occasion to an active enterprising woman who takes no notice of his whims, and goes her own ways, thus, making him happier. Consequently he becomes less of a genius; his new paintings of “sun over dappled waters, and pumpkins in kitchens” (*HLM*, 298) are worse but, paradoxically, more saleable than the previous ones. However, we are not to expect any trace of thankfulness for his deceased wife’s lifelong sacrifice. Quite the contrary, her devoted catering for his many whims deserve but commiseration. She would, for example, make home-made wine for him: “Poor Evelyn! Season after season, in the interests of economy and ecology, with nettles, rosehips, parsnips: plucking, picking, digging, stripping, sieving, pounding, boiling, brewing, funneling, filtering, lifting, storing” (*HLM*, 350). Because of all her ineffectual pains and because of the fact that she “hadn’t called his bluff” (*HLM*, 246), John Lally keeps referring to his deceased former wife as “that fool of a woman” (*HLM*, 251). After all, with some hindsight he is bound to be ashamed of having put her through that entire ordeal for his sake, he can’t but resent and feel guilty about his unaccountable behaviour towards her. Similarly, the narrator does not allow us to overlook the fact that, unlike Evelyn, Marjorie, John Lally’s second wife, “had her own source of income. That made it easier for her. That she did not have to ask him for money” (*HLM*, 298). Things being as they are, it cannot come as a surprise the fact that women are reduced to the state of

hysterics, that typical female malady, for which of course, Weldon ironically states, men are not to blame: “certainly it was not they who ever provoked this exclusively female and distressing phenomenon. Hysterics” (*Big Women*: 139). It is implied, though, that it is the prerogative of the dominant sex, in this case men, to inflict pain on the subjected one, in this case women. Nonetheless when women start to work outside the home, when they gain self-confidence and are no longer economically dependent on men’s income, the situation is gradually reversed. This is seen in later novels by Weldon in which better times for women as well as a different state of affairs are reflected. Talking about the predominant tendency in women to nag, the narrative voice in *Big Women* comments: “These days men nag, women reproach” ([1997]1998: 82), allowing the reader to realise that things have changed. To reproach is understood as a more refined, impersonal way of acting than nagging. With an improvement in their situation women can afford the elegance, the “bonhomie” which so far has eluded them. In fact, Weldon’s first novels, or the ones recounting events backdating the time of publication, depict women’s gruesome existence as a constant selfless sacrifice, a relentless fight for survival.

1.3 MEN UNDER SCRUTINY

At this stage of our reading, we can easily gather the reason why her characters have been defined as “one-dimensional figures in a cartoon strip” (Dowling 1998: 18). Her novels display a narrow range of male characters, in contrast with a richer variety of female ones. They show the same features from one novel to the next, to the extent that their behaviour is, in many cases, predictable. There is no doubt that they constitute Weldon’s major targets of satire. General Makeshift and Murray, both figures of fun in

The Shrapnel Academy are good examples of it. Murray, for instance, has undergone all kinds of tortures and withstood all kinds of weather but, after all, he is a mean person “slightly brain-damaged by various blows to his head over a long period” ([1986]1994: 30). Or Christie is another such figure of whom it is said in *Female Friends* that he “was a civil engineer and his buildings were frequently falling down” ([1974]1993: 51). This description, apart from letting us know what a mess he makes of his profession, what a risk and danger he poses to all and sundry, lends itself easily to phallic innuendo. Similarly, men get offended for no obvious reason. When Lady Rice in *Splitting* reminisces on her family dessert, the jellies her mother used to prepare, and refers to them as “Flop and wobble” ([1995]1996: 141), her husband takes it amiss and this innocent expression acquires gigantic proportions and absurdly becomes “verbal assault” (S, 140) when he sues for divorce. They also, against all appearances, fall easily apart, as happens in *Down Among the Women* where Wanda complains that her ex-husband Kim “could paint nudes with toe-nails growing out of their ears but one baby with a dislocated hip and he went into pieces” ([1972]1991: 177). A similar case is recounted by the narrator of *The President’s Child*, who hides from her husband the dramatic fact that their baby, who died five minutes after birth, had been born with no reproductive organs. Thus, in her words, she has to bear the burden by herself, as her husband Lawrence “didn’t ask any further: barely a why or a wherefore, and he an investigative journalist, and, as usual, away at the time” (1982: 46)

Perhaps we should take into account the insistence on autonomy and separation that goes into the upbringing of boys. As soon as they enter the symbolic order, that of secondary socialisation, of acquisition of language, they leave behind all that has to do with connectedness, with the feminine, and accordingly all their relational tendencies are

suppressed. In her influential work *The Reproduction of Mothering* Nancy Chodorow demonstrates that boys establish their gender and identity through separation, that they “tend to be experienced as differentiated from their mothers, and mothers push their differentiation” (1978: 110). With this in mind we can understand Praxis when she is meditating about the traditional classification of women: whores and housewives, the second not being in a better position than the first. However, she also thinks of her sister Hilda, who in her madness functions like a man: “If it was madness, it served her very well, as obsessional interests –company, religion, country, politics– serve men well, to relieve them of the more exacting chores of family and domestic relationships” (*Praxis*: 164). Furthermore, Weldon constantly makes light of these obsessive interests in men which are the cause they neglect their basic ties with the world. They can be something as absurdly childish as an electrical train set. In *The Hearts and Lives of Men*, Horace is the owner of a wondrous one: “So delicate and intricate, with its tunnels and signals and trees and little wayside cottages complete with curtains and electric lights, and some really rare collector’s items by way of engines –including the fabulous Santa Fe” (1987: 230). The privileged owner of this train set happens to be no other than one of the members of the couple in charge of an Assessment Center, where orphan children were accommodated before being allocated to foster parents. A great amount of the money donated for the children was diverted into the acquisition of this train set, of whose existence the children were completely ignorant. On the other hand, Horace favoured a camp-bed in the attic where the train set was placed instead of the marital bed he was supposed to share with his neglected wife. Another male character enthusiastic about train sets is Ruth’s step-father in *The Lives and Loves of a She-Devil*. Ruth has to leave his house so that he can occupy the room with his train set. As for Edwin, an education inspector in *Down Among*

the Women, he devotes some of his precious free time in the pursuit of the rewarding new hobby of “cataloguing” railway bridges. Men are shown to channel their energies in extremely silly ways. All in all, we may get the impression that we are being rendered a biased outlook on reality and a subversive one at that. For a change, men are under scrutiny, they are seen through the eyes of women. In this regard, Fay Weldon explains that her male characters are not as well-rounded as the female one for the sake of “redressing the balance” (Martin, 1999: 44). After all, in Weldon’s view, it is women who bear the brunt of an unjust state of affairs where more is exacted from them than from their male counterparts. In fact there must be something wrong, incongruous and in need of change in a society where propositions such as “building is as natural to men as cooking is to women” are held, whereas by contrast “if you look around you in primitive parts of the world you will see its women carrying bricks, chopping trees, and erecting makeshift dwellings in the street, while the men just sit and stare zonked out by drink, drugs or depression” (*Life Force*, 85). Therein lies the irony, the universally established male-dominant society outlasts any of the legal basis or economical reasons which could have created it in the first place.

1.4 THE TENACIOUS PATTERNS OF POWER

As has been shown so far, in many of Fay Weldon’s novels, men and women play their gender-roles unwittingly and unquestioningly. Women masochistically adapt to whatever is required of them, playing victims to bullies while men have no qualms about their dominant position and cling strongly to it. They avoid women surpassing them at any cost. However, we may wonder about the reason why so many female and male characters act their roles, following the dominant patterns of behaviour so predictably and

in tune as if they were mechanically set to do so. Perhaps the explanation for this state of affairs could be sought in Foucault's conception of power. Power doesn't consist so much in one group, in this case that of men, having the upper hand, exerting control over another, that of women. It could be argued that in many novels by Weldon the institution of marriage is held to a great extent responsible for the power men wield over women. Nonetheless power can be defined as something more vague, more diffuse operating through "a whole body of practices and expectations, our assignments of energy, our ordinary understanding of the nature of people, and of their world" (Showalter 1992: 283). Accordingly, we see how in *Down Among the Women* when Emma is at the peak of her career Paul "gets fearful headaches from nervous irritation" ([1972]1991: 77), so with the pretext of marrying her, he makes Emma renounce her successful job in order to share a secluded life with him in the country. We can clearly see to what extent this is a ruse—whether conscious or not, as it is often the case, is another matter—to have her subdued, when he overheats the kiln on purpose. Emma explains this to Sylvia: "I'd started to do pottery myself, and frankly I was better than him. So of course he had to go and crack the kiln" (*DAW*, 138). Men resent that their wives excel at anything because that would jeopardise their dominant position in the marriage. They are bound to go to any lengths, even if unconsciously so, to hold on to it. In *Female Friends*, for instance, Edwin is not able to witness her wife's triumph when she sings because he suitably "slips a disc before she is due to appear on stage" ([1974]1993: 66). On the other hand, we are made aware of the extent to which this behaviour is ridiculous and unreasonable. In *Big Women* Hamish finds it difficult to cope with the fact that his wife works in advertising. However, this does not make much sense if we take into account that "He came from Glasgow where his mother worked in a betting shop, and should, as his wife observed, have been

accustomed enough to women working, and to frivolous and anti-social ends at that: nevertheless, he was troubled” ([1997]1998: 12). Whether this seems funny or not, a feature in greater or lesser degree common to many of these men surfaces: that of sheer sadism. Of Edwin in *Female Friends* it is said that “He becomes an expert in domestic sadism” ([1974]1993: 46), and an even more clear instance of domestic sadism is Oliver in *Female Friends*. On the other hand, while talking about these two male characters’ attitude we should keep in mind the fact that “Weldon introduce la variante de la opresión mediante el trabajo doméstico” (Hidalgo 1995: 183) as quoted in the introduction and as seen in a number of examples above. All in all, what we get in Fay Weldon’s novels is a grim picture of the one-sided balance of power struck between men and women. In some cases, women even become objects of exchange. In this sense Philip in *Down Among the Women* becomes a pimp to his wife, Jocelyn, without any misgivings and is better at sex when he prostitutes her than ever before. As Jocelyn eventually reconsiders, he wanted to vilify her, to reduce her to her right status in the world. In the war enacted between men and women, men are supposed to be the masters, the winners. Nonetheless the greatest master of sadism is, in my view Spicer in *Trouble*. As Gilda says “He’s nice for a bit just in order to be nasty. He presses a button. He knows how you’ll react and he does it deliberately” ([1993]1994: 123). The scope of this psychological torture verging on the physical is far from being underestimated in the novel, neither is the fact of how long it takes the protagonist to realise she is suffering aggressions. She is so frail and dependant on her husband that the idea of being a single different entity on which her better half can be exerting violence keeps eluding her in spite of all the evidences. Annette, Spicer’s wife loses her baby in the last months of pregnancy. She has been driven into a terrible state by her husband’s constant contradictions as well as his insistence on encouraging Annette to

do things forcibly and against the general prescriptions for pregnant women, like drinking champagne or eating shellfish. In his struggle for dominance he makes his wife wear bangles that cut into her wrists ([1993]1994: 153), sodomizes her against her will and applies to her all those terms related to a threatening femininity: Medusa, Lilith.... To Spicer's cruelty and lack of support we have to add the negligence of the antenatal clinic when she is refused an appointment in spite of feeling sick because she has been missing sessions on account of her husband's spree of strange behaviour. After her miscarriage, she runs away from home, and is picked up on the road and eventually thrown into a ditch by a lorry driver who insists on having more sex than what they previously convened in exchange for the drive. As a result of the fall, she hurts her neck. The extent to which the concept of violence is underscored in *Trouble* is shown in the fact that the cut in her neck finds its reflection on the sawing through that of an astounded young man in an old atrocity picture she finds in the newspaper and which illustrates events in Yugoslavia. The image of a man sawing away at the neck of a hapless victim held by three smiling torturers reminds her of the psychological torture she has been subjected to by her husband: "We're all Serbs and Croats and Bosnians at heart" (*Trouble*, 225). Annette eventually realises what she has been through and is aware that she has withdrawn her neck at the last minute. However the fact that historically women have not been considered free-thinking agents, autonomous beings leads Alexandra, the protagonist of *Worst Fears* to think that "perhaps women minding men hitting them was a recent cultural innovation" (1997: 170). Their insufficiently individuated sense of self may have made them believe themselves mere extensions of their husbands and, thus, no aggression could be produced, they were not independent entities or, in other terms, had no soul, in the first place.

Just in case we haven't had enough of this arena of predictable sado-masochistic behaviour which is marriage, we are told how the latter, being the mainstay of patriarchal society, constitutes in itself "a breeding ground for deception": "of course. It happened all the time. Women married to rapist, bigamist, con-men, adulterers are all when it comes to it taken by surprise" (*The President's Child*, 198). Quotations of this kind are found in Weldon's novels again and again. In fact, marriage as a sort of deceptive and treacherous trap for women is the subject matter of many of her plots. In *The Fat Woman's Joke* Esther equates marriage to a "single crushing weight, on top of which bore down the entire human edifice of city and state, learning and religion, commerce and law; pomp, passion and reproduction besides" ([1967]2003: 4). According to Lana Faulks, her gaining weight runs parallel to the "retaliation against the institution that has been weighing on her" (1998: 12). In fact, we must remember that Esther puts an end to her diet when she is prompted by her husband's unfaithfulness to leave him and live alone. She moves to a sordid crummy flat and takes to guzzling and gulping down all sorts of food to make up for the time wasted in feeding others and not herself. Likewise, in *The President's child* Isabel and Homer's ideal marriage turns out to be a sham. In *Worst Fears* Weldon devotes a whole novel to develop the subject of Alexandra Ludd's progressive realisation, after the death of her husband, of his deceptiveness, his unfaithfulness, his selfishness, his envy towards her, in a word, her worst nightmare come true, her worst fears fulfilled one by one. In this same novel Vilna, another extreme case of comic blindness and naivety as far as her husband is concerned, comments: "I lived with Clive for four years and never knew he was a crim. I learnt that word from his friends. It is short for criminal" ([1996]1997: 49). In fact, in one of Weldon's latest novels, *Rhode Island Blues*, it is mentioned that the word husband is no longer

fashionable; many married women favour the term partner. After all “partner has no in-built drama, contains no sense of coercion, no in-built thanatos, no tragedy. It is not the stuff of major film” (2000a: 150). From this perspective we can understand Mrs Hemsley’s feelings in *Little Sisters*. When she was newly married she hid her wedding ring because she could just “as well hold out the bloody sheets” (1997: 196). Blood on the sheets symbolises what used to be a patriarchal requisite in marriages: chastity on the part of women, which meant that they were valuable tokens of exchange between husbands and fathers. The newly-wed woman, having passively awaited the great occasion, was an unblemished medium for the procreation of a given man’s children. The chaster the woman proved to be the fewer qualms the husband would have about who had fathered her progeny. Paternity may be a tricky factor, something which may easily escape male control, even in a patriarchal society. The marriage ceremony could in a sense be understood as the sacrifice of a virgin.

1.5 THE INTERACTION BETWEEN THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPHERES

However these small-scale dramas which are marriages grow in dimension in some of Weldon’s novels. We are made conscious of the motto originated in the 1970’s, coined by Kate Millet, the author of *Sexual Politics*, and the consciousness raising feminist groups: “the personal is political”. In *The President’s Child* the inhabitants of Wincaster Row, a place from which “the main stream of life is, in fact, a long way off” (1982: 5), bear witness to how one of their neighbours, Isabel, sees her life threatened because she happens to be the mother of the son of the prospective president of the United States, the dashing Dandy Ivel. Isabel comes to the conclusion “that when male power and prestige is at stake the lives and happiness of women and children are immaterial, that

women just have to learn to dodge bombs, napalm, defoliant and so forth, while getting on with their daily lives” (*The President’s Child*, 160). Manly traditional duties as far as protection or caring of women and children are concerned are easily forgotten, left unfulfilled, or even transgressed when they go against their interests. The moment the identity of Isabel’s child becomes apparent to all and sundry the American powers in the persons of Joe (Hot Potatoe) and Pete (Kitten) make their presence felt in England “Overpaid, overarmed and over here” (*PCH*, 205). Concerning this novel, Flora Alexander says that “the theme of conflict between male power and female power is combined with political allegory about American involvement in Europe” (Martín. 1999: 54). In a similar fashion, it is noteworthy to mention *The Heart of the Country*, where the key word to describe it would be *rotten* and in which we are offered the portrait of the run-down countryside in Thatcherite England, that is “in the hour England’s need”, mostly populated by abandoned mothers dependant on the DHSS supplementary benefit, children and robber barons. The moral tenor of the whole nation matches that of its rulers, and this becomes more obvious away from the cities. The only private enterprises going on in this “worn out, sold-up, clapped-out country” (1987: 174) are those of a murky kind, like the selling against EEC regulations of illegal growth promoters, forbidden insecticides, or chemical fertilizers, all of them hazardous substances adding carcinogens to the food chain in the long run, but source of substantial short term benefits for the farmers and those who sell them. On the other hand, the lack of public funding is so blatant that world experts in agricultural subjects as is the case of Val, an authority on “ergot-related diseases on wheat” (*The Life of the Country*, 59) are out of work. Nothing in Eddon Gurney, the imaginary village in which the action is set, escapes the supervision of two unprincipled men who are said to be “hand in glove” (*LC*, 33) in everything, Arthur

Wandle the antique dealer and Angus Field the state agent. And while they rule the roost unscrupulously, women are placed at the very bottom of the ladder, as could not be otherwise. However, interestingly enough, we witness women reach bottom position and simultaneously how prone they are to remain there. They are the only ones held responsible for the upbringing and nurturing of children, to which probably contributes the fact that rearing children is not a very profitable enterprise. Once Natalie's husband Harry Harries elopes with Miss Eddon Gurney 1978, avoiding criminal proceedings against him for fraud, and leaves his wife "well and truly in the shit" (*LC*, 1), she is confronted with a group of institutions which seem to join forces to make her stay put. First of all, the secretary at Coombe Barrow, the private school her children were attending fails to tell her that the charities at work in the school would probably be willing to pay for the overdue fees, thus allowing the children to remain there. Secondly when she approaches the bank manager, he cheats her into believing that her house was to be sold whereas the truth was that "she could have had a stop put on a compulsory sale through the courts" (*LC*, 67). Regarding the first DHSS clerk the heroine comes across, Mary Alice, we learn that her obsessional hobby is potholing and that, being a virgin at forty-three, does not find it reasonable that some women are bent "on consorting with men, and bearing their children, in an area of high unemployment" (*LC*, 69). Accordingly, the institutions belonging to the Welfare State to which Natalie Harries resorts in her search for help are mercilessly satirised in the novel: "one in five women on supplementary benefit ends up in mental homes. Driven mad by the State" (*LC*, 134). For one thing, all its buildings –Housing, Welfare, Appeals, and DHSS– are so far away from each other that women lack the means to reach them. In addition, clerks in a department don't have a clue of what goes on in other departments, and as for regulations, they change from one

day to the next. Computers are likely to start doing strange things and in that case the best one can do is to go in person. On the other hand, clerks are difficult to reach and besides “they’re always on holiday or on courses or being transferred to head office” (*LC*, 135). As Sonia, the narrator, explains to Natalie, “it’s full time work being on social security. They really make you earn your living” (*LC*, 136), and she goes as far as to advise Natalie to “encourage a wheeze or two” in regard to her children since, as it is, “they really go for asthma up the DHSS” (*LC*, 131). As we can see, women dependent on the Welfare State are under constant scrutiny and surveillance and, whereas occasional sex is even approved of, stable relationships are firmly opposed. Natalie even has a go at working in the quarry for a pittance but she faces her male-co-workers displeasure; she is supposedly depriving a man of his bread, in short, that is not a woman’s task. In the end, running out of resources, Natalie, who accepts to be Angus’s lover, is lodged with her children in a house of his property. He, on the other hand, has as good as given all her belongings away at an auction. Meanwhile, Arthur, the other robber baron, makes a fortune reselling her house.

As we have seen so far, an insidious network of powers is at work in the form of practices, institutions and technologies which reach as far as run-down Eddon Gurney. In this regard, Foucault holds that in an age of democracy, individuals are less free than ever. They are exposed to the influence of new modes of control that, according to Lee Bartky, whether they “have charge of correction, production, education or the provision of welfare, they resemble one another; they exercise power in a bureaucratic mode -faceless, centralised and pervasive” (in Conboy 1997: 147). In Natalie’s story we can see these powers at work; perhaps not in a faceless way, but, notwithstanding, she is equally overwhelmed by them. She may come across as someone who sticks happily to this bottom-of-the-ladder position, someone who forswears her rights easily. Weldon provides

an eloquently humorous picture of her in which she is compared to “one of those little dolls weighted at the bottom, the only point to whose existence is that you try to knock them over. The dolls come up again, swaying and smiling-they’re vaguely female” (*HC*, 124). However, with regard to her passive responses and reactions, we should take into account two factors: when her husband leaves her, she is appalled, caught up in a nightmarish situation for which she is not ready and which takes her completely unawares. And besides, the expression: “The wages of sin!” (*HC*, 11) repeated like a litany during the first chapter of the novel reminds us that she was having an affair with Arthur Wandle, an antique dealer, at the time her husband abandoned her. In the face of so much disaster, her first reaction is to feel guilty on account of her husband’s actions, although her extra-marital affair had no effect whatsoever on the inappropriate conduct he adopted. He knew nothing of it, and would probably not have minded, as he had too many things on his mind. The last of his sordid enterprises was failing and he had just fell madly in love with someone else, as the narrator dramatically puts it, indiscriminately equating strong infatuation with the opening of paint pot lids, “Miss Eddon Gurney prised off the top of Harry’s paint pot all right” (*HC*, 6). Nonetheless Natalie, in her helpless plight feels guilty for what has happened to her family and blames herself in spite of the little pleasure she has had, after all, her “paint just stayed there undisturbed, rich, thick and glorious” (*HC*, 6). In Weldon’s novels the easy and unreasonable way in which women assume guilt becomes preposterous. We could enumerate many other examples of her female characters shouldering responsibilities for committing stupid and nonsensical sins. The instance of Wendy in *Darcy’s Utopia* comes suddenly to mind. When she breaks waters she does not want to wake her partner Ken, who is peacefully sleeping in spite of the fact she had previously complained to him of strong birth pains. Left to her own devices, she

transfers herself to hospital, after cleaning the mess she has produced when breaking waters. Her main concerns when leaving the house are that she will have to “lug” the towel used to clean the dirt all the way to the launderette, as Ken is not in favour of having washing-machines at home, and that Ken may take his time to have breakfast before visiting her at the hospital the next day. After an accidental birth in hospital, where she is badly attended by the staff, on being required, nearly harassed into providing a name for her newly born baby, the only name that occurs to her is that of Apricot after the colour of her nightie. When reproached about the choice of name for her baby, she feels sorry and regrets not having consulted it with the baby’s absent father, who could have come up with a better one had he put his mind to it. This is a clear illustration of how women are so deeply concerned with the thoughts and emotions of others and so involved in the matters of those that surround them that they tend to forget their own basic needs. They easily fall prey to an overriding feeling of guilt. Thereby, further on in *The Heart of the Country* it is mentioned the fact that: “Misfortune makes women feel guilty; men take to rioting in the streets” (1978: 52) As it is, in Natalie’s case we can see a clear instance of internalisation of the feminine role that ensures her passivity, lack of action in contrast with Sonia’s rebellious attitude. She rejects a promising proposal of marriage from her nice psychiatrist in order to “get on with changing the world, rescuing the country” (HC, 199). Taking into account the fact that in Weldon’s novels there is many a rebellious heroine or antiheroine, women who adapt to whatever is required of them, who try to conform to the rules femininity imposes on them, are to a certain extent apportioned some blame for this unequal and unfair balance of power between the sexes. In *Down Among the Women*, it is Wanda’s opinion that there is a lot of sleepwalking among women. Moreover, in this same novel she tells the reader that: “If we look upward, it’s not towards

the stars or the ineffable, it's to dust the tops of the windows. We have only ourselves to blame" ([1972]1991: 74).

However, notwithstanding whose fault it is, a wide range of different factors contribute to place, to even push women into a marginal position and, accordingly, to partake of the disadvantages inherent in such an inferior status. To start with, their basic needs are completely neglected, far from being covered. In this sense, "Midwifery, as always, comes low on the list of national priorities" (*Down Among the Women*, 92), and, hence, when one reads Weldon's novels one comes to the conclusion that, for example, Christmas, with the only staff left in hospitals celebrating or singing carols, is not the best of times to give birth. It is the time when Helen, nearly unattended, has Nell in *The Hearts and Lives of Men* or also when Midge and Grace in *Female Friends* were delivered of two babies who share a common father, Patrick Bates. Grace categorically advises: "Never have a baby at Christmas" (1993:132). The only plausible reason that could account for the neglect which accompanies the act of labour would be that giving birth is a matter that ultimately affects women. It is easy to realise how little power they wield in society if we consider that, ironically as this may sound, some of the first improvements which took place in the obstetrician field were due to the influence of men. In *Big Women* we are told how the legs of mothers were uncomfortably and painfully placed in stirrups after birth so that trainee doctors could do the stitching, or, rather, make a mess of it. As it is, the before-mentioned "stirrups went when the fathers started coming along" ([1997]1998: 110). Having no proper identity, their rights not being adequately established, women inhabit a sort of no-man's-land, and I am aware of the wrong choice of expression, where all sort of nastiness can come from all fronts. A clear example of this we get in *Big Women* at Zoe's cremation. Her friends are finding fault with her husband for Zoe's

suicide when a woman present at the service intervenes and blames herself for it: “My name is Janice. I don’t know what you’re all going on about. I was having an affair with Bull and Zoe found out and now I want to die too” (*BW*, 192). However, it is characteristic of Weldon that things which may seem awfully dramatic, take place amid general chaos, and in this case in one of the most hilarious scenes of the book. All sorts of things happen in it: the microphone does not work properly, the rollers, on which the coffin is supposed to slide, jerk; two other women squabble over a man with the consequent latter’s glee, and so on, and so forth. On the other hand people are constantly entering and leaving the place to the extent that when Janice tries to walk out of the chapel with dignity “people crowded out spoiling her exit” (*BW*, 192). This is a clear sample of how Fay Weldon’s writing makes very bearable and even funny that which otherwise would be distressing or even offensive. In the same novel, *Big Women*, Weldon uses a remarkable distancing technique, very common in her work. Many of her novels, above all the first ones, are set in a time predating that in which she writes which affords some distancing from what is narrated and gives scope for a critical perspective. *Big Women* starts in the sixties but the facts are seen from a later day with the subsequent lack of innocence. Hence we are constantly exposed to light comments like “smokers were allowed to go to hell their own way-which Daffy and Zoe now did” (*BW*, 135), or more serious ones like “in those days, it was generally accepted that in any quarrel over a man the women were to blame. The woman who lost him had ‘failed to keep him’. The woman who won had ‘led him on’” (*BW*, 92), but of course now we know better. The reverse happens with present-day mores which, having the past as frame of reference, are not seen in the best of lights. This is applied again to practical matters: “These days ... socks get thrown away, not washed. manufacturers ensure that washing machines lose them or

remove colours unevenly, and render them shapeless. The life expectancy of the sock falls and falls" (*BW*, 36), or also in the case of more abstract subjects: "The air you breathe, the water you drink, the bus you ride on, seem freely given: yours by social right. No one notices that the tide is turning, that market forces are sweeping in, as is the notion that the only way to keep inflation down is to keep unemployment up" (*BW*, 197).

1.6 WOMEN'S UNSISTERLY RITES OF PASSAGE

As mentioned above, women in their marginal position have it difficult to do anything but survive. However, of course men are not the only ones accountable for this poor state of affairs. In the Weldonian universe we are bound to witness all kinds of bitchiness and rivalries taking place among women. In this regard, Sandra Lee Bartky, mentions that for a woman to turn into a "properly feminine body" either she is supposed "to triumph over other women in the competition for men or jobs" or to take advantage of "an opportunity for massive narcissistic indulgence" (in Conboy 1997: 143), among other factors. Of the second instance we have uncountable examples in Weldon's novels such as Lily in *Remember me*, Mary Fisher in *The Lives and Loves of a She-Devil*, the unpopular Doris in *The Bulgari Connection*, or Poison Poppy as the protagonist friends of *Growing Rich* call her. As for the first method here quoted for reaching the goals imposed by the disciplines aimed at making women properly feminine, first wives is a subject which keeps cropping up in Weldon's novels. As often as not, the new wives think that the failure of the marriage is the previous wife's fault for not being up to scratch. We are told in *Down Among the Women* how "Susan despises Kim's former wife for having failed to make him happy" ([1972]1991: 29). Consequently, we see how second wives take possession without any qualms or remorse of the houses over which other women

previously presided. In some cases the former wives leave behind some indelible imprint, as Grace in *The Bulgari Connection*: “and still with the stuffy if non corporeal presence of Barley’s ex-wife around –it somehow seemed to have got into the wooden floors of Wild Oats” (2000b: 36). In some other cases, what remains of them is more prosaic: “a Magimix in which was still wedged a piece of fungoid carrot” (*Leader of the Band*, 87). A noticeable case would be that of sly Eleanor Darcy in *Darcy’s Utopia*, who gained the approval of the academic authorities by introducing severe economising habits in the Vice Chancellor’s residence previously occupied by his extravagant wife. A letter written by her explaining the changes that had taken place in the household was the reason why they sanctioned the new liaison established between the Vice Chancellor and Eleanor, far younger than him in years, which so far had struck them as mere dotage on the part of the Vice Chancellor. Sometimes the subject of first/second wives can trigger funny, if corrective, situations, for example in *Praxis* when, she, as second ex-wife is making nasty comments in front of a magazine photograph about the changes that Philip’s kitchen has gone through under his third wife’s supervision and Irma, Philip’s first ex-wife gainsays her: “‘It was nicer in my day’ said Irma, ‘simpler and more functional’, and Praxis, who had her mouth open in dismay, distress and indignation, had to close it again”. ([1978]1987: 258), since it is clear that Irma occupies the higher moral ground. Praxis has been done harm by Serena, who does not even acknowledge her very existence, but Praxis had previously hurt Irma. However, the plight in which first wives are left, to which the insensitivity of second wives contributes, acquires on occasions dramatic overtones. In fact, Adam’s first wife Lilith, who, according to myth, is connected with evil and revenge, is mentioned in one or two of Weldon’s novels. In *Trouble* the end of the title of a review of Annette’s novel goes “Lilith in her New Appearance” ([1993]1994: 85). In *Splitting*

Lady Rice, amid divorce proceedings, identifies with and wants to become a new Lilith: “Let Edwin have a sense of her as Lilith, whom Adam discarded; the original, wronged wife, who wanders the outskirts of the universe, bringing trouble to mankind, never resting, for ever spiteful, for ever grieving, making others feel bad” (1996: 24). Furthermore, this brings to mind some Weldonian characters, wreckers of vengeance and retribution, as are the cases of Ruth in *The Lives and Loves of a She-Devil* and the ghost-like presence of Madeleine in *Remember Me*. All the same, this subject of first wives undergoes a slight change of treatment in her latter novels. These deal with better times and softer mores. Whereas first wife Madeleine becomes a threatening and active presence as a ghost in *Remember Me*, in *The Bulgari Connection*, at the end, it is Doris, the second wife, who appears as a mock-ghost once she has been deprived of the power and force to cause harm.

As has been shown, in Weldon’s novels the male characters and the female ones seem to be at cross purposes. Both groups seem to effortlessly assume their disparate gender roles, and striking a balance between them turns out to be a nearly insurmountable task. In her novels we are able to gauge to what high degree these two gendered groups have ludicrously assimilated the social discipline that ensures the fixing of sexual roles. This constant and unwitting gender-playing is what, in many instances, prompts laughter and makes caricatures of many of her characters. However, in Weldon’s literary production, it is women with their acceptance and assimilation of the “feminine”, that is, of the ideological construction of femininity, who in most cases patiently bear the brunt of an unjust and unequal state of affairs. Once and again we come across ridiculously defenceless and unprepared women in the face of an unexpectedly hostile medium or chain of events. This is pinpointed to us on many occasions by the narrative voice, which

is a crucial element in Weldon's novels and gives the reader guidance through all the stories. It gives them perspective and scope. For example, it is said of a party hostess, whose husband runs away with another younger woman in the middle of the party: "She has been trained to behave well, and not to shout, scream or murder, and that is the only training she has had, besides cookery and housecraft at school" (*Down Among the Women*, 140), and it suddenly dawns on us the uselessness of these disciplines when confronted with such a dramatic situation. Equally illuminating are the dialogues that take place in *Trouble*, between the couple formed by Spicer and Annette, or between the latter and her friend Gilda or with any of her parents, or even with her husband's secretary.... They are the medium through which we become aware to what extent Spicer ill-treats his wife far earlier than she does. He says one thing one day only to deny it the next. We also realise how gullible Annette is when she imparts information about what is going on. Likewise, another example of this kind of revealing dialogue could be also found in, *She May not Leave*, which is about a cunning and greedy au-pair new in the household of a young couple, who being very morally-sound have scruples about hiring someone to work for them in the first place. The au-pair ends up by replacing the protagonist, robbing her of baby, husband and home. In the instance I am referring to, Hattie, the protagonist, tells her grandmother that she is very upset because her baby cries whenever she enters the house and how reassuring the au-pair is in pointing out that the baby is going through a phase in which she resents strangers. The grandmother horrified claims that Hattie is no stranger, but Hattie explains the misunderstanding away: " 'She is not English,' says Hattie. 'It's only a question of communication. She got the wrong word for stranger'" (2005: 120). The reader becomes as shocked as Hattie's grandmother and wonders how the protagonist can so easily deceive herself when it is obvious that something extremely

fishy is going on.

1.7 THE COERCIVE CHARACTER OF FEMININITY

In a society charged with masculine values and which exacts of women the curbing and the suppression of their basic needs and appetites, women appear vulnerable on all sides, subject to men's whims as well as to their sisters' collusion in their plight. In this case the term sister is meant as Gemma applies it in *Little Sisters* when she is rebuking young Elsa for choosing older married men to go out with to her elder sister's disadvantage: "I was speaking of the human family, not your mother's" (1977: 57). Young Elsa is going out with and working for Victor, a married antique dealer richer than her. Victor is visiting Hamish and Gemma, who are millionaires, to give them advice about family furniture, and probably with the intention of buying some himself. Elsa is accompanying him in his visit, and Gemma, who is in a wheelchair, starts to tell the younger woman her own life story in the third person and in the form of a fairy tale. It is a precautionary account in which elements of reality and fantasy are inextricably mixed as is often the case in fairy stories. By the time she finishes her narrative, Gemma finally feels compassion for Elsa, and, thus, harbouring the sisterly feelings to which she previously alluded lets her escape in spite of the fact that she had planned a darker destiny for her younger counterpart. She intended Elsa to become the sort of vehicle or foetal-incubator that would make it possible for Hamish to have the child that she could not give him herself. In *The Shrapnel Academy* Mew also finds it easy to find common ground with those behind the "green baize door", that is, the servants who dwell in the building of the Military Academy. They belong to many races and most of them conceal their presence in the warren-like domains of downstairs, since they are illegally staying in

Britain. She tries to express her feelings to them, but is unable to do so: "I am one of the world's victims. I'm a woman in a man's world" ([1986]1994: 89). Concerning this, there is, according to Spacks, "an increasing propensity amongst twentieth century women writers to express feelings of powerlessness, of frustration and anger. They dramatise the heroism of suffering, irony and self-pity" (Sara Mills 1989: 88). This powerlessness is materialised in Weldon's novels in the form of the paralysis, if a somewhat self-inflicted one, that affects many of her narrators and main characters. Their bodies become the symbolic constructs on which the coercive ideal of femininity is inscribed. By paralysis is meant "the condition of being manipulated" into loss of self-confidence and gradual self-destruction. Noticeable is the fact that, for example, in one of her first novels, *Down Among the Women* there is a catalogue of characters with psychosomatic illnesses. Susan's eyes, for instance, start popping, and they don't stop popping until her husband Kim dies and she gets a job as a typist. In the case of Sylvia: "Her ability to see fluctuates, experts consider, in an unreasonable, even bizarre fashion" ([1972] 1991: 197), and she says that when she is miserable she is as blind as a bat. We know that things started to go wrong for her the moment she was compelled to go through an abortion at the early age of fifteen. Her hearing is also impaired, and becomes even more so when her bully partner, Butch, who has just obtained the divorce from her former wife, hits her good ear, and all because she cannot listen properly when he imparts the news that he is leaving with someone else. Nonetheless, she recovers from her physical troubles once she starts to receive National Assistance money and gets a job in the Civil Service, as has always been her wish, thereby managing to fend for herself. A similar case is that of the narrator of disguised identity in this same book, Jocelyn, who happens to suffer from general clumsiness. We are revealed who she is at the end of the novel when, no longer feeling

ashamed of herself, she finally introduces the first person in the last chapter —she had used the third person all along to conceal her identity. She bathes her son in scalding water, causes explosions when putting the plugs into the sockets, her dog drowns in a frozen pond chasing a stick she has thrown for him, and, all in all, the havoc she causes is enormous even by the standards of a mid-European refugee who works at her place and is supposed to have already seen enough wreck and ruin in her time. This general clumsiness is shared by Ruth in *The Lives and Loves of a She-Devil*, by Natalie in *The Heart of the Country*, and again both recover from it when they are abandoned by their husbands and have to fend for themselves. Similarly, we are told of Esther in *Female Friends* that “when Edwin is away fishing or seeing his solicitors, Esther is brisk and efficient. When he returns, she lapses into a vague clumsiness, lets the saucepans burn, the baths overflow, she trips and sprains her ankle ([1975]1993: 49). Women develop a syndrome of increasing helplessness and become the victims of men’s sadistic behaviour towards them. In Weldon’s novels we bear witness to the artificial process by which women let themselves be driven, be manipulated into a state of constant fright by men who, when all is said and done, should produce laughter and pity rather than terror because of the fixity and easy accountability of their ways. There is no limit to the number of absurd and anomalous situations which arise out of the asymmetrically established heterosexual relationships and of which Weldon’s novels keep a faithful record. When Victor in *Little Sisters* abandons wife and daughter, contrary to all expectations, they end up feeling happy and relieved to the extent that when the bulk of his clothes force the door of the cupboard open, reminding his wife Janice of his existence, she addresses herself to her absent husband in these terms: “Victor, stay in your cupboard./ I don’t want your vision of me any more./ I don’t want to resist your disapproval, struggling for my pride in

the face of your contempt” (1977:156).

Nonetheless, the way some of the narrators in Weldon’s novels are physically and mentally handicapped goes deeper than what could be easily expected, which is quite connected with Butler’s statement that gender “is not passively scripted on the body” it is rather “put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure” (in Conboy 1997: 6). Maya in *The President’s Child* is blind because of an accident caused by her husband’s unfaithfulness. Thus, she has to combine physical blindness with a powerful keen vision on most matters; after all, she is the raconteur. The narrator in *Growing Rich*, Hattie, has become a cripple after a botched abortion; Sonia, of whom Weldon is fond (Martín 1999: 215), is a convicted arsonist and writes under the supervision of a psychiatrist in *The Heart of the Country*. In *Little Sisters*, Gemma, one of the main characters, as well as narrator of her story, suffers from a hysterical paralysis. In fairy-tale terms she happened to marry the frog instead of the prince. It is as if all the contradictions and, we have seen many so far, which go into the ideological and social formation of gender, had left its scars painfully inscribed on the surface of the body. The latter becomes a symbolic construct on which the power relations, hierarchies, metaphysical commitments, economic and ideological constraints of a society are engraved. We must also take into account the fact that “being feminine”, and here I’m not arguing against it, is not a natural condition, as Beauvoir famously coined “One is not born, but becomes a woman”. In many cases the acceptance of the disciplines that contrive to the formation of a feminine body requires women’s self-denial, does harm and causes them pain. We could probably describe Weldon’s narrators and the female characters I have just mentioned as disordered women. Susan Bordo says of the bodies of disordered women that they “offer themselves as an aggressively graphic text for the

interpreter –a text that insists, actually demands, that it be read as a cultural statement, a statement about gender” (1995: 169). However, this, which in other twentieth century writers would probably constitute a gloomy and depressing collection of narrators, in Weldon merely means making a statement. Besides, the fact that their experience has placed them beyond suffering, that they have transcended the common run of feminine existence makes of them the perfect detached narrators for Weldon’s novels. After all, according to Agate Nesaule Krouse: “Weldon’s skilful handling of tone and her playfulness with narrative techniques, however distance many of the horrors” (Martín 1999: 174). She often resorts to switching from the first to the third person when distance is required. In this sense Sonia, the narrator of *The Heart of the Country*, is compelled by her psychiatrist to write in the third person, though she is at pains to do so, to the extent that on occasions she finds it difficult to avoid interfering naively in the development of her own objective account, as when she explains that “Gerard sliced the salmon with socialist reluctance. (Don’t get me wrong Sonia is a socialist trough and through)” (1987: 80). As for Jocelyn, the cryptic narrator of *Down Among the Women* only confesses her authorship when the novel is coming to a close and circumstances are improving for her. All in all, Weldon adopts an attitude of detachment and lightness in the face of the horrors and disasters which her narrative entails. This does not mean that the magnitude or scope of the horrors is ignored; it is just that she refuses to be overwhelmed by them. According to Muecke, as quoted by Nancy Walker, this light pose, this “refusal to be overwhelmed” by the seriousness of circumstances is what characterises the stance of the ironist (Barreca 1988: 208) Furthermore, in Weldon nothing is definite, there is always a glimpse of hope. Thus, with the help of circumstances, and taking into account the fact that there is an element of hysteria in the diseases of some of the narrators mentioned above, Maya

eventually recovers her sight and the narrator of *Growing Rich* and Gemma their movements. Likewise, Sonia's psychiatrist declares her sane and asks her to marry him.

1.8 MEN'S UNBRIDLED SEXUALITY

So far horrors are a recurrent feature in the picture that Weldon renders of the asymmetrical power relations established between the sexes. However, as has been mentioned before, they may be softened, distanced by her great mastery in narrative techniques, but, whether we like it or not, they are still horrors, and what may seem grotesque is "actually the product of an uncensored vision" (Barreca 1994: 177). The source of her characteristic blunt and trenchant style, of her capacity to produce shock could be Weldon's attitude of lack of sentimentality. Sentimentality stands for the veil that hinders a clear vision and which has to be overcome by many of her female characters. Romance, "etched so deep into the female soul it defies all reason, all probability" (*Life Force*, 156), is unmercifully exposed as one of the causes which help account for the way in which women put up with otherwise unbearable conditions. Grace explains how many fellow-inmates in the prison "tended to have husbands and lovers who got drunk and beat them about when they wouldn't leave because they loved them" (*The Bulgari Connection*, 41). But, of course, if romance controls the behaviour of women, it has no kind of effect on men. Men's sexuality is adapted to fulfil the canons dictated by a patriarchal conception of an all-powerful manhood. There is a term coined by Shaw (*Auto Da Fay*, 107) and wielded by well-known nineteenth century psychiatrists like Henry Holmes and Havelock Ellis, which appears on occasion in Weldon's writings, besides giving title to one of her novels: *Life Force*. In *Auto Da Fay*, Weldon speaks of it as "that male conceit" (2002:19). In her novels it takes the form of a male sexuality running

rampant and wreaking havoc, sometimes with tragic consequences, as in the case of Felicity in *Rhode Island Blues*, who as a young woman was raped by Anton, his step-mother's brother. On other occasions, however, it is treated in a more light-hearted way, as the expression seems to have been initially intended. An instance of the more frivolous treatment is Leslie Beck the Magnificent, who with his powerful manhood represents the *life force* that gives name to the novel of which he is a character. He has affairs with the four women in his group of friends, a group composed of four couples, including himself and his wife, and a single woman, Marion. Leslie Beck with his powerful mythical member impregnates three of the women. In this novel, however, it should be pointed out that the term *life force*, acquires a different meaning which counterbalances the previous one. Following Lana Faulks, it has to do with women's dissatisfaction and the discontent which leads most of the female characters to have affairs with Leslie Beck. However, this *life force* is above all the spark behind Anita's, Leslie Beck's unhappy wife, pictorial creations, which her husband starts to reveal gradually now she is dead and he is in narrow financial circumstances. Anita, an insignificant and underrated presence so far, is having her posthumous revenge by disturbing everybody's peace and quiet with unsettling memories and by wrecking their long-established, if not completely well-suited, marriages. As a result, Nora, also driven by her *life force* burns Anita's studio, source of all sorts of trouble, thus joining the ranks of, among others, Cassandra Austen, Ruskin's maid or Burton's wife, destroyers of art all of them, and depriving posterity of its rightful legacy. Another satyr-figure, possessor of phallus, begetter of children is Patrick Bates in *Female Friends* who is defined in the novel as "elemental, disruptive and mischievous" in his involvement with women. As a result, he has two children, Kevin and Kestrel, by his wife Midge; by Grace he has Stanhope, and by Chloe Imogen. All the same, because of

his negligence and parsimony Midge, his wife, dies. All his children end up in charge of Chloe and Oliver. This kind of situation has led Pilar Hidalgo to remark that: “la paternidad en Weldon es algo aleatorio” (Hidalgo 1995: 183). Proof of this comment is Margot’s discovery at the end of *Remember Me* that Hilary is the doctor’s daughter whereas there was a chance that Laurence might be Jarvis’, thus mismatching the marriages and reversing what had been held so far. In the same vein, Mrs Lee-Fox in *Puffball* frets in case her grandchild has slanting eyes thus giving away her son’s true father, a friend of her husband’s and the incompetent lawyer in charge of her son’s affairs, and of whom she does not seem to have the fondest memories: “Talk about being seduced and abandoned!” ([1980]1990: 200). In consequence, paternity in Weldon is bound to be much less bonding than maternity, in some cases even volitional. Victor in *Little sisters* has always been remiss to acknowledge his obvious paternity of Wendy because, after all:

other men’s sperm had also swum around inside Janice, before Victor and she were married, and had, it was vaguely felt by both of them, left some disagreeable trace of themselves behind, polluting her procreative byways, and highways, as it were, so that Wendy was not only Victor’s child, but Alan’s, Derek’s, Mike’s, Joe’s, John’s, Murray’s, and so on,... (1977: 157)

In contrast with this carefree paternity, and with the unbridled sexuality of trickster-like male characters, as is the case of Patrick Bates and Leslie Beck, some women in Weldon’s fiction pay the consequences of being with child even with their lives. I would like to quote two examples of this. The first is found in *Remember Me* with “poor Katriona, who as it happened had good reasons to fear the results of fulfilled desire” ([1976]1992: 209). She dies after an abortion, but had she survived, prison would have awaited her. In *Praxis* Miss Leonard is denied an abortion by a priggish society in times of war, which makes young Praxis naively comment: “It seems extraordinary to me that in

a world in which men are killing each other by the million, they should strike such attitudes about an unborn foetus” ([1978]1980: 76). In the end, Miss Leonard dies during a bombing raid, though her child survives. In some novels, however, we see how women, following the example of men, leave the children behind, thus trying to show that maternity is not something as inherent in women as could be expected.

1.9 WOMEN’S BODIES AS ARENAS FOR CONTROL

Returning to the subject of female-submission, in *Little Sisters* we have another clear example of two female characters who like to make themselves useful: Mrs Hemsley, who goes through giving birth to five daughters for the sake of having the son her husband longs for, and also the dentist’s wife, who helps her husband as a receptionist during his lifetime and who after her husband’s death turns out to be a better dentist than him to the extent that she extracts “his old fillings with a shocked and ultra-professional frown” (1977: 134). On the other hand, we are left with no doubt about why, in spite of being more skilful than her husband, she has put up with this unreasonable state of affairs: “her bosom was flat, her complexion muddy, her teeth protruding, and her legs crooked, so her opinion of herself, at any rate during her husband’s lifetime was low” (*LS*, 41). In this regard a new subject comes up, that of women’s bodies, which give male characters scope for bullying —whether they behave so consciously or we are dealing with some unconscious twitch, something deeply ingrained in their psyches is another matter. Praxis’ Philip admires the breasts of any passer-by and calls Praxis old to her face. A similar case is that of Zoe’s husband who goes as far as to say that her breasts hang too low. And just as these men, tacitly supported by a long-standing tradition, feel entitled to give opinions on women’s bodies, we see these women acquiesce to their comments and suffer their

already low-self esteem to lower even further. In the same vein as men keep deriding their wives for their physical inadequacies, the latter feel they do not conform to the unreachable beauty norms imposed on women.

Beauvoir's main contribution to female studies may help explain why women's bodies constitute arenas for control and confrontation. Taking as a starting point Western dualistic epistemological system, she applies the philosophical category of self/other to the division of gender, that is: man/woman. The first term, that is self/man represents transcendence, thought, culture..., whereas the second, woman/other stands for immanence, body or *res extensa*, nature.... We are likewise aware of the overvaluation in Western thought of the first term of the polarity as against the second. Thereby, when this idea is applied to relationships we are left with a very grim one-sided image. In a society based on a binary system of thought men adopt the role of subjects in a relationship whereas women are relegated to the object position. Furthermore, according to the pervading and ever-present Western division between spirit and matter, women are reduced to their bodies and measured by them. Perhaps we should add to this that, according to Foucault, even though we live in an age of democracy, individuals are less free than ever due to a series of disciplinary micropowers addressed to the body which lie beyond the political sphere. Sandra Lee Bartky explains that these disciplinary micropowers exert a grip on the body, can train it to "operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines" (in Conboy 1997: 130), thus producing what Foucault calls docile bodies. More than ever before in history is the body a "direct locus of social control". Needless to say, this greatly affects women's bodies, since their difference from that of men's has been the pretext for the creation of a second class category of human beings. According to Kaja Silverman: "There is an alarming

consensus as to what woman is and wants, and that consensus has been produced through shared assumptions about the female body” (Waugh 1989: 171).

The consensus of which Kaja Silverman speaks probably refers to compliant women, women lacking in needs, possessors of aseptic bodies, bodies with all traces of age, needs and even motherhood erased. The body to which most women aspire is that of a pubescent boy or girl, and we are not to underestimate the powerful imposition by the media of norms and ideals. We are constantly bombarded with images of stylised bodies, bodies subjected to all kinds of disciplines and beauty practices like make up, clothes, removal of facial hair, constant physical exercise, surgical operations, and so on and so forth. To achieve one of these perfect bodies is a fruitless, nearly insurmountable task; it requires an unrelenting self-centred effort where there is always room for more self-improvement. In this regard, Elizabeth Grosz speaks of “the extreme formlessness and plasticity of any concept even resembling the natural body” (in Lauretis 1994: 144), arguing that its very materiality renders the body a very pliable medium easily impressionable by any discipline applied to it. However, the tendency of the bodies of mature women is not towards slenderness, but towards fuller contours, the size of, for example, their breasts and hips usually increases with age. Women, accordingly, confront a paradox, the contradiction of Western society, where the ideal of “femininity” is at odds with all that femaleness entails. In a culture in which masculinist values are overruling, there is a systematic association of “feminine curvaceousness—in particular, large breasts— with wide-eyed, giggly vapidty” (Bordo 1993:55). We cannot help understanding Liffey in *Puffball* who was at her happiest before getting pregnant: “Nymphet Liffey” ([1980]1990: 57), when she was “placed, physically, at a point somewhere between girl-child and stripling lad” (*Puffball*, 134). We should also bear in

mind that the body of women has been traditionally associated with all that is monstrous and unruly whereas a slender boyish one or even that of a girl evokes values of autonomy and transcendence. These bodies harmonise with the spirituality and evanescent essence which infuse the values of that elusive femininity to which most women are supposed to aspire. Likewise women's constriction of movements is in full accordance with these desired frail bodies, they tend to occupy less space than men, their gait, their postures, all their physical mobility and gestures are more restricted more decorous than that of their male counterparts.

Accordingly, without a doubt, gender is impressed on bodies and it would be tempting to test whether a female soul, were it implanted on a male body, would stick to its feminine tics and traits and vice versa. This is superbly done and gives rise to very hilarious scenes in the second volume of Fay Weldon's autobiography *Mantrapped*, in which autobiography and fiction intermingle and cross boundaries reproducing the encounter between Peter and Trish on the stairs with their subsequent exchange of souls. The merging of bodies and souls is in line with and parallels that of genres. Out of the blue, and after passing each other on the stairs Peter, an example of the new man, the perfect partner starts to occupy oldish Trisha's body, whereas Trisha, once a lottery winner, now down on her luck, replaces Peter in his. However, they seem to be at pains to adapt themselves to the "gender mannerisms" which go hand in hand with their newly acquired bodies:

The body Peter sat on a stool and chattered on, male knees genteelly together. And the body trisha sprawled on the sofa, dozing, legs akimbo, knickers actually showing, and then stirred and woke, and Doralee frowned at her, and the Peter [Trisha] body took time to realise what was wrong before moving her legs together. (2004: 165)

However this light and mocking treatment of the subject of the imprint gender leaves on

the body corresponds to Weldon's later work. It has nothing to do with and is very far from that of her first novel. So much has happened and there have been so many changes, as reflected in the course of her literary production, that what was once considered incendiary and subversive is now, according to Weldon, seen as "chick lit" (*Mantrapped*, 82). Perhaps, if we accept this, the words of Esther, her earliest heroine may have lost some of the dramatic overtones which they possessed in the first place:

A woman has too much substance in a man's eyes at the best of times. That is why men like women to be slim. Her lack of flesh negates her. The less of her there is, the less notice he need take of her. The more like a male she appears to be, the safer he feels. (*The Fat Woman's Joke*, 63)

In a similar fashion as Esther indulges in food, we could say of Weldon that she indulges in a sort of female biologism which embraces descriptions such as this one referred to "that other terrible world" "where the body is something mysterious in its workings, which swells, bleeds and bursts at random; where sex is a strange intermittent animal spasm" (*Down Among the Women*, 349). When Sonia, the narrator of *The Heart of the Country* says about women that "we are all part of a bleeding body if you ask me" (1987: 24), strange as it may seem, we have to take it at face value: all women of a reproductive age have periods, we are not only to understand it in its figurative sense that all women are sufferers. In *She May not leave* the narrator, who, paradoxically, shares some biographical features with the author, is accused by her sister, another fictive characterization of Fay Weldon, of having "an unbalanced view of women" of considering them "just bundles of oestrogen" (2005: 215). However this indulging in female biologism can be counted as one of Weldon's most outstanding features, her constant insistence on counteracting the lack of notice or even revulsion which has

traditionally kept the female body under yoke. In fact she is not afraid to tackle subjects as controversial as pregnancy, a topic that, and this can be said in her favour, has not been accorded the importance it really requires on the feminist agenda (Bordo 1995: 94). What Fay Weldon does in *Puffball* is remarkable. In the first place, she reverses the metaphor of pen-penis as the source of creation, replacing it with that of gestation-pregnancy. There is a long-standing tradition of applying the imagery of pen-penis writing on the virgin page to the concept of literary creation. Understandably, and, as a consequence of this, inspiration for women writers has on occasion been conceived as “an infusion from a male master” (Showalter 1992: 303). Moreover, women as blank-virgin pages have come to feel their body as their only channel of expression and have, accordingly, narcissistically devoted to its care. Weldon in *Puffball* appropriately deconstructs the metaphor pen-penis writing on a virgin page and carries the traditionally endorsed identification between the female body and the text to its last consequences, in this case “establishing a link between the creation of plot and the creative process of biology” (Dowling 1998: 93). Secondly, she confronts “a biological determinism which regards the social dependency of the female as natural” (Sara Mills 1989: 20). Her treatise-like development of the stages of a pregnancy does away with all that which is unnerving and out of bounds in the female body. In this sense, Liffey, the protagonist regards “the inner, pounding, pulsating Liffey with distaste, seeing it as something formless and messy and uncontrollable, better unacknowledged” (*Puffball*, 22). In contrast with this we are given a thorough, reasonable description of what goes on “Inside Liffey” that contributes to bridge the gap between what is physical and out of bounds and what is mental and controllable. In the words of Olga Kenyon: “Never before has the struggle between reason and unreason, triggered by pregnancy, been so sympathetically and dramatically detailed”

(Faulks 1998: 42). Perhaps it would be illuminating to mention that from the very beginning of *Puffball*, everything is seen in terms of contradictions, through the lenses of the Western dualistic system of thought. At the beginning of the novel Liffey is determined to leave London and live in the country, she “saw smooth green lawn where others saw long tangled grass, and was not looking for snares” (*Puffball*, 7). In a biased fashion she compares town with country, or rather culture against nature. So this novel which starts with a contradiction is riddled with them and it is a set of polarities that which engineers the plot. Richard, who, the moment his wife gets pregnant, begins to have affairs with other women singles out his wife from the rest: as the mother of his children, she is placed above them, the others are just for pleasure. However, as we could have gathered from the previous comments, the most outstanding contradiction is pregnancy vs non-pregnancy. Pregnancy is the condition to which Mabs, Liffey’s peasant-witch neighbour, aspires. This is the state in which she feels best: “And so pregnant, became ordinary, like anyone else, and used her hands to cook, and clean, and sew, and soothe, and not as psychic conductors” (*Puffball*, 130). The opposite happens to Liffey who, as we know, is at her best when non-pregnant: “Nymphet Liffey” (*Puffball*, 57). Moreover, once she becomes pregnant, instead of the caring she requires, she has to withstand the wide array of hostile forces which suddenly surround her, mostly in the person of Mabs, who having urged her husband to have sex with Liffey in order to make her humbler, regrets it, since she thinks the child is his. Liffey sees herself as a puffball, that is, a “giant mushroom ball” being kicked by all and sundry. Everything starts to come to terms again when “half-daft” Eddie, one of Mabs’ neglected children sets out to take her to hospital and ask for help there for her sister Debbie who has been poisoned with one of her mother’s herbal remedies, buckthorn. The doctor alerted to Debbie’s condition,

and here another contradiction is enacted: medicine vs herbalism, goes to her rescue and finds Eddie and Liffey, the latter in precarious condition, on their way to the hospital. After Liffey gives birth to her child and Mabs realises it is not her husband's, everything falls into place again and harmony is reached, and proof of that is the fact that Mabs is pregnant once again.

The female body has been appropriated from time immemorial by patriarchy for the oppression of women and, paradoxically, as we have seen so far, Fay Weldon never avoids tackling the subject in her novels. On the contrary, she seems to relish that biological determinism which has historically been the cause of the social and economical dependency of the female. Women are blithely equated to their bodies and none the worse for it. Furthermore, according to Pilar Hidalgo, Weldon “muestra escaso interés por la mujer individual” (Hidalgo 1995: 180), although this last comment applies more to her first novels. I cannot imagine the following lines in the pen of another writer: “Marjorie, Grace and Chloe. They bleed in unison, punctually and regularly for five days every four weeks, whenever the moon was full” (*Female Friends*, 76). On some occasions, we can even get the impression women are just seen in biological terms, in fact in her fiction childless women have been described as “one of nature's dead ends”, as is the case of Marjory in *Female Friends*. However, in her novels the subject of how women's body can become a liability for them is ever-present: “Maternity wards are full of paradox: women lie weeping, some because they've had a baby, some because they haven't: the woman who wants fertility treatment lies next to the one who's had a termination” (*Auto Da Fay*, 251). Furthermore, topics such as contraception, abortion and their importance in women's lives are broached without the slightest hesitation. With her typical technique of predating the events of her novels to the forties, fifties, and sixties we are given a certain

perspective and made aware of the awful conditions women were expected to bear:

No quick pregnancy tests in those days: no vacuum abortion on the side. Just for the former a toad which got injected with your urine and laid eggs and died forty-eight hours later if you were pregnant, and laid eggs and survived if you weren't, and for the latter an illegal operation which you, like the toad, had to be lucky, or very rich to survive. (*The Hearts and Lives of Men*, 63)

In this last quotation women are equated to toads, in a similar fashion as Liffey identified herself with a puffball when pregnant. As we can see there is no skipping of imagery when referring to women's biological processes. The usual course of action is just the opposite. As has been mentioned above women occupy the pole which corresponds to nature. Accordingly, the transition has to be made from nature to culture (Conboy 1997: 3). Nature must be curbed must be controlled to be assimilated into culture as much as possible. Most things related to femaleness must be transcended in order to reach "femininity," to become a "docile" body in Foucaultian terms or, as Esther bluntly puts it in *The Fat Woman's Joke*, "a piece of docile flesh" ([1967]2003: 142). It would be useless here to examine the disciplines like diet, make-up and dress that go into the making of a docile feminine body, but we must bear in mind that most of them are related to the curbing of needs and appetites and through them "we continue to memorize on our bodies the feel and conviction of lack, of insufficiency, of never being good enough" (Bordo 1995: 166). Being the body the locus where femininity is constructed, its suppression or transformation seems an easy way out to redress the balance of power. This is the case of Madeleine in *Remember Me*, where the fantastic element plays a large part in it as well: her "body, so little regarded in life, has in death become the focal point of some kind of group energy, some social concentration" ([1976]1992: 146). With her death we are witnessing the opening of Pandora's Box.

Unfeminine rage and all that is subversive in women's psyches is given vent, released, and, thus, in the end her aims are achieved: Her daughter Hilary is to remain with Margot instead of with Jarvis, Madeleine's ex-husband, and his new wife, Lily. The latter, by the way, shows a proclivity to make hers all that belongs to Madeleine. Madeleine's ghost-like presence in the book, hence the title evocative of *Hamlet*, wreaks havoc in the novel. Jarvis hears the old casement window of Madeleine's times banging in the wind in spite of the fact that the double glazing one that Lily has had installed is firmly closed. He also sees Madeleine's face reflected in the window. Nonetheless Madeleine's best vehicle of expression becomes Margot, to whom she also transfers her limp after the accident. The feature they share and which joins them is that of mutual discontent, but, whereas Madeleine has represented outspoken dissatisfaction all along in the novel, she used to ring Lily up and call her names when alive, Margot, in accordance with her role, has all along hidden it. She is a classical case of housewife with all the self-sacrificing attributes that define them. Thus according to Lana Faulks under the influence of Madeleine's ghost, and due to their affinity, she easily turns nasty.

If Madeleine does her best to suppress her body's wants, Esther, the earliest of Weldon's heroines, represents a sort of physical suicide concerning the rules of contention and restriction which govern femininity. According to her "Men are always accusing women of unfeminine, and at the same time making sure that the feminine state is as unendurable as possible" (*The Fat Woman's Joke*, 97). She stops the diet she was sharing with her husband to proceed to gorge on any kind of food. When she finds out that her husband is being unfaithful with a younger woman, she leaves him and spends her days in a basement sitting and guzzling non-stop. When her friend Phyllis pays her a visit she offers the latter to join her in the gobbling of buttered toast, condensed

mushroom soup to which she adds cream to improve the flavour and tomato sauce to “cover up the tinny taste”, nuts.... To which, Phyllis naturally refuses, being herself a role-model of that femininity which Esther so harshly derides and against which she so strongly rebels. She also explains to Phyllis that being middle-aged, she is relieved, she doesn’t feel forced to please men any longer. However, by her behaviour she shows that not only does she refuse to please men, but that she also seeks to turn them off, to become their worst nightmare. She willingly embraces the image of the insatiable, monstrous woman, the woman seen as “too much”. According to Susan Bordo this idea, based on fear, of woman as too much and related to her sexuality is represented as often as not with “eating and hungering metaphors” (1995: 161). Following Lana Faulks the joke which gives name to the novel: “*The Fat Woman’s Joke*”, is that her husband asks her to come back to him. She prefers her to her young lover and to Phyllis for all their feminine contrivances.

However, Esther’s course of action may not seem appealing to many a woman. After all, women’s bodies have constituted for a long time the only means for them to acquire power. In this sense women conventionally beautiful have traditionally had better chances to opt for a higher social status than the homely and plain ones. This is crystal clear to Driver, a modern personification of the devil in *Growing Rich*. He transforms Carmen physically when she waits at the employment agency: “I reckon I’ve gone from an A cup to a C overnight. It’s disgusting. I flop when I walk. And my waist’s got small, so my hips poke out in a ridiculous way. And I swear my legs are longer, or somehow my skirt has got shorter” (1992a: 46). And, moreover, “that same facial expression which yesterday would have meant Carmen was in a sulk now made her seem charming, and in need of help” (*GR*, 47). Driver’s ploy is the reason why the clerk

at the employment agency offers her a job as an air-hostess instead of the ones customarily available in the area: those of domestic help, or worker at the chicken factory. In addition, Driver places a zit on the tip of Carmen's nose whenever he wants to contravene her. It is difficult to overestimate the important role a woman's looks play in her social interaction. Conversely, in the case of a boy things turn out to be much simpler. In this same novel it is said that there is a lot of rejoicing when a baby boy is born: "it just doesn't matter what he looks like, how crooked his nose, how lumpy his figure, how crossed his eyes, how feeble his legs –he will get a job and find a spouse" (GR, 86).

Ruth, the heroine or antiheroine –when referring to Weldon's novels the cataloguing is difficult– of *The Live and Loves of a She Devil*, learns to her cost to what extent a woman's body may become a liability to her. She is hyperbolically ugly and huge. We should mention her grand-scale height, she is over six feet tall, shows hairs on the upper lip and chin, has moles, and her weight "swayed from one massive leg to another and shook the house each time it fell" (1983: 28). It is constantly implied by her husband Bobbo that their marriage is not a proper one because, after all, her body "is at fault". When he leaves her for Mary Fisher, a successful writer of romances, Ruth lusts for "revenge", "power", "money" and she wants "to be loved and not love in return". Ruth turns out to be very cunning indeed, and all her artful designs lead to the downfall of Mary Fisher and her husband, which happens to go hand in hand with her own rising in society. So far the novel is funny, even hilarious, her harsh punishment of the couple may seem a bit disturbing, but probably justified. However, the controversial element appears when in spite of all her successes, which we are not going to examine now, Ruth does not have enough. She wants to be the physical reproduction of Mary Fisher, her

look-alike. Mary Fisher's features are extremely "regular" and "perfect": "She is all woman because she is no woman". Ruth therefore aspires to no less than embody femininity and to this end she resorts to complex and painful cosmetic surgery. In this regard, it has been said of this novel that "the knife beneath the comedy becomes a literal surgical knife"³. Here the Pygmalion myth is re-enacted once more, however not to create a monster as in the case of Mary Shelley's, but as the original myth in order to get as end-result: "an impossible male fantasy made flesh" (*LLSD*, 239). Ruth thereby achieves what she set out to accomplish in the first place, what has been a sort of joke all along the narrative: to be able to look up to men like Mary Fisher's "staunch heroines". After all her plight had been that: "Little women can look up to men. But women of six foot two have trouble doing so" (*LLSD*, 29). It would be interesting to link this quotation with the first one in this chapter, a lower height in women could at least make the powerful position of men in relationship seem more reasonable. Nonetheless her quest lands her a perfect body and, by contrast "an assertive, sadistic, monstrous psyche" (Waugh 1989: 193). The paradox here is extreme. Once her body has reached the standards of feminine perfection, she can afford to transcend it; she can leave the domestic sphere, and gain admittance into a world where masculine values pervade. On the other hand, there is no feminine contention or setting of limits in the process, she went as far as to mutilate her legs in her lusting and search for power. In reference to this, and following Susan Bordo when referring to anorexia "at this point of excess, the conventionally feminine deconstructs, we might say, into its opposite and opens onto those values our culture has coded as male" (1995: 179). When Ruth becomes all-powerful, it is she who tortures her husband and is unfaithful to him, and concludes that:

³ "Literature Annotations. Weldon Fay. The life and Loves of a She-Devil" New York University 1993-2003 <http://www.W1685-des-html+weldon+fay&hl=es&es=UTF8> (7-10-2003)

“It is not a matter of male and female, after all, it never was, merely of power. I have all, and he has none” (*LLSD*, 256). Ruth changes her body, that is, the locus on which her dissatisfactions are focused, in order to change the world but there is a ring of regret at the end of *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*: “I am a lady of six foot two, who had tucks taken in her legs. A comic turn, turned serious” (*LLSD*, 256). In some subsequent novels women characters abandon the self-centredness that the perfecting of their body require and follow the course of action which had already been predicted by Praxis: “I have to cure the world to cure myself” (*Praxis*, 49). In this regard *Big Women* constitutes a clear example of the case in point.

Big Women can be described as a novel depicting the feminist struggle. A motley group of women, four, who, “Unable to change themselves, they turned their attention to society, and set about changing that, for good or for bad” (*Big Women*, 1). Perhaps they are not the best of representatives: “they were never quite in step” (*BW*, 1). However what is clear is that their effort sets a landmark in women’s lives. From the very first novels in Weldon there is a huge generation gap between women, which is unquestioningly for the better. At the end of *Down Among the Women* there is a comparison between Wanda and her granddaughter, both are destroyers, but “where Wanda struggled against the tide and gave up, exhausted, Byzantia has it behind her, full and strong” ([1972]1991: 216). Nell in *The Hearts and Lives of Men* admires her mother’s beauty and sees the contrast between them both. Her mother unwittingly exerts a considerable effect on the hearts and minds of men whereas she herself is “too spiky and blunt” for it, and “glad of it” (1987: 379). Furthermore, Praxis does not disguise her admiration for the new species of women, for what she calls “The New Women”. About them she says: “I could barely recognise them as being the same sex as myself, their

buttocks arrogant in tight jeans, openly inviting, breast falling free and shameless and feeling no apparent obligation to smile, look pleasant or keep their voices low” (*Praxis*, 13). Life for the new women is no longer a question of survival; all her efforts are not spent on it now that it has been seen to it that their basic needs are covered. The virtues of pliability and submission are left out of the equation. Older women do not praise the blessings of endurance to younger ones the way Gwyneth did with Chloe in *Female Friends*. A lot has been done to overcome the dichotomy between spirit and matter in which women are supposed to assume the physical and emotional side of the Cartesian dualism, whilst all that is rational and non-demonic corresponds to men. As Sandra M. Gilbert has said, “feminist connections between the personal and the political, the theoretical and the practical, renew those bonds of feeling and thought” (Showalter 1992: 40), the severing of which so much contributes to schizophrenia. In this line Saffron at eighteen is the product of this evolution of the species, to put it somehow. She has learnt to: “think a lot, feel a lot, and know not much at all; which is OK” (*Big Women*, 195).

1.10 WOMEN’S CHANGING IDENTITY: THE LADY IS A TRAMP

In *Down Among the Women* Edwin is constantly thinking of names for Byzantia like Edna, Linda, Marjorie, Annabel, or even goes as far as to venture Edwina, the feminine version of his name. Likewise, Audrey becomes Emma under her husband’s influence. Something similar happens in *The Shrapnel Academy* to the servants, who have undergone a change of name because their mistress, as the narrator sarcastically points out, is above learning names, “Joan Lumb, being a member of the literate races,

had no time for names which, however full of phonetic and racial resonance, would give difficulty to typist” ([1986]1994: 55). The need to go to some lengths in order to know what she considers the name of second-class citizens, however well these names sound, does not cross her mind. Names could be said to represent identities, and she feels safe and superior belonging to a culture which has always attempted to subsume and absorb all other forms of identity. The names of women and servants are happily switched and transformed because they are considered to lack identity, subjectivity. The latter is understood as “the reflection of an inner ‘essence’” (Waugh 1989: 3). We must remember that within the Western dualistic system of thought, with its division between Self / Other, the Self is defined in terms of spirit, that is, transcendence of the body, rationality, autonomy and the like, whereas the Other is linked to and objectified into a body. Onto the Other are cast all the emotional and relational aspects which have been done away with, split off for the construction of the Cartesian rationalistic Self. On the other hand, as a body or *res extensa*, the Other is deprived of basic legal rights. Those belonging to this category cannot become full-blown human-beings. From this we can surmise the extent to which being endowed with subjectivity is an essential vehicle for proper survival in Western countries. However, taking into account the dysfunctional character of the fictitious and enforced unified identity, Postmodern epistemology shatters this cherished concept of a being suffused with subjectivity by declaring the death of the self, the death of the author. The values that had contributed to this concept of inner essence were those which the Western men as the dominant group had held important, such as independence, autonomy, separateness, and for the maintenance of which other groups had had to be marginalised expelled from privileged position. In short, this inner essence or subjectivity turns out to be the end-result of unequal power

relations by which some members of society are possessors of a unique individual identity at the expense of the marginalised-others. Noticeably, despite the crisis of the subject triggered by Postmodernism, most feminist voices still hold on to concepts such as subjectivity, embodied consciousness and the like, though they claim for a reformulation of them. Women strongly feel the need to interact in society as subjects in their own right, claiming that, to be acknowledged as such, a deconstruction of the cultural, historical, social formations of maleness and femaleness must be effected.

In the words of Foucault, “power relations give rise to a possible corpus of knowledge, and knowledge extends and reinforces the effects of this power” (in Lauretis 1994: 1518) and, indeed, in this way concepts such as subjectivity or psyche have been constructed. Knowledge and power are inextricably linked. Through knowledge information about bodies is extracted which once absorbed and sanctioned by power – that is the network of force relations established and implemented in a given society– become discourses which in their interaction with bodies, and with the regular organisation of the life of individuals, impress bodies in a certain way. They are engraved with “the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity, femininity” (Bordo 1993:166). These power relations, accordingly, leave their imprint, are inscribed on bodies and become part of their essence. In the previous chapter, we roughly saw how Ruth made her body amenable to the impositions of power, to the norm of femininity. In spite of the fact that the above example is too drastic and extreme and, moreover, of a fantastic character, I think it may be an illuminating case of how power relations take hold of the body. Although the procedures for the inscription of bodies are mostly willingly embraced and this is what is termed “technique of self-production”, the element of imposition, its coercive character cannot be denied. In this

regard, Elizabeth Grosz speaks of “various techniques of social inscription that bind all subjects, often in quite different ways according to sex, class, race, cultural and age codifications, to social positions and relations” (in Lauretis 1994: 141). The narrator in *The Shrapnel Academy*, for example, interprets for us the social stratification which goes from the most powerful to the less or under-privileged. In her opinion it is as follows: “White men/ Black men/ White women/ Black women/ Animals” ([1986]1994: 110). Praxis also becomes aware at an early age of the fact that: “You only had to go into a room, talk to someone for a minute or two, to do the social sums required, and rate yourself and others appropriately” (*Praxis*, 54). This unjust state of affairs, these “imbalances of power traced along the lines of gender, country, and class” (Barreca 1994: 4) derives in the concept of individuality-subjectivity with which the haves are endowed and which the have-nots lack. Taking into account the fact that the perspective adopted in Weldon’s narrative is mostly that of women and that she positions herself with those who are on the wrong side of the “green baize door”, that is servants or have-nots, it does not come as a surprise that the traditional concept of subjectivity, of a single-unified individuality is largely contested in her novels. To start with, in her first novels a *communitas* of women replaces a unique single individual as the protagonist. The titles of two of her first books, *Down Among the Women* and *Female Friends*, are eloquent in this respect. This idea of a group of women as main characters is very much in line with the feminist movement and its workings. Let us, for instance, recall the important role that some techniques like group-consciousness played in the rise of the second wave of feminism in the sixties and seventies.

Another way of defying this concept of unified identity comes naturally to Fay Weldon in her autobiography. In order to do so, she resorts to the long-established

tradition of women changing their name according to their marital status. In *Auto Da Fay* Weldon, as her grandmother in a lesser degree has done before, constantly changes names with the consequent acquisition of new identities and life-styles. She begins her life as Franklin Birkinshaw; following her fancy she changes her name to Franklin Davies by “Deed Poll”, that is, she registers officially under another name and this roughly coincides with the time when she becomes a single mother. The father of the child, a certain Colyn whom she describes as a *troubadour*, volunteers to marry her and work as a gas fitter to get a flat in Luton, since the flat goes with the job. Thinking that to be the wife of a gas fitter is somewhat beneath her, she refuses his proposition, though, with hindsight, she is to regret her decision. At a further stage, through her marriage to Bateman, of whom Edwin in *Down Among the Women* is reminiscent, she becomes Fay Bateman. She adopts her current surname from her next husband, Ron Weldon and Fay Weldon is the name to which she definitely sticks, in spite of the fact that she is now married to Nick Fox, her third husband. Interestingly enough, she even affords to pick and choose among the different identities, and rejects what she considers excessive: “Franklin Birkinshaw can be osmosed, Fay Franklin Davies acknowledged,” but Fay Bateman is “more than the current ‘I’ can bear” (*Auto Da Fay*, 283). The change of name and identity is also the main topic in *The Bulgari Connection*, in which Grace Salt, a fifty-five year-old deserted wife, must revert to her unmarried name when her ex-husband’s uncompassionate new wife, Doris, so wishes. Dorothy, who had taken on the name of Grace at her husband’s request when they got married, finds herself “altogether unGraced” and “taking up her old self again, being the person she was before she married and if that person was seventeen too bad” (*The Bulgari Connection*, 157). In the novel she grows young at the same pace as Walter, her young lover, grows old. The

resulting plight is that she “would get younger and vanish away at one end of the scale, and he would vanish away at the other, and into that great silence” (2000b: 15). Dorothy-Grace suspects that this is all the result of a curse put on her in prison by “a young girl from Haiti”, for staring at her too closely. This same girl casts a spell on Doris, the effects of which will be irreversible and will cause her ruin. Dorothy-Grace and Walter go to a Chinese medicine clinic in Soho, trusting that with their experience of “ten thousand years of treating ailments” (BC, 153) they may be of help to them. However, Dorothy’s sister, Emily is the one who eventually comes up with the right solution. They are to visit their ageing Aunt Cecilia who had disgraced the family by having a child by her uncle when she was eighteen. When her child died soon after birth, she forsook the world and became a nun. Aunt Cecilia sees Dorothy-Grace carrying a basket and takes her for Saint Dorothy, a martyr who lived in the times of Emperor Diocletian, and who, when she was going to be beheaded, and in answer to Theophilus’s teasing proffered fruits and flowers from the bottom of the basket belonging to a boy standing by. Theophilus adopted her faith at once, and both of them embraced death willingly for the sake of their beliefs. Aunt Cecilia, Emily and Dorothy-Grace pray to Saint-Dorothy, and the destiny of certain death which, Dorothy and Theophilus-like, awaits Grace and Walter is miraculously reversed. Names cannot be taken slightly, there is more to them than meets the eye, a change of name means a change of identity, one can never be too careful when choosing one. Dorothy, accordingly, returns to her thirties and Walter to his forties and both keep to those ages, if only for a time.

These are not the only cases, as it is, indeed quite common for Weldon’s female protagonists to go through changes of names and identities. Such is for example the case of Apricot, who becomes successively Ellen, and Eleanor in *Darcy’s Utopia* or Sandra

Harris, Sandra Sorenson, or Starlady Sara in *Leader of the Band*. The reason is, nonetheless, easy to explain: “Women crossed the barriers easily: were required to by marriage, moving house, changing status: men seldom crossed them, went on as they began, their lives under their own control” (*Praxis*, 190). However, there are some advantages to be traced in this pliability, this lack of fixity inherent in women. The transformations the two enterprising heroines above mentioned go through are without a doubt purposeful and for the sake of improvement. No one would deny that they are in control of their lives; they hold the reins of their own destinies. They have no qualms about breaking away from their pasts, especially Apricot who eventually outwits the establishment and gets away with it. As for Sandra, the fact that she, gypsy-like, is able to discard her highly bourgeois and well-to-do life-style in order to run away with an itinerant musician embodies, according to John Glavin in his article “Leader of the frivolous band”, a healthy spirit of “frivolity, that particular toughness of mind and feeling combined” (in Barreca 1994: 134). In this line there is no doubt that this feature of toughness of mind and feeling describes Ruth in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* perfectly well. She is the greatest name-cum-identity-shifter and, clearly her newly acquired harshness, what we might call her frivolity stands her in good stead, as does other Weldonian heroines. When her unfaithful husband calls her a she-devil she is determined to become such, and a cunning one at that. She stops being the compliant housewife she has been so far and stops acquiescing to all the rules a society based on patriarchal patterns imposes upon her. In the adventures leading to Ruth’s revenge on her husband and his successful lover, Mary Fisher, she easily swaps names and identities. She takes advantage of her skills as a housewife to get the menial jobs which are to come in handy for her retaliation. In her picaresque-like quest she works in

emblematic places, which, by and large, come under scrutiny. Among these, there is a rest-home for old people where Mary Fisher's mother is one of the inmates or the house of the judge in charge of her husband's trial, where she works her way as something more than an efficient nanny for the children. Another place where she lives is Bradwell Park, a poor suburban area mostly populated by women who happen to be eager readers of Mary Fisher's romantic novels. There she shares quarters with a single young mother, Vickie, who lives on welfare and who under the influence of the doctrines of the church seems bent on burdening herself with children. In addition, the welfare clinic encourages mothers to take charge of their progeny rather than to leave them into the care of the state. Practical Ruth dissuades her from that course of action and advises her to sell her children for adoption. Her next abode is also in Bradwell Park, she stays in the house of an abstemious priest, Father Ferguson, for whom she works as a housekeeper. She introduces him to sex and makes him change his old-fashioned views on the use of contraception. She manipulates him into seeing the pernicious effects romantic novels exert on her female parishioners. Father Ferguson contacts Mary Fisher and uses his newly acquired sexual skills to persuade her that what she is writing is wrong. He leaves her for another more successful writer, and she contentedly returns to the domestic existence to which Ruth has reduced her. But, all the same, Mary Fisher feels dejected and in hell, as after all "she has [had] carnal knowledge with a priest" (*Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, 225) and soon afterwards she dies. Ruth's last accommodation before undergoing her surgical operation is a commune of separatist feminists where "the living was hard and the diet fibrous, and low in fat" (*LLSD*, 213). She chooses this place as the best one to lose weight, nonetheless, the severity and narrow-mindedness prevailing there are trenchantly highlighted. It is also interesting that in her versatility she sets up

an employment agency welcoming those housewives eager for change from the ranks to which she previously belonged. The names by which she is known at one time or another are: Vesta Rose, Polly Patch, Georgiana Tilling, Molly Wishant, Millie Mason, Marlene Hunter, only to end up, with the help of some complex cosmetic surgery, emulating the identity and body of her great enemy, the robber of her husband: Mary Fisher.

However, not stressing the surgical operation that Ruth undergoes would mean to overlook her most important transformation: the physical one. As far as the body is concerned, we must not underestimate the fact that it constitutes a symbolic construct. As Elizabeth Grosz has pointed out, the Western body, as opposed to the savage corporeal representation by means of tattoos, incisions and so on, is inscribed from the inside. That is, the body is deemed to be the reflection of that inner entity we call soul. Mrs Black, the wife of one of the doctors responsible for Ruth transformation, reproaches them for being “reductionists”. She considers the new Ruth, the end-result of their operation, as “an insult to womanhood” (*Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, 239), after all, the latter’s huge female monstrous body is replaced with a standard angelic one. Thus dualistic thought, “the simple oppositions on which theoretical systems are founded” (Mills 1989: 160) is re-enacted once more, but this time with a significant variation. After the operation, according to Patricia Waugh, Ruth is landed with a perfect angelic body but with a monstrous psyche, which to Western thought is a paradox. This is contrary to what one would expect: the perfecting of the body should be accompanied with the betterment of the mind for its transformation to be complete. The traditional correspondence between perfect bodies and perfect psyches is, in this instance, exposed and wreaked havoc with. Perhaps it could be argued that when Ruth has her body

rendered standard, she plays into the hands of patriarchal society, but that is not a subject we are going to deal with here. What is worth our notice, in this case, is the way Weldon disrupts the traditional split which patriarchal mythology establishes regarding women, dividing them between angels and monsters. That dichotomy pervades everyday life. Gemma in *Little Sisters* treasures two mementoes: on the one hand “her mother’s false pearl –symbol of sin and excitement: Eileen had been wearing it the night Gemma was conceived; pressed up against an alley wall” (1977: 28). On the other hand, her “greatauntly crucifix” a gift aimed at dispelling the malignant effects of the first.

1.11 PLAYING HAVOC WITH STEREOTYPES

Likewise, we can see how some of the old clichés and stereotypes are still at work on men’s minds. Such is the case of Victor who sees attractive Bella as a threatening monstrous presence: “She was a ravenous woman: she would swallow him up, engulf him as she had engulfed her food at dinner” (*The Shrapnel Academy*, 160) and he sees her surrounded by “a host of sinewy vampires with heavy claws and bloody beaks, which were about to tear him to shreds” (*SA*, 161). That’s why in spite of being attracted to her, Victor seems somewhat relieved when his wife joins them and, so to speak, comes to the rescue. In *Praxis* Mr Allbright avoids physical contact with his second wife after the latter bears him a child. He “no longer sucked her of sweetness, as a bee sucks nectar from the honeysuckle: he respected her too much, alas. She was the mother of his child: his holy Madonna” ([1978]1980: 120). Jarvis in *Remember Me* also clings to this binary pattern of thought as applied to women. He is described as the “last of a line of English gentlemen, revering women yet fearing them” ([1976]1992: 125). Another male character who has problems coping with the contradictions that women

pose for him is Philip, married to Jocelyn in *Female Friends*. He doesn't sleep often with his wife because he has to feel that his wife is "a virgin at heart" ([1974]1993: 96). Similarly, when he goes out with his female friends he prefers to stop at a lay-by with his luxurious car rather than remain in a domestic environment. By the end of the novel, on account of his business –he is an executive– it is required of him to find a call-girl, but there is none available. When her wife volunteers to act as one, he has no qualms about prostituting her in front of a client, and for once his performance turns out to be flawless to his wife's surprise; needless to say, he sees her as a whore, not as his wife. Since he either despises or reveres women he just behaves naturally with the ones he considers depraved. His reactions can be linked to his attitude towards his mother of whom it is said that, like his father, is a "shadowy figure" and who in his fantasies "appears ladylike in flowered prints, to damp his ardour and spoil his concentration, and make him feel guilty" (*Female Friends*, 98).

Philip's ambivalent attitude to women, as that of many other male characters, may be accounted for by the traditional system of parenting where mothers are the only ones in charge of breeding children. For Chodorov the masculine contempt for feminine values is one of the "manifestations of a deeper 'dread of woman' –a masculine fear and terror of maternal omnipotence that arises as one major consequence of their early caretaking and socialisation by women" (Chodorow 1978: 183). After their entrance into the symbolic stage, boys are required to abruptly sever all connections with the pre-oedipal period and those values of care, nurturance, and blurring of self-other distinction that surround and represent mothers. Mothers, for their part, will foster and encourage this separation, this breaking of their common bond. Boys acquire their identity with this denial of the feminine and their access to the world of secondary socialisation in which

masculine values pervade and which is, obviously, related to the public sphere. That mothers tend to see boys as somewhat detached from them, we can see in Isabel's reaction in *The President's Child* when the life of her son is threatened and she puts hers at a stake in order to save him: "If he was a girl.., she thought, I would not do this. I would be more practical, less reverent. I would see a daughter as an off-shoot of me. I would be less prepared to sacrifice myself" (1982: 213). As a result of the sudden separation from the mother, infant boys, by way of defence, draw upon the splitting of feelings: that is, idealisation on the one hand and aggression with its consequent denigration on the other. Boys and men's attitude towards women turn out to be ambivalent: They combine the feelings of depreciation of all that is feminine with those of idealisation, the latter born as "psychological and cultural/ideological mechanisms [that boys and men develop] to cope with their fears without giving up women altogether" (Chodorow 1978: 183). As far as infant-girls are concerned, their transition from the pre-oedipal period to the symbolic one isn't as brusque as that of their male counterparts. They do not suddenly cut the ties with the mother, nonetheless the general sense of devaluation of the feminine, as confirmed by Isabel's musings, is passed on to them. Mothers favour their sons, their male children, and girls lack the strong links with their fathers that would make up for their mother's preference for boys. That contributes to explain why many women are not very exacting in their choice of partners. However, both boys and girls share ambivalent feelings towards their mother, towards that being on whom they were completely dependant and in whose presence they were helpless. In the case of girls, who never need to break their attachment to the mothers, the hostility they feel for their primary caretaker is projected upon their relationship with their mothers or derives in a sense of self-depreciation (Chodorow 1978: 182)

Weldon plays in many of her novels with this polarity in women's typification. Her work is firmly installed in the traditional binary system of thought in regard to women, only to overturn it, and play havoc with it. This is the reason why her novels are peopled with a proliferation of mock-witches, devils and angels. As regards the former, Mabs, one of the main characters in *Puffball*, comes immediately to mind. That she is a witch may be proved by the fact that, according to Liffey, "If you nailed her footprint..., I bet she'd limp" (1990: 204). With regard to evil-characters we could perhaps pinpoint Ruth, who in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* willingly adopts the role of she-devil. However, Ruth becomes one as a last resort, lusting for the power and success which so far has eluded her. Her life before had consisted in a perpetual struggle for survival, as was the existence of the other female inhabitants of the "planned as paradise" Eden Grove, some of whom were "found hanging in the garage, or cold and overdosed in the marital bed" (1983: 12). As for the other extreme of the polarity, those characters who strive to be angel-like paradoxically don't come across as the nicest women at all. The description we are rendered of Mary Fisher, the target of Ruth's revenge, parodies that of any of the heroines in her romantic novels: "bubbly laugh", "pale hand", "little fingers", "pink, pink tongue". Another woman referred to in terms of all spirit and no flesh is Lily in *Remember Me*: "Lily's arms are covered not with common hair but with a soft and silky down" ([1976]1992: 5). Although to our surprise we are made aware of the fact that she "bleeds, yes she does ... like anyone else" (*RM*, 61). Susan in *Splitting* becomes the reason behind her female friends' nightmares and distress. She is associated with sophistication and femininity and she is responsible for cynically breaking the hearts of the men surrounding her, be it those of her circle of friends or the occasional neighbour. On the whole, she manages to disrupt four households. Moreover, what is

remarkable is that she successfully gets away with it, leaving everything and everybody behind her, including one of her children, and ending up with an ex-husband of hers. The divine physical appearance of these angel-like characters is in clashing dissonance with their ambitious psyches, an instance of this would be Ruth after her operation, or Mary Fisher and Lily, though perhaps to a lesser extent. The three women just mentioned, that is Mary Fisher, Lily and Susan share their extreme femininity and are cause for concern and general distress to their female counterparts. We must bear in mind that the association of women with the pre-oedipal period reduces them to fleshly entities, impresses a stigma of mortality on their bodies. To combat it women develop strong narcissistic tendencies taking pride in a body for which they experience feelings of alienation. They vacuously employ all their resources to the care of it, in order to erase its overtones of all that is rampant and out-of-bounds. Among the greatest Weldonian narcissistic characters stands out Helen, Marjorie's mother in *Female Friends*. Funnily enough, she seems to have a natural predisposition to let works of art go to waste. First she leaves some of her husband's valuable paintings under an attic's leaky roof for years; secondly she destroys Patrick's highly-prized paintings when she throws him out of the Frognaal house. Accordingly, it's said of her that she "was always prodigal with man-made works of art, seeing them as something presumptuous in the face of her own God-made female perfection and a kind of challenge to it" (*Female Friends*, 216). Being a self-centred woman, she follows all her whims and impulses, and nothing deters her, not even maternity. In fact she delegates the care of her only child, with whom she avoids all physical contact, to others and unabashedly uses men to her advantage. There are always shadowy men around her willing to provide her with whatever she requires for very little in return. In *Female Friends* she serves as

counterpoint to the self-sacrificing Esther and Gwyneth who waste and give away their lives for the sake of others. Contrary to what might be expected, however, the narrator's final verdict on Helen is not too harsh. Her *savoir-faire* is considered the best attitude for coping with life in the novel, the best role-model for the female friends: "Better to end like Helen, unforgiving and unforgiven" (*FF*, 233). Another narcissistic character is Doris, whose divine physical appearance is accompanied with an evil psyche. Being of a disagreeable disposition, she uses her success to make enemies in *The Bulgari Connection*. Hence, she is generally loathed and disliked to the extent that two attempts on her life are performed. She is the anchor woman in a TV arts programme and tends to fire any prospective rival, as is the case of Flora, whose legs had "a little more flesh around the calf than Doris sported" (2000b: 133). Notwithstanding the differences between Helen and Doris, it cannot be denied that both of them constitute clear examples of "femme fatale" (*BC*, 162). However the more lenient treatment of the former may have to do with the harder times the novel reflect. We should recall, in this respect that *The Bulgari Connection* is a more recent novel and corresponds to a period in which conditions for women in some countries have somewhat improved.

Weldon's novels play havoc with the traditional female stereotypes. Devils are not so awful and angels turn out to be less than nice, at least for other women. Moreover her fictions can serve as effective antidotes to any remnants of binary patriarchal thought. Of Praxis she remarks:

I went through all the bad words women are called and made her these: whore, adulteress, murderess, incestuous, thief, lecher. And she is all these things, but I go through them one by one to explain why these portmanteau words cannot really be applied to women. (Dowling 1998: 77)

All the range of demonised female experience is embodied and put into practice in the character of Praxis, in accordance with the name. *Praxis* is an autobiographical account told in the first and third person. The first person is Praxis herself, who, as an old woman, writes her diary after she has left prison. The story in the third person starts when an itinerant photographer, Henry, takes a photo of her and her sister sitting on the beach in Brighton when they were children. When their father, a Jew who had not married their mother, abandoned them Henry is allowed to live with Lucy, Praxis' mother. However, Lucy considers that this relationship is beneath her, so Henry ends up eloping with the maid. When Lucy is transferred to a mental home, Praxis is left in the charge of a spinster school teacher, Miss Leonard, who dies in a bombing raid while giving birth to Mary, the result of one of several casual encounters. Praxis goes to Reading University and there she meets Willy. She interrupts her studies when Willy finishes his and they both move to Praxis' house in Brighton. Seeing that Mary, the late Miss Leonard's daughter, is being totally neglected under the care of the Reverend Allbright and his wife, Praxis and Willy take it upon themselves to rear the child and become their new foster parents. For a while and out of dissatisfaction with their boring existence, Praxis and her friend Elaine would visit a club called the Raffles Esplanade Dive frequented only by men proceeding mostly from the ranks of the "seedy gentry". They would prostitute themselves; hold sexual congress with some of the customers of the Raffles Esplanade Dive in exchange for money. On one occasion Praxis offered her services to a client who happened to be her father. After having had sex with him, and spurred by the hopelessness of her situation, she decides to move to London. There she marries Ivor only to leave him and the children she has by him for Philip, the husband of her friend Irma. When Philip divorces her, she takes part in feminist activities. Old

Praxis is probably talking about this period when she says: “I was a lesbian for a time” (*Praxis*, 49). Praxis also becomes a murderer when she smothers Mary’s mongoloid baby and goes to prison for it. Although Weldon is far from subscribing her behaviour, rather on the contrary she admits that “Praxis behaves in the most appalling fashion” (Carmen Martín 1999: 183), it does not follow that we are to overlook the fact that the cornerstones of her life are transgressions: infanticide and incest. She killed Mary’s mongoloid baby, had it survived her mother would have had to give up a successful and fulfilling career as a doctor in Toronto or the States. Mary had not undergone the tests which detect mongoloid children because she was against abortion. Besides, as an obstetrician, she herself had supported and encouraged another woman in her situation to embrace the upbringing and the care of her mongol baby. The baby, on the other hand, had been born nearly dead, since it had survived thanks to medical efforts. Praxis took upon herself to kill the baby and free its mother from a lifelong dedication to him. Nonetheless, Mary never forgave her for it. Lana Faulks interprets it as follows: “By killing the baby, Praxis has enacted a symbolic turning point for women, freeing them to pursue independent, self-fulfilling lives” (Faulks 1998: 41). The other “transformative event” in Praxis life takes place when she consciously commits incest with her unknown father, which could be understood as figuratively transcending the symbolic order: “by having sex with her father Praxis destroys the symbolic power of patriarchy which rules by fear and prohibition” (Finuala 1998: 83). In this regard, this transcending of the symbolic order may be interpreted as reverting to the preoedipal period, the only metaphorical vantage point from which the process of the formation of identity could be reversed. This would place Praxis in a marginal position, in a state of rebellion, in close contact with what Kristeva calls the semiotic, a process previous to and at work in the

structuration of the symbolic order and where the feminine is repressed (Mills 1989: 158). Miss Leonard is another of the characters in *Praxis* who is in clashing dissonance with the role society assigns to her as a spinster schoolteacher. On Saturdays nights she takes to dress as a prostitute and walk down the esplanade. On one of these occasions, instead of running away when accosted by a man, as was her custom, she has sex with three different men. As a result she is in doubt whether the child she is expecting thereafter was “the father’s, the son’s, or the American’s” (*Praxis*, 79). Another of the stereotypes which is overturned in *Praxis* is that which identifies womanhood with motherhood. Praxis leaves her children behind unscrupulously and with no regrets when she changes husbands and goes to live with Philip, and so does Irma, Philip’s ex-wife, before her.

1.12 DECONSTRUCTION OF THE TRADITIONAL CONCEPT OF IDENTITY.

However, it is not enough to reverse or play havoc with stereotypes, the traditional humanist concept of subjectivity must be deconstructed as well. This is blatantly done in *The Cloning of Joanna May* and in *Splitting*. In these novels unique individuality is multiplied four, five-fold. In *The Cloning of Joanna May* this concept of subjectivity is experimented with, given full play by having five women sharing a single soul. Successful Carl May, Joanna’s husband, the son of abusive parents, kept in a kennel as a child, refuses to have a progeny, to pass on his genes to his descendants. God-like, he tampers with her wife’s fertility when she goes through a hysterical pregnancy. He has an egg extracted from her in a mock abortion which puts an end to the inexistent pregnancy. The nucleus of the egg extracted from Joanna is shaken up and irritated in amniotic fluid until it is divided into four and implanted in the wombs of the

same number of ladies eager to have babies. The reproductive technique employed is not exactly cloning but parthenogenesis or unisex reproduction plus implantation. The clones have the same genes as Joanna, are repetitions of her. As a punishment for her unfaithfulness, her unique individuality is wiped out: Joanna and her four clones are thus to share a single soul. Joanna becomes obsessed with this subject of identity when she finds out she has four clones. She reflects that little children when beginning to talk use the pronoun you instead of I to refer to themselves as in the case of the “you cold” for the “me cold” or what is later to be “I am cold”. She wonders if this phenomenon implies “the sudden bright consciousness of the self as something defined by others?” and goes on to think that “perhaps we did better in our initial belief, that the shivering cold is jointly experienced, something shared” (*The Cloning of Joanna May*, 6). This responds to and is in line with a conception of subjectivity supported by object-relations psychoanalysis which stresses the importance of the preoedipal relationship established between the baby and the mother, the parent usually in charge of its upbringing, for the formation of identity. Emphasis is given to the relational aspects developed by the baby in its interaction with the mother during the first six months of its existence, a period which for example is completely neglected and overlooked by Freud, whose matrophobic tendencies have been signalled by many. The defenders of object-relations psychoanalysis describe the infant as object-seeking rather than pleasure-seeking. For Freud the individual is an isolated being who, driven by the pleasure principle, seeks to gratify “impossible imaginary pleasures” which are at odds with reality, a being whose basic impulses must be held in check, restrained by culture and society. As Waugh points out, this is no less than an enactment of the old liberal division between nature and culture with its consequent “view of the inherent competitiveness and aggression of

human beings, which must be curbed or coerced into co-operation by laws and the state” (Waugh 1989: 49). On the contrary, in the object-relations theories emphasis is put on the social and relational aspects which go into the formation of a full personality and which infants develop in their first months of interaction with the world. In *The Cloning of Joanna May* we see, as in many of Weldon’s novels, how the sense of identity based on co-operation comes naturally to women. We are told how Angela, Joanna’s friend, stands by Joanna all through her divorce: “The burden of guilt, indignation, upset, and general sense of injustice must be handed round, communally shouldered: it is too much for one person, one ‘I’ to bear” ([1989]1993: 61). This emphasis on the emotional and affective aspects of human beings can be set against the liberal humanist idea of personality as entailing singularity and the shedding off all that is emotional and non-rational. The latter conception of individuality, as we are well aware, provokes, among other things, an artificial division in terms of gender. To men corresponds the sphere of reason and objectivity if we deceptively endorse the fallacy that what is perceived becomes detached from the perceiver. However, how can research “ever avoid the bias, the conditioning, of the observer?” (*The Cloning of Joanna May*, 230). In this respect male scientific objectivism, as Rose Quiello (in Barreca 1994: 89) has pointed out, comes up against criticism in *The Cloning of Joanna May*. She pinpoints the following description of Dr Holly’s office through his eyes: “The room was male; straight-lined, hard-edged: he saw now what was wrong with it. No pot plants, no family photographs, no cushions –not an ashtray, not a coffee cup– nothing to bear witness to human frailty” (*CJM*, 232). Women, on the other hand, are objectified, equated to that which the rational rejects and consequently must be tamed and controlled. They become their bodies and stand for all that is emotional. Likewise, according to Ortner, they are nature while men

stand for nurture. Nonetheless, Carl May, in his attempt to interfere with his wife, with her materiality, is hoisted with his own petard. He intends to find her love for him increased four-fold, whereas just the opposite is the case: the four clones, not unlike the original Joanna, turn out to be unfaithful beings.

In *The Cloning of Joanna May* we also see how Carl May plays subject to Joanna-object. Nonetheless, from what has gone on before it can be easily inferred that the subject of reproduction is foregrounded. In this regard, what Pilar Hidalgo says of *The Leader of the Band* could also be applied to the novel under consideration: “reflejan la inquietud creciente del movimiento feminista ante las novedades políticas y tecnológicas que en la década de los ochenta incidieron en la función reproductora de la mujer” (Hidalgo 1995: 94). The cloning of Joanna is performed by Dr Holly at the infamous Bulstrode Clinic where in the fifties terminations as well as artificial reproductions were performed with the consent and acquiescence of women: “what passive creatures women are: they just lie there, trusting and let the medical profession do what it wants” (*The Cloning of Joanna May*, 34). However Mrs Love, on whom an abortion was performed at the Bulstrode Clinic, clears herself from this attack: “They knocked you unconscious and did what they wanted: you couldn’t object; what you were doing was wrong, illegal” (*CJM*, 215). Dr Holly experimented with women’s bodies, impressing on them his techniques and skills as well as extracting knowledge from those same bodies. Mavis after looking into what information she had on the Bulstrode Clinic can’t help but exclaim: “Bloody men, [...], so competitive, always muscling in on women’s bodies” (*CJM*, 183). The supervision, the control to which the female body is subjected is nowhere else in Weldon’s work so overtly exposed as in this novel. Here the female body is contemplated, in accordance with what, in the words of Elizabeth Grosz,

Foucault holds as “the object, target, and instrument of power, the field of greatest investment for power’s operations, a stake in the struggle for power’s control over a materiality that is dangerous to it” (in Lauretis 1994: 146). The very capacity for reproduction which is a feature of women’s bodies turns them into an easy and all-important target for the networks of power. This is for example the theme of *The President’s Child*, Isabel as the mother of the son of the prospective president becomes a threat to the powers that be. Consequently, it is no wonder that in *The Cloning of Joanna May*, the subject of identity is triggered by that of reproduction. Women have been all along defined in terms of their bodies. In this sense, their capacity for reproduction has placed them in an awkward position: very powerful on the one side and very vulnerable on the other. On both accounts they must be taken care of, looked after, supervised. However, if, originally, an egg was deceitfully extracted out of Joanna on her husband’s orders, by the end of this novel, this very man, Carl May, the great manipulator, pleads with Joanna so that he may be cloned and in order that amends may be made for a childhood spent in a kennel. Joanna and her clones voluntarily divide the tasks of carrying the foetus, giving birth, and taking care of little Carl among themselves. The adult Carl May, who as owner of a nuclear power plant called Britnuc died trying to show that nuclear waste was not harmful, could be said to represent all that is negative in scientific thought. Nonetheless, he will be given a chance this second time: he will receive all the sustenance and nurturance required and will be properly reared surrounded by love. This denouement represents a final victory and an unequivocal vindication of those values of nurturance and affectivity traditionally associated with the sphere of the “feminine”, being that the only possible reason why they constitute incomprehensively underrated qualities.

Foucault has said of the body that it is “the locus of a dissociated Self, adopting the illusion of a substantial unity, and a volume in perpetual disintegration” (in Lauretis 1994: 146). Accordingly, the body of Lady Rice is a site of encounter and conflict for different personalities in *Splitting*. This novel displays a complex structure in which plot and sub-plot finally converge in the end. On the one hand we witness the unreal and fantastic process in which the gradual collapse and disintegration of Lady Rice’s personality takes place, how she splits into several warring personae when she is unable to cope with her divorce and the struggles of these minions born out of her obsessions to take control of her. She feels helpless in the face of the incongruous accusations which fill her husband’s petition for divorce. After all those wasted years spent exerting herself to become a proper wife to Sir Edwin, she now runs the risk of being left with nothing, not even her rightful alimony. The fortune she had made as a pop singer had gone into the maintenance of his stately home and now she has nothing to vouch for that inordinate amount of money. Consequently, when confronted with that petition for divorce based on false pretences, part of her is alerted to the danger. Thereby, hers becomes a case of multiple personality that by the end of the British version of this novel, the one Weldon favours, has come close to complete disappearance after the subtraction of all the different personae born out of traumatic events. By contrast, in the American version we are left with a healthy whole personality. On the other hand, we are told the story of the inheritors of a Tuscan-Gothic house, Lodestar house, legally fighting for its ownership. The importance of the houses in this novel, Lodestar and Rice Court, cannot be overlooked. They are in line with the main subject of this work, that of richness and multiplicity of personalities and even of genders, as clearly “in the house of our dreams each room represents a different aspect of the self” ([1995]1996: 260). Both

stories become connected when Jelly, the most practical of the personalities into which Lady Rice splits, and who works for the firm of lawyers, finds out a legal document which states that Lodestar House is a property of the Rice Estate. Lodestar House does not belong to the ones who consider themselves its rightful inheritors. It was a gift from an Oscar Rice Musgrave to his lover Violet, but it did not go beyond a tenure, which means that she and her inheritors have a right to it for ninety-five years (*Splitting*, 99,100). Jelly, the only person who has access to this information hides it from everyone else. Returning to the main plot Lady Rice's unfair predicament after her divorce is somewhat reminiscent of that of Grace in *The Bulgari Connection*. Lady Rice, stunned as she is, effaces herself to such an extent that she is nearly blotted out, as a result of which her pre-marriage personae are let in. Thus Angelica, and the efficient Jelly, who encompasses all the virtues dear to their father, enter the scene and take the reins of the situation. Accordingly, Jelly sets to work incognito as a legal secretary for the firm in charge of the case Rice vr Rice Catterwall & Moss in the interests of Lady Rice. This complex and warring personality becomes even more so when Angelica and Jelly are joined by Angel, who is described as a "no angel it" (*Splitting*, 25), and whom the others cannot abide because of her doubtful morals and her "whorishness" (*Splitting*, 53). Nevertheless the Angel case constitutes another of the many examples in which, in the words of Rose Quiello "Weldon trenchantly dismantles the old double standard, unrepressed female sexuality does not lead to death" (in Barreca 1994: 86), but rather to freedom. Thus, *Splitting* is an instance of "the more the merrier", since all the personae are the end-result of fixations grown to considerable proportions. The unnatural pre-eminence given to these disparate attributes is welcome insofar as they become the means to right the wrongs inflicted on Lady Rice. Jelly's efficiency to get a fair alimony

must not be underestimated. Angelica's link to the past and her memory of the affronts and indignities suffered in the hands of her ex-husband, Sir Edwin, and his present wife, Anthea, keeps prodding them to act, and, last but not least, wicked Angel's much needed contribution is of the uttermost importance if they are to finally remain in one piece: a bit of fun and deviation from harmful and constraining patriarchal injunctions. In spite of their conflicting abilities "the three must, and should take their place together, in the eyes of the world, if not themselves" (*S*, 55). In the face of confrontation and disagreement, amid so much female disorder, however, and for the sake of unity or unique personality a stronger mythical male presence is required: that of Ajax. Hence, and to Lady Rice's chagrin, a male personality joins the others; his name is an acronym for Angelica, Jelly and Angel, as for the x, it stands for maleness. We could construe his male intervention as a parodic contribution to the humanist conception of "an essential unified self". He is the one in charge, the one to put an end to the chaos surrounding him, the narrator. He thinks he is essential for the coherence of the story: "You will lose your narrator, your history: We'll vanish altogether" (*S*, 306), but the development of the novel proves otherwise. Although he eventually disappears, and his "saga" ends, the story goes on. The fictitious explanation for so much perforation and splitting, since in Weldon's novels there are no loose ends, is no less than that Angelica's mother was "gangbanged" by a football team after a third-rate match which she had unwillingly attended. As a consequence of this discovery, Jelly, no longer her father's daughter, takes her leave of the group, as does Lady Rice who was born to fulfil all the duties imposed on her by her husband's stately home: Rice Court. Thus Angelica becomes a sort of hologram nearly invisible towards the end, her "fingers so pale, you could hardly see them. Her mouth was splodged with strawberry juice more observable than her lips"

(*S*, 320). When the novel finishes, however, a sort of rebirth happens and Angelica the sole remaining “heroine” runs away with the young taxi-driver who had been driving her all along. All these goings-on, preposterous as they may sound, could be deemed to contribute to a parody on the traditional concept of subjectivity. For all its comic vein, *Splitting*, with its breaking of realistic signifying practices as that of the myth of indivisible character representation, shares with other fantastic texts the endeavour “to reverse or rupture the process of ego formation which took place during the mirror stage, i.e., they attempt to re-enter the imaginary” (Waugh 1989: 178).

As regards the subplot of *Splitting*, Tully Toffener, Member of Parliament visits Catterwall & Moss premises, Brian Moss is the lawyer in charge of Lady Rice’s case. Tully Toffener is married to Sara who is to inherit the Tuscan-Gothic house, surrounded by elegant Georgian buildings in Lodestar Avenue. However, there is a minor snag: the house is still inhabited by Sara’s grandmother, Wendy, and Congo, the man to whom she remarried when she was already an old woman. Apart from letting the house go to rack and ruin, both were selling all the valuable items it contained, and dilapidating a fortune. Tully Toffener complains to Brian Moss that Congo, the healthier of the old couple and thus the one responsible for its maintenance, has “begun to see things. He needs to be shut away for his own good. He’s senile. Alzheimer, I expect” (*S*, 74). His inner world has taken hold of the outer one. He receives nightly visitors: “Congo would leap and flail with his broom all night and be exhausted by morning, but at least Wendy could sleep. He kept her safe” (*S*, 74). In his paranoia he keeps fighting and defending himself from so unlikely characters as Bedouins, Communards, a pirate, Peter Pan’s Tinkerbell, who would scream “abuse, striking out with what looked as an extended sparkler” (*S*, 74), a rope garrotte-brandishing executioner, or even “a row of Arabs squatting by the

garden". Paradoxically this inner-world of his is given full swing in the last chapters. After Congo and Wendy's death, Una, Wendy's daughter, returns to claim her inheritance. She turns the house into a brothel and the ghosts of the former inhabitants of Lodestar House, including Wendy and Congo, together with the figments of the latter's imagination are seen again by Maria and Oriole, any of whom could be described as "a natural at the other world" (*S*, 320). This brothel decorated in gaudy taste, "glitter[ing] in vulgar crimson and gold", from the ceilings of which "hung over-the-top chandeliers", and characterised by a garish combination of "erotica and strong colours" (*Splitting*, 318) offers the perfect atmosphere for transgressive sexual adventures in which individuals may slide unobtrusively in a genderless flowing continuum in which the divisions established on account of "being hung with a penis" or "being split by a vagina" no longer hold. Furthermore, since the place is riddled with what Maria describes as "opportunistic ghosts", probably referring to the Bedouins, Communards, the pirate or Peter Pan's Tinkerbell, those bothering presences born out of Congo's active imagination, and the spirits of previous residents of Lodestar House voyeuristically witnessing the sexual prowesses of the guests and clients of the new enterprise, the barriers between life and death, between reality and fiction are trespassed. In this respect, when comparing some twentieth century male and female writers, Waugh says of the latter that they don't consider "the experience of the loss of rigid boundaries between inner and outer as necessarily threatening" (1989: 32). Rather, we should add that for women writers the fantastic constitutes the optimum means to tackle the subject of the constructions of personality through the collective by momentarily removing all social norms contributing to identity formation. The above-mentioned case can be offered as a good instance of the case in point, despite the fact that Weldon is

none of the female writers referred to by Patricia Waugh on this occasion. Splitting in her is not so much a result of paranoia, of the side-effects of a concept of identity based on the rejection of its emotional aspects, as a deconstruction of it. In addition, the definite comic bent of Weldon's attempts at demolishing traditional conceptions of identity following the lines of gender does not diminish the liberatory effects of her narrative.

Among Una's recommendations to Angel when she is offered to work for her at the brothel she is soon to open at Lodestar House is that which goes: "It's the 'I' you need to forget" (*Splitting*, 303). This is again another of the countless examples in which the construction of personality through the collective, through the individuals' relational capacities is invoked. To Una we also owe the belief that: "the cock/cunt divide was now obsolete" (*Splitting*, 297). The identity of those who work for her is not defined in terms of their sex, were it so, it would be somewhat confusing. Among them there are three heterosexual females, two lesbians, one transsexual, one transvestite, two gay men and three heterosexual males, but all of them are required: "to be able and willing to move freely between at least three other gender subdivisions without protest or personal difficulty" (*Splitting*, 300). This, though it must be taken in the flippant and mocking fashion intended, is probably the nearest Weldon comes to Judith's Butler's formulation that gender constitutes "a free floating artifice" (1990: 6).

Notwithstanding the fact that most of Weldon's heroines are heterosexual, there are some cases of women fond of women in her novels. To start with in *Praxis* and *Auto-Da-Fay* we are given descriptions of the swoonings produced at female schools and the crushes some female students had on older girls. In fact at these institutions they didn't favour any sort of dealings between girls of different ages: "Unnatural friendships

were feared, and closely watched for, and flourished” (*Praxis*, 38). In this respect, we see young women for whom the experience of giving sexual comfort to other members of their own sex is not new, as is the case of Elsa with Alice, because after all: “Thus Elsa did with her school-friends on many an educational and recreational school journey” (*Little Sisters*, 165). The profitable relationship established between Ruth and Nurse Hopkins in *The Lives and Loves of a She-Devil* should not go unnoticed. In *Remember Me* Renee “extracts comfort, company and solace” ([1976]1992: 49) from her girlfriends. Another instance of women tired of men who take to women is that of Mrs Hemsley and the dentist’s wife who become a couple after their husbands are dead in *Little Sisters*. In these three last cases we are talking of heterosexual women who, despairing of unsatisfactory relationships with men, resort to liaisons with members of their same sex. Similarly, Madge and Stephanie, co-founders of the feminine magazine called *Menstra* in honour of menstrual blood, go out together for a time in *Big Women*. When the former asks Johnny, who is gay and dying of AIDS, for some financial help for the magazine his answer is as follows: “Go on worshipping your own blood, we’ve got reason to be fearful of our own!” ([1997]1998: 253). The subject of the gay community is also touched upon in *Rhode Island Blues* where it is mentioned that “they created more of a noisy family feel than the females managed” (2000a: 56). All in all, although in Weldon novels the subject of homosexuality is not avoided, it mostly has to do with heterosexual women or is reduced to a group of anecdotes. Homosexuality is approached at a thematic level, it does not put pressure on a heterosexual orthodoxy (Mills 1996: 237).

According to Lynne Pierce “critics like Butler have succeeded in putting the category ‘woman’ into complete epistemological freefall” (Mills 1996: 227). Race,

class, nation vie with gender as marks of identity. The identity of a woman in the third world has little to do with that of a Western one and that helps deconstruct the term woman. The subjects of homosexuality and race crop up in Weldon's novels, yet they do not constitute issues directly addressed or confronted. Her protagonists are all white middle class British women. However, when we are reading her novels we are dealing with the dismantling of the traditional concept of a self, of a subjectivity created at the expense of others. Likewise, even though play and experimentation in regard to women's identity or the search for it abound, we cannot talk about her novels in terms of "epistemological maze[s]" (Dowling 1998: 136). That would respond to the Postmodern conception of a fragmented subject, which is an extension of the humanist one and constitutes its subsequent stage. This is a version which women, who had no part in its creation and who have fought to acquire the status of subjects, are naturally remiss to embrace. However, there must be a reformulation of identities; women's first aim is to be able to interact as subjects in their own right. In this regard nobody would dare deny that Hattie, one of Weldon's latest heroines, excels at this in spite of all appearances. We get the impression that, like with many previous Weldonian female characters, she sleepwalks through her existence. She is taken by surprise despite all the "warning bells" and lets herself be deprived of daughter, husband and home by an upstart au pair who has not taken too many pains to dissemble her cunning intentions. Given that Hattie does not come across as one of those typical gullible heroines of previous novels who do not notice what goes on around them, we assume that the only reason she behaves as one is the prevailing ethos which comes down to "just let's all get along and empathise with others and upset no one or it will end in the Twin Towers" (*She May not Leave*, 195). Nonetheless we learn with dismay, or rather alacrity, that it is us who have been deluded

all through the novel. She is not cheated into leaving her family; she just plays along her babysitter's plans because they suit hers. Domesticity throttles her and she can no longer stand it. She is a free independent woman who can have any man for the asking, she simply refuses to be tied to one. She does not become a new wise woman bent on being happy after going through turmoil and disorder. She has been so all along, as would be expected of one of the youngest of Weldon's heroines. Many before her have paved the way to achieve this. Her predecessors have learnt for her that they are to incorporate the unruly aspects of their personalities, otherwise they may become suicidal and not proper human beings in their own right. It is the cry the protagonist in *Splitting* utters who, having tried to deny her most playful and frivolous self all through the narrative, eventually misses and realises she cannot do without her: "Can't we have Angel back" ([1995]1996: 249). From self-sacrificing victims at everyone's beck and call women start to heed their own needs and requirements. We have seen how hard it has been the transition in Weldon's heroines from half-beings or shackled cripples into volitional free-acting agents with a full-blown sense of autonomy and we have relished it. We become likewise aware of how alien to Hattie, one of Weldon's most recent heroines, seems the bitter comment Jocelyn makes about two young girls who are enthusiastic about the preparations for the wedding of one of them: "At least the priest accords them a soul" (*Down Among the Women*, 106) with all the intimations of what went before and after the wedding.

2 UNDER THE SPELL OF THE GOTHIC

2.1 A NEO-GOTHIC PERSPECTIVE

As we know, Weldon's novels are extremely witty comedies punctuated with black humour where the asymmetrical character of heterosexual relationships and the insidious rapports established among women are mercilessly satirized. However, I would like to suggest that we delve a bit deeper and consider her work from another perspective. In the introduction to *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions*, Susanne Becker refers to an extended fashion of Postmodern reformulations of a two-hundred-year-old literary form, the Gothic, which is employed by female writers as an useful tool to "attack the often misogynist complacencies of the contemporary cultural establishment" (1999: 4). The Gothic has played a very interesting role in women's narrative from its very origins: apart from having originally counted upon an eager and enthusiastic female audience who found in this literature the much sought after entertainment and evasion, the Gothic genre, following Alison Milbank, has in some cases served as "an overt vehicle for social and feminist critique" through a constant representation of women's "nightmares of oppression and enclosure" (in Mulvey-Roberts 2009: 121). In order to prove this, Alison Milkbank mentions Charlotte Smith's *The Old Manor House* (1793) and Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman* (1798) as classical paradigms of female Gothic novels portraying social protest. Thereby, this genre has traditionally been favoured by women writers as an appropriate channel to convey the sadly persistent domestic horror which, to a lesser or greater extent, seems to be a relentless feature in most societies. This depiction is appropriately done by means of the

technique of estrangement which is a common characteristic of the Gothic: what is natural and familiar stops being so and becomes spooky and uncanny. Susanne Becker attributes the enduring prevalence of this gender not only to its inextricable connection with the female gender but also to its characteristic pose of moral ambivalence which so much accords with the Postmodern spirit. She also mentions Fay Weldon's comic ironic bestsellers alongside Angela Carter's erotic Gothic tales as well-known examples of this Gothic revival or neo-Gothic popularity in England. If we examine Weldon's narrative bearing this in mind, plenty of examples can be produced offhandedly to prove this point. The following considerations about the Gothic imprint on Weldon's work may seem to be too interspersed with comments on specific books or we might even seem to dwell on them for longer than thought necessary. However I consider it essential so as to understand how Weldon's novels operate and to what a high degree they benefit from a Gothic perception of reality, even if it is just for the sake of exceeding it.

Let us start with a quotation from *The Stepmother's Diary*. By the end of this narrative there is a sentence reflecting the thoughts of the protagonist, Sappho, which may be said to touch upon all the basic themes of Weldon's fiction:

My white knight in shining armour, the one who was meant to rescue me, did turn up, but alas he was already married to Isolde, and soon his armour was discarded and moths got in and rust, and now he is nothing but a heap of gnawed, still stirring bones, animated only by his hatred of me. (*The Stepmother's Diary*, 261)

This quotation may be said to encapsulate the subject-matter of Weldon's novels. It intimates the tale of terror into which an apparently happy romantic heterosexual relationship has derived. The transition from romance to horror is abrupt, driving gullible women, who have been passively contemplating how their unfounded expectations and dreams are easily dashed, to the verge of despair. The masochism they have displayed when complying with all their husband's whims and which has led them

to become devoid of personality may be only compared to the sadism their submissive behaviour awakes in the husbands. Similarly, this quotation refers in passing to the probable rivalry between two women: “but alas he was already married to Isolde”. In the same vein, novels like *Trouble* or *Worst Fears*, in which the heroines are suddenly taken aback by the sudden instability of their so far secure and safe lives, also reverberate with resonances pertaining to a literature characterised by the disturbance of the soothing “solidity of normality” (*Spa Decameron*, 230), by the irruption of the irrational into an otherwise pleasant and humdrum existence. A series of ghastly events or what Weldon would describe as a “whole spew of nastiness and corruption,” (*Auto Da Fay*, 134) which go far beyond the worst nightmares the main characters of these novels may have, suddenly encroach on their routine. Thereby, horror enters the picture, making the heroines lose the reins of their lives. This invasion of creepiness, this process of defamiliarisation by means of which what is close and homely suddenly becomes sinister instantly links Weldon’s fiction to a specific literary tradition.

In regard to this genre, Barfoot in his superb essay “The Gist of the Gothic” refers to the technique of estrangement as a method commonly employed in Gothic novels, he alludes to the weirdness created by the presence of intrusive guests and phantoms which “cast a doubt on the daylight and undermine the present with charges from an atavistic unreformed past” (in Tinker-Villani 1995: 161). We are thus referring to a fiction with a penchant for extreme emotions and basically concerned with individuals harassed and tormented by nightmares and misgivings caused by stressful experiences. According to Barfoot, this literature is primarily articulated around the idea of crossing borders: the irrational suddenly invades the rational world; the familiar, sifted through human mental processes, turns sinister and uncanny; the past trespasses

on the present; positive action is triggered by terror and, if the ending is a happy one, the characters eventually manage to travel from an existence plagued by conflict to a free unhaunted one. Incidentally, this pivotal Gothic idea of crossing borders, of “boundary-blurring” has also been decisive in the hybrid nature of Gothic writings at a formal level. Indeterminacy has been a major feature of this genre since its inception. It started as an attempt to amalgamate “high culture” and “low culture”. In this regard, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) by Walpole, which may signal the beginning of this tradition of Gothic novels, is described by its author as a combination of “two kinds of romance”. Jerrold E. Hogle explains that his style is the result of a “cross between medieval chivalric romances and neoclassic tragedies oriented toward the old aristocracy, on the one hand, and the newly ascendant bourgeois novel” (2008: 8) with a taste for the comic and an attachment to reality which was intended to fulfil the desires and expectations of a burgeoning middle class, on the other.

The above-mentioned feature of constant border-crossing, of an exploratory experimentation which consists in the search for a new identity but which, at the same time, entails a confrontation with all those elements that have been expelled and *abjected* for the sake of the formation of a previous and sanctioned individuality conforming to the rigid parameters of gender construction could be broadly applied to the whole of Weldon’s writings. It could be said of them that the perspective they adopt, their focus on the world has a distinct neo-Gothic quality. For instance, in a novel so seemingly out of range of the Gothic as *Rhode Island Blues* there is a description of the New England coast very much in line with this spirit of unrest and suspicion in which a looming and lurking past interferes with what, to all intents and purposes, appears to be a quiet and uneventful present. This is the vision Sophia, the narrator, offers to us when

she and her grandmother, Felicity, are looking for a home for elderly people in Mystic:

Although a landscape may look stunningly pleasant and tranquil, the ferocious energies of its past –and few landscapes are innocent– are never quite over. The impulse to exterminate the enemy, to loot and plunder, to gain confidence before stabbing in the back is hard to overcome: if it's not with us in the present it seeps through from the past. (*RIB*, 30)

The subject matter of the novel does not deviate from this style, Sophia, in her search for unknown relatives through the agency of a detective, starts to stir up her grandmother's past only to unveil hideous forgotten events, in the shape of deaths, incest, and rape, which had better remain undisturbed. We learn how Lois Wasserman, Felicity's step-mother had contributed to the death of her mother and, younger and prettier, replaced her in Felicity's father's heart. The novel also reveals to us the way in which after her father's demise, fifteen-year-old Felicity was raped by Anton Wasserman, Lois's brother and lover. As a result, she had a daughter whom she gave for adoption. And now, after so many years, and with the help of Sophia's unfortunate intervention, the offspring of Felicity's first daughter reappears out of the blue with a view to getting hold of their grandmother's invaluable painting by Utrillo. Nothing better could be expected from Lorna and Guy, who, sharing the same mattress, clearly descend from their ambitious and cruel grandfather Anton and have the same blood as their grand aunt Lois –they may be said to stand for human repositories of atavistic tendencies. In this same grain, the Golden Bowl, the home for elderly people that Felicity has chosen as her place of residence and in which Nurse Dawn measures the medical doses of the inmates somewhat indiscriminately, is not as agreeable as it seems. However, Felicity, as aged and excessive as the melodrama that surrounds her, turns out to be the best antidote for so many misfortunes. She represents the culmination of those virtues that a Weldonian heroine is required to have. A survivor at heart, her dauntless

behaviour flies in the face of Gothic encumbrances. Furthermore, thanks to her lack of disposition to become a victim to circumstances she is never overwhelmed or swamped by traumatic experiences: “Felicity managed brilliantly, skittering along the surface of her life, still at it after all this years” (*Rhode Island Blues*, 220). She has acquired toughness, a quality of frivolity and indifference to despairing thoughts that is inextricably linked to her capacity to reject and not give in easily to feelings –this attribute of uncompromising blitheness happens to ultimately constitute the essential fibre which characterises Weldon’s heroines, the be-all and end-all to which they have to aspire. This enables her to easily sort out and dodge all the obstacles that come her way, with the one exception of the madness of her second daughter and Sophia’s dead mother, Angel. Felicity may be said to epitomize those women who exceed the inherent fears of the conflict-ridden existence that Gothic literature portrays. As Clara, one of the other elderly residents of the Golden Bowl explains to her: “People take notice of you” (*RIB*, 230) in contrast to what happens to the rest of them, whose ties with the exterior world have been sundered. At eighty three, she even falls in love with a gambler whose faith in chance clashes with the atmosphere of disease and despondency of the place, sending the reader a hopeful message even if one of a somewhat exaggerated and extreme nature: “True love. Could it be that if you just hung round for long enough, your faith intact, it happened? When you least expected it, there it was at last” (*RIB*, 124). This is the positive attitude in the face of a harsh reality –even if it is sometimes of a parodic nature– that is usually portrayed in Weldon’s novels, since the resolution of conflicts is an essential part of women’s growth. Those who do not acquire the capacity to solve them become the significantly impaired characters or ghosts who on occasions haunt her literature. The way Weldonian heroines skilfully sort out, and, hence, transcend the

Gothic-like snares they come across runs parallel to the suppleness and freedom of Weldon's refashioning of this genre.

Another obvious case in point would be "The Vicar's Ex-wife's Tale". This is one of the stories in *The Spa Decameron* and no one could deny that it has all the ingredients of a Gothic tale. It is narrated by Tess, the ex-wife of an Anglican vicar, to the rest of women who are spending their Christmas at a luxurious spa in Cumbria. In the past she had been married to a handsome priest twenty-one years her senior with no capacity for empathy, "a borderline Asperger's or perhaps OCD –obsessional compulsive disorder" (*The Spa Decameron*, 293), who secretly blamed her for not having children. Taking into account that the flamboyant ceremonial and rigmarole of the Catholic Church suited him perfectly well, he also resented his marriage to her, since it was the only hindrance to his becoming a successful priest of that doctrine. Tess also tells her listeners that she had resigned herself to this unfair situation with stoicism but strange unnatural things began to happen at the vicarage, an ancient haunted Victorian building adjacent to a Norman church and very close to a graveyard where a century before a pregnant maid servant had hanged herself from a yew tree when confronted with a fine for objects she had broken. Accordingly, strange things began to happen around Tess: very valuable antiques started to fall and break, socks began to disappear, taps were left running, doors opened without human intervention, saucepans constantly burnt as if the dead maid had put a curse on the house. All Tess's endeavours were aimed at sorting out all kinds of domestic disasters caused by the ghosts haunting the vicarage. When Tess is pressed by her audience to confirm the existence of these ghosts, she recognises that perhaps all these uncanny phenomena, all this distortion of reality may be accounted for by "the power of rage if you try to deny it" (*TSD*, 313). On the

other hand, this “power of rage” would constitute her mighty and unacknowledged other self (*TSD*, 303) –and we will see the importance of the hidden or second self in Gothic literature.

2.2 THE RADICAL NATURE OF WELDON’S SATIRIC AIMS.

We should be a bit wary when referring to the Gothic characteristics of Weldon’s work and consider the nature of the filiation of modern novels to existing genres. We must never lose sight of its beguiling character, since this assimilation can be compared to a playful exercise of flirtation. Consequently, it does not consist in an unconditional absorption of, in the words of Linda Hutcheon, the “backgrounded material”, but rather in its absorption by means of its transformation following the requirements of the new work. An unsuspected richness is thus injected into what otherwise might have become a lifeless and unproductive tradition. However, this is not an innocent process; trans-contextualization entails an effort of analysis and reflexivity which contributes to produce judgement on the incorporated matter. As Linda Hutcheon in her study *A Theory of Parody* explains: “Unlike imitation, quotation, or even allusion, parody requires that critical ironic distance” (Hutcheon 2000: 34).

For instance, in *The Lives and Loves of a She-Devil* the pernicious effect of popular gothics on the lives of women is highly criticised: “The light was treacherous; it spoke of clear water and faith life when in fact there were rocks and dark and storms out there, and a mariner should not be lulled but must be warned” (*LLSD*, 192). This kind of literature fills women with false hopes which are invariably shattered. That is the reason why some of Ruth’s neighbours in Eden Grove “are found hanging and overdosed in the

marital bed” (*LLS*, 12). However, as can be inferred from the mention of “rocks and “dark storms” or the “High Tower” inhabited by Mary Fisher the aesthetics of this kind of novels has been successfully absorbed in an exercise of parody, the nature of which entails criticism and transcendence as well as admiration. In this regard we should take into account that, according to Linda Hutcheon: “Parodic art both deviates from an aesthetic norm and includes that norm within itself as backgrounded material. Any real attack would be self-destructive” (2000: 44). Something similar happens in *The Lives and Loves of a She-Devil*, and here the ambivalence is served, since this novel entails the absorption of the aesthetics of the popular gothics. However, their messages of hope in order to appease women’s yearnings triggered by their mediocre lives, by the abyss between their aspirations to be immensely pretty, inordinately rich, and be married to a charming prince and the prosaic lives they lead, though conveyed, acquire here a very disturbing character. Whereas the popular gothics’ main function is that of consolation once dissatisfaction has been identified, the novel under consideration goes beyond that aim, since it involves a remodelling of women’s aspirations. Considering the fact that the tackling of women’s discontent on account of their lack of power involves matters concerning the formation of individuals according to gender parameters, the Gothic method of estrangement is probably the most suitable vehicle to deal with subjects as intricate as those relating to the “bio-politics” governing the construction of femininity. In the beginning of *The Lives and Loves of a She-Devil* Ruth sets out on a course of revenge against Mary Fisher, a famous writer of popular gothics. Having transcended the ordinary run of woman, Mary Fisher epitomizes all the aspirations of suburban housewives: She leads a dream-like existence full of romance and luxuries, as if she herself were the end-product of her novels, one of the heroines out of her books.

Nonetheless, the actions of a hyperbolically ugly anti-heroine, who occupies the opposite end of the spectre, i.e., that of complete failure in regard to the fulfilment of the norms of femininity required to reach success in a society governed by gendered criteria, are going to put to an end to her privileged position. After a long series of cunning actions of a picaresque nature, in which her housewifery skills are shown to advantage, Ruth finally manages to take revenge on Mary Fisher for having deprived her of husband. On account of Ruth's evildoing, Mary Fisher dies as a humble and lonely housewife, just like any of her common and frustrated readers. As for Ruth, abnormally ugly at the beginning of the novel, she is physically transformed in Mary Fisher's image after a complex series of surgical operations which have resonances of *Frankenstein*. Through a process of defamiliarisation, traditional beauty becomes grotesque: If initially Ruth was a freak because of her physical appearance, now she could still be said to remain a freak because of her monstrous psyche or because of the dodgy and painful methods she has chosen in order to achieve her transformation. Concepts are deconstructed into its opposites when coming so close into contact with them and the end-result obtained after this experiment is a contradictory and hybrid cross between the myths of Frankenstein and Galathea. As we have just seen, the theme of beauty is by now imbued in the Gothic and has lost its original innocence; deep layers of dark meaning have been added to it and have made it abhorrent. Consequently, the incorporation of Gothic material and aesthetics is accompanied with a considerable degree of complexity and ambiguity. Despite the fact that the ideals of femininity have been reversed—the lack of contention which has characterised Ruth, as well as the lack of scruples she has shown all along has placed her in a sphere dominated by masculine values—the novel is ended, all the same, with a heroine after Mary Fisher's likeness still

standing on the edge of a high cliff, an independent and autonomous woman who can have any man at her command if she so wishes like any she-devil worth the name.

Let us be more precise and examine the distancing attitude, the implicit pose of aloofness that goes into the task of incorporation that in Weldon's narrative is done through humour and irony. In their original study entitled *Gothic and the Comic Turn* Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik maintain the coexistence of a serious tendency of Gothic focused on terror and anxiety alongside a comic current, which is already explicit in Walpole's writings. They also explain how Gothic texts "locate themselves on the unstable boundary between humour and horror and transgress it in both directions" (2005: 165). Accordingly, this comic turn must be never understood as an anomaly, but, rather, as a component element of a genre characterised by its hybridity and its insistence on self-parody and fakery. Fay Weldon's novels clearly partake of this comic turn of the genre and the reproduction of the ghastliness and shocking effects of the Gothic mode constitute the black humour which, on account of its aggressiveness, is the weapon employed to compel her heroines to react in self-defence and assert themselves in the face of injustices. The best instance to prove this would be to mention *Remember Me*, where Madeleine, its protagonist becomes a corpse, as we will see the most extreme example of *abjection*, and reappears as a ghost. Paradoxically, from this point of no-return, of complete dissolution of identity she manages to properly reinstate herself in the memory of her ex-husband and provide all the means so that her daughter may be entitled to have an agreeable future.

It would also be interesting to take some of the examples above mentioned in order to see the humorous perspective adopted in these novels. The best antidote for the Gothic atmosphere in *Rhode Island Blues* is its undaunted and ancient heroine, Felicity

—her exaggerated and thereby somehow parodic presence flies in the face of the melodramatic content of the novel. As for the tale of horror narrated in *The Stepmother's Diary*, it would be useful to consider the satirical treatment given to the most typical subject in Weldon. The tragic story of a husband gradually dismantling all that his wife stands for is here seen as the result of the latter's determination to proceed on a "wilful course of self-destruction" (*The Stepmother's Diary*, 240). Sappho, the aforementioned wife, finally becomes aware of it thanks to the novel she is writing out of despair at her distressful situation. This will be the means to help her outgrow her gullibility and come to terms with reality. Her mother, Emily, on the other hand, sees through her sham marriage and her streak of masochism even before she starts reading the diaries and the novel Sappho has left under her care. The readers are alerted to the situation not only by what they read alongside Emily, but also on account of her comments or thoughts or even of her conversations with her friend Barnaby, thus making Sappho not an object of pity, since we have known all along that she has been deceiving herself, but rather one who needs to correct her ways and attitude. Regarding another example already mentioned, "The Vicar's Ex-wife's Tale," the ghosts that haunt the vicarage stand for evidences of the personal hindrances that have to be overcome in order to reach a satisfactory and free existence. As a now successful Tess explains: "I have ghosts to thank for what I am today" (*The Spa Decameron*, 291). Their message was loud and sound: "They frightened me out of my old skin into a new one" (*SD*, 291), and she listened to them attentively evolving from a vicar's ex-wife, to a doctor's ex-wife and finally achieving fulfilment as a prosperous banker after leaving behind the doctor and their baby.

2.3 THE GOTHIC TEXTURE: A HARSH REALITY

If we take into account the ascendancy of the Gothic over her literature, many aspects of it will become clear. This taste for ghosts and for the irrational, notwithstanding its comic vein, and the fact that her writings may appear purposefully “limiting” or “self-limiting” can only be accounted for by the influence of the Gothic over her novels, by their filiation to that two-century-old form. This, which at first may be considered a far-fetched hypothesis, is the only plausible explanation for many of the features of Weldon’s comic literary production. Even in a novel so apparently un-gothic as *Leader of the Band* plenty of traces of this genre can be found. We could easily find similarities between this novel and, for instance, *Frankenstein*. To start with, both are characterised by bordering on science fiction. In addition, *Leader of the Band* shows an obsession with reproduction from a woman’s psychical and physiological perspective as one of its main topics – Ellen Moers has spoken of *Frankenstein* as a “a woman’s mythmaking on the subject of birth”, in the sense that it focuses on the trauma of the afterbirth (1977: 93). Moers also mentions Mary Shelley’s early and tragic experience with motherhood since her own mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, had died while giving birth to her. To this it must be added the death of her two first babies, which happened to be illegitimate, the first one was born prematurely and died a few days after and the second one only lived for a year. Likewise, Shelley’s first wife committed suicide when she found herself pregnant by another and so on and so forth.

If we turn to Weldon’s novels and consider, for example, the family life of the protagonist’s grandmother in *Leader of the Band* we find no small amount of : “shameful secrets – illegitimacy, insanity, cancer, divorce, bankruptcy: all unthinkable,

unsayable, weaving in and out” (*LB*, 69) to the extent that the protagonist defines herself as the end-result of immoderate and extravagant experiences which go beyond the boundaries of the socially accepted: “I am the point where the mad, the bad and the infamous meet. I am an ordinary person, but carried to extremes” (*LB*, 137). The strong element of self-conscious parody in a kind of descriptions only admissible in a literature which gloats on the emotional, the sentimental, and the irrational in defiance of contention and rationality should be stressed. Weldon’s novels entail an incorporation of the modes and conception of a literature born to grapple with the anxiety caused by the horrors which prevalent ideologies produce. All that is considered to be beyond the socially accepted boundaries of propriety becomes monstrous.

It would be clarifying to ponder for a brief moment in the texture of the reality Fay Weldon conjures up for us in *Rebecca West* when assigned to write the biography of a novelist she so much admires. The fact that she chooses an episode of social disgrace and probably terror over all the remarkable events that invariably punctuate a fruitful and successful life is meaningful. Weldon recreates the night when Rebecca West surrounded, as she assumes, by unfamiliar people gives birth to an illegitimate child by her lover H. G. Wells at lodgings in Hunstanton. This happens the very day World War One breaks out and Weldon imagines Rebecca West totally bewildered by the overwhelming process of labour, of the different stages of which, as is thought proper at that time, she has not been previously informed: “All is ignorance, all is faith: all is terror and you are mystified, and you are hurting, and all you understand is pain, anguish, punishment...” (*Rebecca West*, 38). Weldon fictionally sends Rebecca West letters from the future in an attempt to support her and commend her courage in this moment of darkness and social disgrace in which she has lost the good opinion of her

peers. There are words of encouragement; through this experience with terror Rebecca West will acquire a stronger moral fibre: "It will be the making of you" (*RW*, 61). The world is henceforth to benefit from the moral strength shown in the journey Rebecca West undertakes from ignorance to enlightenment. Through her experience she has paved their way to "a better future, a freer, nobler existence (*RW*, 33)

Originally, the Gothic entailed the rejection of a realist depiction of the world in favour of a limited perspective exacerbated by the excesses and horrors resultant from a hyperbolic or parodic vision. However, this irrational and inflated focus on excesses and horrors demands the immediate confrontation of hidden fears and the subsequent victory over them. Taking this into account, we can begin to see the mock ghost and anachronic presences which proliferate in Weldon's novels and the irreverent play with the supernatural or the comic simulation of the irrational under a new light. They will no longer constitute mere anecdotal incidents of an outmoded and redundant character only apt for burlesque and satiric purposes. They represent symptoms of an impairing disease or psychological disorder which have to be overcome and eradicated in order to achieve a fulfilled existence, and they appear in Weldon's novels as constant variations of a genre which, in spite of its unpretentious origins and seemingly unassuming aims, still displays an inextinguishable capacity to produce fertile and inventive reworkings.

2.4. INCORPORATION OF FOLK ELEMENTS

With its refusal of realistic and mimetic forms, the Gothic was in its origins a good vehicle for all those irrational, emotional impulses which the dominant culture tried to repress. Perhaps we should remember the massive migration of workers to the

cities produced on account of the Industrial Revolution and the subsequent feeling of social alienation experienced by many individuals who had been uprooted from their communities of origin. No wonder people turned to folklore in search of a tradition that would reshape their lost identities. Fantastic literature absorbed popular myths and fairy tales and favoured romance over realism thus fulfilling the strong need for escapism of a displaced population. In his above-mentioned essay, “The Gist of The Gothic,” Barfoot, referring to early Gothic novels, explains their adoption of popular forms and swerve from the mainstream realism for the sake of the creation of a sentimental fiction full of “tears and screams”. He also considers that “these particular types of novel in themselves represent a limited, self-limiting, and marginal achievement” (in Tinkler-Villani 1995: 171). Some classic female writers, who, to a greater or lesser extent have appropriated Gothic patterns for their fictions, like the Brontës, Mrs Gaskell and even George Eliot were well acquainted with folk literary tradition like fairy tales or ballads and included them in their writings. In Fay Weldon’s neo-adaptations of this familiar form there are humorous nods to folk tradition in the shape of characters like the witch-like Mabs or, even in a lighter vein, her mother “On moonlit nights, even now, she would switch off the television and go gathering herbs – mugwort and comfrey, cowslip and henbane, or any of the hundred and more plants she knew by heart or by sight” (Puffball, 25). Besides, we constantly come across allusions to fairy-tales motifs, to the extent that *Little Sisters* turns around them and is written in this key. Similarly *The Stepmother’s Diary* represents a reversal of the story of Hansel and Gretel in an adjustment to modified archetypes. Stepmothers are no longer the evil figures who force Hansel and Gretel to “roam the forest”. On the contrary, the latter “is awash with lonely, weeping second wives shivering in the cold and rain, tripping over tree roots, grabbed at

by thistles and thorns which can pierce the heart” (*The Stepmother’s Diary*, 14).

Many of Fay Weldon’s short stories have the quality of traditional accounts to the extent that they appear to share the same substratum —we could think, for instance, of “Santa Claus’s New Clothes” a very singular version of the popular tale of Hans Christian Andersen. Some of them may distinctly serve the purposes of cautionary tales, as in the case of “Living by the Small Print”, “Who goes Where?” or “Pumpkin Pie”. And to corroborate this we could employ the two sentences beginning the last story, which was published in the collection of *Moon over Minneapolis*: “This is a story for Thanksgiving. Pay good attention or there won’t be any more” (*Moon over Minneapolis*, 81), and the narrator goes on to explain that Thanksgiving will cease to exist if the rich go on taking advantage of the poor. As a step further, we are given an account illustrating this in which Antoinette, a South-American girl working for the Marvins is really stressed and overworked on Thanksgiving day. Instead of having the long-needed day off to spend with her family, she has to prepare a buffet for eleven people by herself —Claire, the Cordon Bleu girl, called in sick the day before and was fired on the spot. Under such strain, Antoinette burns the cholesterol-free pumpkin pie replacing it with one made with whole eggs taken from her home, thus putting the life of Mr Junior Marvin, who has a triple bypass, at risk. So the admonitory piece of advice offered at the end of this story is that one should make do without the pumpkin pie on Thanksgiving Day instead of telling others to elaborate it for you, otherwise, “you’ll find cholesterol in your pie and a knife in your back” (*MOM*, 88).

2.5. THE SUPERNATURAL

Apart from the reproduction of folk elements, the Gothic emphasis on the fantastic is also replicated in Weldon's narrative. The Gothic, by becoming the necessary threshold to modernity required by a public in need of guidance, contributes to the adaptation to new circumstances of a disoriented population. However, as corresponds to a literature riddled with contradictions, this genre's tackling of the past is complicated and amounts to something more than rejection. In *Gothic Literature 1825-1914*, the volume dedicated to Victorian times in a *History of the Gothic* consisting in four books edited by Wales UP, Jarlath Killeen quotes Max Weber when explaining that "Protestantism divested itself as much as possible from the three most ancient and most powerful concomitants of the sacred — miracle, mystery, and magic" (Jarlath Killeen 2009: 31). The dominant and complex role of the fantastic in Gothic literature in its origins can be understood as an obvious reflection of the nostalgia for the "miracle, mystery, and magic" of the Catholic England of former times. The need for the sacred is not merely a vestige from the past, but rather a constitutive component of the psyches of the Victorians, still obsessed with the awesome and irrational side of existence, which hinders an untrammelled transition into the future —though the nature of the latest statement is made dubious by the very insistence on the fantastic in this literature primarily characterised by its ambivalent stamp. Thereby, when analysing Weldon's narrative, we should not discard the kitsch character of the anti-realism resultant from some spooky necrophilic inclinations as in *Remember Me* or the evocation of the supernatural in the form of the everyday mock ghosts which constantly make their presence felt in her novels. These innocuous ghosts, apparently as fictitious and unbelievable as the injustices they represent, are there in their materiality to remind the rest of the characters of the victims of domestic horror or of rivalry between women.

Nonetheless, transcontextualized as they are, they produce a comic effect insofar as they are conspicuously out of place in a contemporary setting, thus satirizing the preposterous situations which created them in the first place. Like in *Growing Rich*, where the ghost of Audrey keeps haunting a bedroom: “If Kim was back sharing a room with Audrey’s ghost, it would serve him right and no doubt keep her contented and quiet” (1992: 156) –Kim had left Audrey for a younger woman, Poison Poppy, and had always put the needs of his fish Kubrick before those of his dead wife. Another instance of the satiric nature of these ghosts is that of Wendy, Ellen’s mother in *Darcy’s Utopia*, whose own mother had become her husband’s wife. The fact that “her mother Wendy hovered round the house in too pretty and ethereal a form to be much use” (1990: 122) was a matter of a certain disappointment to Ellen when she was in need of an older woman as a confidant.

Ghosts may be often connected to old houses and this is the opinion of the protagonist of “Spirits Fly South”, a story included in *A Hard Time to Be a Father*. He thinks the ghost of his burnt Devon cottage –it was used as a drug processing plant by the man from Hong Kong who bought it– has travelled with him to New Zealand and occupied No. 12 of Rosemary street, a house built in the last decade of the nineteenth century now rented by two students, one of them his present girlfriend. The spirits, considering the girls unsuitable tenants of a house so magnificently decorated as to exhibit “a late Victorian verandah” and “elaborate iron railings –original Coalbrookdale” (1998:154), but in dire need of repair, end up banishing the girls from it. After a fashion, the ghost has chosen the protagonist and his new partner, a colleague from University, who also happens to be the owner of the house, as the new occupants of No. 12 who will take it upon themselves to renovate the building, since it was through

its doings that they took up residence there.

In “Watching Me, Watching You” we can find another interesting ghost which, even if it is not accustomed to travelling the long distances that the one in “Spirits Fly South” does, seems more committed than the ghost in that story. Brought to a house located in Aldermans Drive in Bristol by a maid after a séance, it remained there for more than a hundred years. This is a long sojourn, but easily accountable for by the fact that the mistress of the house hanged herself after being replaced in her husband’s affection by the aforementioned maid, thus turning the old house into a haunted abode. This state of affairs finally varies when Ann, another abandoned woman stands outside the house, as an observer, watching her ex-husband Maurice start his life anew in the old building, but this time with her rival in affection, Vanessa, thus repeating the old story. Anne, having been devoid of all feeling after such a traumatic experience, has become the perfect vehicle for the ghost, “a vacuum into which something ha[s] to flow” (*Watching Me, Watching You*, 175). Prompted by this cue, the ghost leaves with her for the basement where she resides in Upton Park. From this moment onwards he alternates between both places tormenting both women for years. Vanessa suffers because the ghost, after all, has “a sense of justice” (*WMWY*, 173) and keeps pestering her on account of having appropriated another woman’s husband. As for Anne, with her feelings for Maurice still intact, she refuses to get seriously involved with a nice, thoughtful salesman who would had been there for her had she not so perversely clung to the idea that ex-husband might eventually return to her. Maurice, for his part, has somehow flourished under the influence of Vanessa; he has become a rich and famous writer of scripts for the film industry in Hollywood. However, he is not satisfied yet, since, as Audrey, the woman who is to be his next wife and who, being much younger

than him will be constantly unfaithful, points out to him, he has not reached the renown he deserves. Instead of slaving away to earn money so that Vanessa can redecorate for the umpteenth time a house which in her eyes is haunted and which however many changes she makes invariably turns out to be an unhealthy environment for bringing up her baby, he considers he is talented enough to write narrative of a certain quality. Only after having moved to a happier life sharing the basement in Upton Park with Anne, does the horror of her previous life with Maurice dawn on Vanessa, once she has also been abandoned by him. The presence of the ghost finally makes sense: "What I sensed was myself now, looking back; me now watching me then, myself remembering me with sorrow for what I was and need never have been" (*WMWY*, 190).

Ghosts are symptomatic of those unsolved conflicts which have become ingrained in women's experience over the centuries and play still a component role in their existence. The haunted life of a woman intimidated by a bullying husband is a timeless phenomenon: "outrunning centuries, interweaving generations, perpetuating itself from mother to daughter" (*WMWY*, 129). Domestic violence is so common that even people who witness it from close quarters consider it natural. For instance, in "Angel, All Innocence", one of the short stories appearing in *Watching Me, Watching You*, Angel's father, a famous crime writer sees nothing amiss in the relationship between her daughter Angel and her husband, the increasingly popular painter Holst. Nonetheless, this may be attributed to the fact that he himself was as cruel and callous to Angel's mother as to drive her to her death. Similarly, the doctor who used to visit the bruised woman living in the attic of the house now inhabited by Angel, though basically concerned about the poor woman, manages to explain away the phenomenon of wife-beating as something happening to a certain kind of woman. Hence, notwithstanding the

fact that psychological torture and women battering fundamentally seem to go unnoticed by the rest of the world, it naturally produces its own ghouls. That explains why Angel is now living in a house, the garret of which is still occupied by the ghost of her tormented predecessor. Angel, all innocence and being more scared of her husband than of the ghost, does not admit to him the existence of this uncanny presence; even if she can clearly hear the noises it produces. However, this eerie companion prompts her to analyse her own situation, making her wonder why the other woman stayed with four children under a leaky roof trying to withstand the beatings of a drunken man. The reason might be lack of money, and, in this case it was a different situation from that of Angel's. However, as she realises hearing the noises of lovemaking from above, her subjection to a relationship of this cruel nature might also be accounted for by "the chains of fleshly desire" (*WMWY*, 149) and, in that case, all the more shame to her and the ghost. Not only, does the ghoul appear in this story as traces of old fears, as a vestige of an abusive situation which has not been put to rights, it also represents its very antidote, its best corrective measure. It becomes the deterrent force necessary to dissuade the younger woman from persisting in this wrong course of action, thereby, acquiring a positive value the moment it urges her to leave a Gothic place of torture. It warns those of the next generation about what may happen to them were they to stay put and endure. In addition, by saving her younger counterpart, the figure of the older woman is redeemed; she somehow escapes, achieving through her sister, and now her double, what she was incapable of doing by herself: "Angel and her predecessor, rescuing each other, since each was incapable of rescuing herself, and rescue always comes, somehow. Or else death" (*WMWY*, 152).

2.6 MORAL RELATIVITY: LACK OF IMPOSITION OF SET VALUES

As we have seen, important features of the Gothic genre permeate Weldon's novels and short stories. However, even if Weldon's adoption of the model which completely infuses her work partakes of the distance and irony required in any Postmodern remodeling of the Gothic genre—a genre in which, on the other hand, distance and irony count as one of its main components—its complete assimilation, the synthetic final effect sometimes makes us lose sight of the boundaries and forget that we are dealing with mock neo-Gothic. These complex sensations are conditioned by the very art of refashioning and echoing previous literary aesthetic forms. Linda Hutcheon explains in *The Theory of Parody* that “parodic art both deviates from an aesthetic norm and includes that norm within itself as backgrounded material. Any real attack would be self-destructive” (2000: 44). Therefore, we would get a far richer perspective if we see Weldon's novels as deeply indebted to this genre, not only in subject matter or in terms of what might be called their neo-Gothic filiation but, above all, in their spirit. This Gothicism with its moral ambiguities and evasion of set values or determinacies, so much to the taste of the Postmodern era, is partly responsible for what I consider to be the ethical richness of Weldon's work.

To start with, if factors like the avoidance of definite closures are added to the position of ideological undecidability adopted in Weldon's narrative—neither a progressive nor a conservative orientation is dominant—it can be easily inferred that her writings are in keeping with what most critics consider distinctive features of the Gothic genre. Weldon's style is characterized by an insistence on demystifying any given experience and the effect obtained from it is that of transcending shock and moral

indignation through laughter. As we will see in the next example, the abyss between context that we are supposed to take seriously and at face value and the informal register employed to depict it is tantamount to the use of irony. Through irony we are always presented with a reality differing from the expected one. This way, what is culturally sanctioned is mocked and constantly evaded. The narrator in *Chalcot Crescent*, an *alter-ego* of the author in, as we will see, the usual game of unending reflections, explains how she was assigned the task of writing a Bill of Human Rights in a Conference of World Intellectuals hosted by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1989 in Moscow and how she was probably not the aptest person for such a task. She was sitting between an African potentate and an Iranian intellectual. The African potentate asked her to be his fifty-second wife, and explained that she couldn't rank any higher because she would distract him from serious matters concerning the lives or deaths of individuals. As for the Iranian, he kept harping on about his aversion to cannibalism on the war-front —the conference was taking place at the time of the Iran-Iraq conflict. When the narrator had to consign to paper the matters dealt with in that Committee the outcome was not very encouraging. She transcribed the following: "The right to have a silent spouse if lives are at stake" and "The right not to be eaten after death" (*Chalcot Crescent*, 180), though she very much doubted the consistency of the second argument. The deflating effect is obvious: she did not employ the formal speech or adorn the content in order to reach the standards of what is purported to be a very official occasion, thus clashing with our suppositions of what a World Conference of Intellectuals should be. We are introduced into an unanticipated context, a derisory alternative to the norm. And, as can be inferred from this anecdote, Weldon's style is not founded on the search for uniformed truths and closed values; it is, rather, a writing involved in a constant process of yielding

ambiguous statements of a dubious nature in a rotund evasion of ultimate pronouncements.

However, not only are Weldon's readers contradicted in their assumptions about the world, more interesting still, they have also to confront the paradoxes inherent in her narrative. We have seen in previous chapters of this dissertation the important role attached to biologism in the Weldonian conception of women, to the extent that sometimes they seem to be reduced to being mere "bundles of oestrogen" (*She May Not Leave*, 215). Similarly, the image of male doctors' probing the female insides is not seen in a good light in her writings and in order to prove this we could just take an extemporaneous quotation from *Big Women*: "Doctors own female bodies; they do it by having information about them; information is power" (1998: 108). At first, this seems roughly the view adopted in the story "And Then Turn out the Light", which begins with a sentence as rotund and grandiloquent as the following: "In Newcastle, New South Wales, they have the highest hysterectomy rate in the entire world" (*Polaris: And Other Stories*, 101) which makes us suspect of gross irregularities attributable to gynecologist practicing in Newcastle. Here we follow the fortunes of a woman suffering a considerable number of indignities in the hands of doctors since a very early age. First, Tandy, when she was twelve, had to visit a paediatrician who "tweaked and poked" with his fingers inside her to confirm that her copious bleeding was produced by a ruptured hymen caused by riding a pony. Then, when she was fourteen, she was publicly accused by John Pierce's mother of hindering his son's academic progress. Rumor had it that they had had sex, which she strongly denied, but, after all, these being the fifties, his father, a doctor, felt obliged to check whether she was still a virgin or not and would have been very cross had not Tandy's mother remembered the incident with the pony.

Next, at college, two medical check-ups were held per year: She was supposed to strip off her clothes in front of an elderly doctor who would palpate her breasts and submit her to internal examinations. She stopped attending these official medical visits the moment she found out that her friend Rhoda's, not endowed with sizeable breasts, was exempted from a clinical inspection as thorough as hers. She had to desist from entering medical training because her father did not consider it a suitable profession for a woman and was forced to attend nursing school instead. After one year in the nursing course she became pregnant by a medical student who was an advocate of coitus interruptus and went to see a doctor who required that she had sex with him and then with his cousin before performing on her the abortion she wanted. So far, Tandy's connection with medicine may be described as a tableau of horrors. Sometime later, she met her husband, Roger, an architect and had two children by him. As a qualified nurse, she got involved with Dr Walker, her only true love and, although Dr Walker eventually came back to his wife, with him she managed to have a glimpse of what a life filled "with a brilliant sexual life" might be like if that initial "sunrise glow" was allowed to develop fully. Roger, for his part, left her after she insisted on telling him about her unfaithfulness. When she was forty-seven, a gynaecologist removed her reproductive organs saying that they were no longer of any use to her. She was appalled and protested that those organs were *her* and that he has robbed her of identity, ruined her life: "You have turned off the light" (*PAOS*, 110). Taking into account the succession of medical outrages which have been the most predominant feature in her life, there seems only to be a possible reaction: that of righteous indignation. The reader readily sides with her against the doctor who proceeds so expediently to the drastic surgical extraction of uterus, fallopian tubes and ovaries. However, when the doctor turns out to be no other than John Pierce, the

sweetheart of her youth, we are presented with an unexpected angle to the story, a slight variation of perspective and the apparition of unforeseen circumstances which make us desist from our attitude of moral uprightness. She had also been responsible for ruining his life: “She’d slept with him and then denied it to everyone, and failed to love him, and spoiled his life, and he couldn’t forgive that. Could anyone, really, man or woman, be expected to forgive?” (*PAOS*, 111).

In her biography of *Rebecca West* Weldon refers to the benefits that women may obtain nowadays from reading magazines like *Cosmopolitan* or *Women’s Own*. Their aim is to enlighten them about relationships and practical, but, vital issues, or, in other words, to help them “know what’s what” (1985, 36). This does not mean that Weldon’s narrative, filled with contradictions as it is, constitutes the place to look for moral certitudes. On the contrary, no closed system of morality is offered, judgments are discarded and ethical stances are contingent to circumstances, to the assimilation of what comes the characters’ way, that is, to an attitude determined by their encounter with others and the empathy they show towards them. In this regard, the protagonists of stories like “Living by the Small Print”, or “Who Goes Where” who have adopted a course of action of complete self-centeredness and ignorance of the harm they may cause the rest of humanity are given a last warning. They eventually react when they cannot longer avoid the unflattering reflection of themselves transmitted by others indicating how horrid they have become. Consequently, we are presented with an ethics in the making, understood as active self-formation.

In the first story of *Wicked Women*, “The End of the Line” we are told of the importance of Latin in order to offer the new generations the intellectual wherewithal to distinguish good from bad. Under the heading good would be clustered the virtues:

“Justice, constancy, endurance, honesty” (*Wicked Women*, 48), whereas vices like procrastination, dishonesty, capriciousness, falsity would belong to the second group. Nonetheless, trying to find rigid moral strictures in Weldon’s writings is a hopeless task, since her fiction is not about them. Instead, we could find fluctuating, even contradictory, positions on all subjects, including, for instance, the fictional treatment of a basically uncontroversial subject like wife battering, although, obviously, within margins. In “Alopecia”, one of the stories collected in *Watching Me, Watching You*, Alison risks job and husband when refusing to accept, as is expected of her by her boss, that Erica suffers from alopecia instead of acknowledging that she is a victim of domestic violence. When Erica, in the depths of despair, goes to Mauromania, the fashionable clothes’ shop belonging to Maureen, looking for help, Alison is the only woman willing to support her. She welcomes Erica and her daughter to her house after Derek, Alison’s husband has hit her and yanked “chunks” off her hair. Erica is admitted to hospital and the next day Derek picks up her daughter at Alison’s house and meets her husband and offers him a job in Show Business. Through the agency of Alison, Erica finds an efficient solicitor who gets an advantageous divorce settlement for her. However, Alison loses job and husband on account of her sisterly behavior. Some years later, Alison, with a new husband and happy once more, visits Mauromania, which is in a derelict condition and pronounces aloud the word alopecia when she sees Maureen, now married to Eric and looking haggard and sporting hardly any hair. However, in *Chalcot Crescent*, a similar story treating the subject of domestic violence is not given the same conclusive treatment, which, taking into account that this is the kind of issue which we would expect to require a unanimous response of indignation and a general outcry, sounds shocking. But just as linguistic signs change meanings according to

context, and, through *différance*, a term coined by Derrida, as we will comment further on, escape semantic determination and closure, a set of circumstances, among other things, may influence the way we contemplate a question as radically relevant as wife beating. Accordingly, the narrator in *Chalcot Crescent* regrets having interfered and helped a battered wife, Doreen, to be separated from her husband, Saul. Instead, he could have gone to Alcoholic Anonymous sessions to solve his conflicts. This way, Doreen would not have died alone and drunk, their daughter Chloe would have avoided a destiny of excessive fatness—she started to gain weight the moment they escaped from the house—and a second, unloved, wife would have been spared the beatings coming from Saul.

This background of indeterminacy of values coincides with the Postmodern awareness that we must desist from the Western belief in ultimate causes or origins supposedly placed in a sphere above and beyond the language we use and which, fundamentally, recreates reality for us. Claire Colebrook analyses in *Irony* the development of what in the Middle Ages and Renaissance was merely a figure of speech but on which Western epistemology may be said to have been founded. First of all, it must be mentioned that the use of irony, doubling and contradicting statements, entails the elevation conferred by a detached position, that is, the occupation of a superior sphere in relation to the language which produces it. Through the intervention of Plato, the Socratic dialectical method, based on questioning and irony, became a vehicle to reach the univocity, transcendent meanings and truth which governed the moral attitude which was prevalent in the Western world until the Romantic age. However, the Socratic Method may also lead to nihilism insofar as nothing can be ascertained by means of an unending search for meaning in a system of signs which will invariably change their

sense adjusting it to the different contexts proposed through a game of irony and contradiction of generally accepted axioms. The German Romantics adopted this skeptic view of Socrates dialectic to combat the supremacy accorded to reason in the Enlightenment and this emphasis on the precarious foundations of human certitudes becomes the basis of Postmodern theorization on morality. Nonetheless, a richer set of ethical attitudes may be obtained out of the instability and negativity of this nihilistic conception of existence than out of a rigid vision of morality. Derrida, insisting on textuality, considers *différance*, an essential feature of language by which the marks and signs that constitute it and which allow us to speak exceed sense and disrupt purpose on account of having contradictory and ambiguous acceptations. The very fact that the same word arbitrarily has two meanings forces us to choose, though a second significance may be always latent. Similarly, Clare Colebrook explains how *The Last Man* by Mary Shelley read in an epoch of AIDS acquires resonances unthinkable in the moment of its creation. Through *différance* language escapes manifest intention and has the capacity to create a context and to, simultaneously, destabilize it. And just as the force and accidentality of the signs that conform the language liberate it from being a closed system, individuals are free from determination by taking action in the face of “textual undecidability”. Choosing options becomes indispensable and truly creative precisely because there are no right decisions *per se*. The fact that irony is at the heart of any system of signs places us in a metaphysical sphere of ambivalence above language and makes it indispensable for us to take action and to position ourselves ethically. Language must not be seen as representing reality, but rather as recreating it and when speaking “one must adopt a discourse of presence, constituting oneself as a subject over and against a re-presented presence” (Colebrook 2008:174), as Colebrook says when

reinterpreting Derrida.

Considering what we have mentioned above, the acceptance of paradoxes is at the heart of any sustainable ethical attitude and this embrace of the erratic and contingent is one of the values advocated in Weldon's writings, thus demystifying some aspects of human relations. For instance, in the story "Live Like a Dog, Alone" belonging to the collection *Nothing to Wear and Nowhere to Hide*, a very successful entrepreneur, voted Businesswoman of the Year welcomes to her home, against all odds, the taxicab driver from Kosovo who has taken her back from the hospital. Taking into account that he is a refugee of scruffy appearance, greasy hair, dirty nails and neck, wearing an ugly sweater, who during all the distance from the hospital to her house keeps complaining about his inadequacy in the face of the new circumstances and scaring the life out of her by going through all the red traffic lights, it does not seem the right decision. Any woman without Miriam's capacity for empathy would abstain from inviting him to her place, but, two reasons or, rather, two weaknesses are accounted for what may appear an unseemly course of action: Firstly, because he says he would never let a woman of his go by herself to the hospital. She is moved, inasmuch as, having a slight chronic cardiopathy, she is a regular at Casualty, and it is there that she feels lonely and at her lowest. The other reason sounds more absurd and risky. She predicts that if this man, ten years younger than her, enters her house, they will have sex and get married and, by this means, he will gain citizenship. Furthermore, with the help of her money he will become an arms dealer and run away with a woman the same age as his and from his own country. Her second weak spot consists in wanting to find out whether her prognoses will turn true. Practically the same story appears in *The Spa Decameron*, and, there, the rich businesswoman and the Kosovar taxi driver are happily married

and her heart has stopped going too fast.

“The imposition of order upon chaos, design over happenstance” (*Wicked Women*, 239) may be said to constitute the only preceptive justice in Weldon’s fiction and it is reached by means of action in the face of unfair situations, or, in other words, her characters have to gain courage to confront unfavorable circumstances in order to escape the Gothic labyrinthine plots that threaten to absorb them. We will see this clearly in the course of this dissertation, but we can begin by illustrating this with the help of an example. In the story “Red on Black” published in *Wicked Women* there is more at stake than the games of Patience the mother of the protagonist is so fond of playing: a victory of life over death and a search for justice becomes imperative here. Maria has to attend the funeral of her ex-husband’s father and her mother accompanies her to offer her support. The idea is that she may not be “defeated” at a ritual as she herself had been at her daughter’s wedding because of Eleanor —she had ended up by abandoning the ceremony and, consequently, renouncing to Maria and her past, giving in to her rival and never forgiving her daughter on that account. Maria, forced to give in to the requirements of an abusive ex-husband to the extent that she is sharing house with him and her successive lovers —he considers she is not capable enough to bring up their child by herself—, has turned into a victim of the circumstances. Taking into account that she has, somehow, failed and disappointed her father-in-law by not being able to remain in her marriage, she considers it her duty to mourn him in peace. Angela, her ex-husband’s pregnant new lover and future wife, appears at the funeral wanting to get the upper hand. Her intrusive presence, somehow, encroaches on Maria’s rights to her past. Maria finally wins when she stands her ground and makes Angela leave in the presence of her son. From now she will also have a house of her own which she will share with

her son, since her husband can now afford one for himself with the money obtained from the money he has inherited from his father.

Noticeably, Weldon's heroines are impelled and free to act once they have assimilated the provisional and precarious nature of their existence and refrain from trying to aspire or accommodate to any given model or narrow ideals. For instance, in "How Donna Came to Win the Lottery", one of the stories of *Nothing to Wear and Nowhere to Hide* the protagonist, fifty-three-year-old Donna, keeps irritating her friends for her general lack of correctness or etiquette which can be exemplified by the car she possesses: "that old wreck of a thing". However, in spite of the derision of her friends, her somewhat lax disposition is given approval when the story unfolds. Four good things happen to her on the same day: She receives an A-level result of A in Art History, she recovers from her stutter by going to a hypnotist, her sixty-three-year-old boyfriend returns to her, asks her to marry him and, lastly but not least, she wins ten pounds in the lottery.

Bearing in mind that a satiric bent characterizes Weldon's narrative, something must be mentioned about the nature of satire and the ethical values it postulates. According to Claire Colebrook, the origins of satire may be traced back to the conception of rhetoric held by Cicero, who considered it and, consequently, irony as a medium for political purposes, hence, to be employed to serve the interests of society. Thereby, satire involves social compromise never devoid of instructive purpose. It does not entail the adoption of superior positions by comparing what it is with what it should be. Rather than impose any given ideal, there is a certain tolerance towards human proclivities, since human beings are primarily contemplated as bodies and matter. Weldon's narrative invariably starts from a position of acceptance of human weaknesses

as an inescapable factor which has to be taken into consideration for the depiction of characters. Let us think, for instance, in “End of the Line” the first story of *Wicked Women*. Weena, its protagonist is an expert in bitchiness and, by the end of the story, has managed to drive everyone away from her to the extent that even her mother sends her out of the house and has sex with Weena’s boss in order to steal her job. Hattie, her best friend gets involved with Bob, whose wife has left him because of Weena and she is the one who calls Elaine, Defoe’s wife, to warn her about Weena’s evil machinations: she has seduced Defoe duping him into believing that she has a commission to write his biography. Hattie knows that the commission has not been granted because Bob has just been fired trying to get it for her —management considers it a preposterous idea. Defoe hears the conversation and makes Weena leave the house. Having nowhere to go, Weena resorts to the crematorium where her father is buried and there she meets a middle-aged man of good appearance who, she realizes, will get her out of her plight. When Weena mentions that she is at the end of her tether —many things are at the end of the line in this story: the Defoes’ house is the train’s last station in that line, Defoe’s career has also come to an end...— the only reaction of the man, after considering her for a while, is: “In the presence of the dead the truly living must stick together. And so few of us are truly alive” (*Wicked Women*, 61). She is saved and given another chance thanks to her one redeeming quality, that of her vitality. Weena’s lack of any moral principle, her blatant wickedness is compensated by her appetite for life.

Although a certain degree of moral ambivalence and relativity is juggled with ease in Weldon’s ethical universe, moral intransigence is clearly abhorred. Harsh punishment awaits the self-righteous and fastidious characters, that is, those who are devoid of tolerance towards the others and use irony to place themselves above the rest.

In “Smoking Chimneys”, which belongs to the collection of *Nothing to Wear and Nowhere to Hide*, Ishtar tells her story from jail. She was invited to Badger House by her office colleague, Marigold, so that she might not spend Christmas by herself. But from the very beginning she ruins the party for everyone else. To start with, as soon as she is introduced to Lady Hester Walpole Delingro, the head of the family, she advises her to put in central heating instead of using the fireplaces to heat the house. She is vexed when she is mentioned as the outsider who has joined the year’s festivities. From then on, she proceeds to make all kinds of mischief under the pretext of her moral superiority. She considers that things are not up to her standards and acts accordingly. For instance, “People should not invite guests if they cannot house them adequately” (*Nothing to Wear and Nowhere to Hide*, 82) means that she refuses to sleep in the room allotted to her which she would be supposed to share with other people and that she will occupy Marigold’s bedroom instead, so that the latter will not be able to sleep with her boyfriend who, by the by, will be seduced by Ishtar and sleep with her in Marigold’s bed. Or, similarly, “People who stuff turkeys with packets of frozen pork and herbs deserve what they get, and must risk E-coli if the power goes off” (*NTWNTH*, 82) is to be roughly transcribed as Ishtar using the washing machines because she could not find a dry towel and creating a power cut which will affect all the deep-freezers and fridges in the old residence. Ishtar’s unseemly conduct is based on a litany of what people should do and all the series of deeds she, uninterruptedly, carries out alleging moral superiority contribute to spoil the party for everyone else, including the children. Eventually, Lady Hester stands up trying to make her leave the table, but dies of a heart attack in the attempt. The old lady is taken to a room by several male members of the family and the meal proceeds without interruption. From jail Ishtar tells us that now

thirty Walpole Delingros declare that Ishtar banged Lady Hester's head against a fireplace after dinner in an argument about smoking chimneys and there is a nasty incision in the head of the dead lady to prove the accusation.

2.7. THE NEED TO ESCAPE GOTHIC LABRYNTHYNE PLOTS

Considering that there is not such a thing in literature as the dichotomy form/content, it would be worth our while to consider the ethical value of the Gothic fabric of Weldon's writings. In his book *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel*, Andrew Gibson proposes a model of literary criticism governed by ethical values and to that aim he undertakes an exegetical analysis of Levinas' precepts. He follows the latter when he aligns ethics with imagination and creative force, with that which is disruptive and escapes cognition as opposed to already set and closed systems of morality. It would be an ethics in which the Platonic conception of unity, synthesis or the "eternal present" as supreme values would have to give way to "dispersal, multiplicity, diachrony, becoming" (Gibson 1999: 87). Correspondingly, this principle of dissolution as the ethical starting point for the recreation of reality would find its equivalent at the level of plots in anti-novels or very disruptive novels. This is not always the case in Weldon's fiction where everything is coherently intertwined and mostly diachronically told in her first novels. Her fiction does not entirely escape representationalism or what Gibson describes as "the possible violence of mimetic authority" (1999, 66). This line of thought may be one of the reasons that has led her to make an off-the-cuff and surely very polemical remark in *What Makes Women Happy* of the kind that; "Nature might slightly favour the male when it comes to creative activity – men's books may be 'better', if less

readable than women's" (2006: 55). After all, her novels do not follow complex intellectual patterns; they rather have their antecedents in a literature that averts realism simply by indulging in a surfeit of sentimentality which is eventually to be contained. However, as we will see, we cannot overlook these elements of dissolution and excess which, consequently, constitute her plots. A profusion of minor details is employed to exhaustion which in the development of some of her novels acquires uncanny proportions and fills them to the point of saturation, thus creating a sort of labyrinthine structure whose only aim appears to be to suffocate its heroines. This scares Sonia in *The Heart of the Country*: "It quite frightens me how *things* keep turning up, and taking a hand in events. You get the feeling that not just people, but material objects, are part of the general conspiracy to toss you up in the air and land you where you least expect" (HC, 136). In the course of this dissertation I will insist on the fact that the plot of many of Weldon's novels may be roughly compared to and have the same function that would have the labyrinth in Gothic literature, which is that of producing horror –Botting explains that labyrinths together with dungeons or burial vaults stand for horror in Gothic classics (in Mulvey-Roberts 2009: 185). Those affected by it become engulfed in a state of confusion and paralysis.

Some of Weldon's protagonists are, thereby, expected to escape from these Gothic mazes of unrest, from these forms of social and self-alienation, thus emulating Anne Radcliffe's heroines' flights from castles in her pioneering Gothic novels. The underlying idea is that the stock protagonists have to go through a great deal of trials in a hostile environment so as to obtain social integration and success –after all, Gothic novels have been said to be primarily about the loss of innocence, the acquisition of maturity: "It's the one-way journey we all make from ignorance to knowledge, from

innocence to experience” (*Little Sisters*, 232). However, we cannot speak solely of the outer obstacles that heroines are supposed to sort out. We are also to take into account those inner barriers in the shape of “the irruption of fantasies, suppressed wishes and emotional and sexual conflicts” (Botting 1996: 11) that are to be transcended by the heroines so that they may negotiate their space in society. For the sake of achieving this goal they have to overcome pressure and duress by means of a pliability expressed in a display of split selves which represent what Kristeva would describe as “subject-in-the-making” (Becker 1999: 46), that is, beings in a liminal state and open to change and transition. The complex play of subjectivities which characterizes this genre is the result of a reformulation of identity triggered, in some cases, by the loss of this very identity induced by the terror produced by intensely extreme and stressful situations. This constant state of passage, this border-crossing of the self becomes entirely comprehensible if we trace the origins of the Gothic genre to the Romance “gest”. In this regard, Barfoot mentions that heroines in Gothic novels are “drawn to journeys, quest, of a physical as well as of a spiritual kind” (in Tinkler-Villani 1995: 160).

2.8. COMPLEX SUBJECTS

Due to the fact that it was born in an atmosphere of disillusionment with the Enlightenment, the Gothic is a genre deeply involved in social, political, and ethical matters. It also may be said to constitute a mechanism of response to the threats brought about by the radical changes and disruption inherent in the conflicts of an emerging modernity. This new age was signaled by events of such momentum as the French Revolution or the beginning of Industrialism. Henceforth, this literature which came to

flourish in Victorian England had to absorb all the uncertainties intrinsic to a dawning era in which a prosperous society, totally oblivious to the inequalities that had made it possible, indulged in narcissistic self-contemplation. Antonio Ballesteros explains that London, the capital of the British Empire, symbolizes the contradictions that the country experiences: “Los esplendores y boatos coloniales contrastan con los barrios obreros, donde la enfermedad, la miseria y la mortandad infantil causan estragos” (Ballesteros 1998: 38). Moreover, as already mentioned, the social upheaval produced by the Industrial Revolution was accompanied by a phenomenon of social alienation and estrangement which contributed to the problematization of the concept of identity. Consequently, in view of so many contradictions, reservations arose concerning that old conception of unified Cartesian subjectivity which had resulted from casting aside all the irrational aspects of human beings along with all that had been instituted as socially marginal. Besides, all that had been discarded for the sake of the formation of this standard identity seemed to have grown to inordinate and sinister proportions when Darwin stated that human beings and primates had a common ancestor. From this moment onwards, the elements of animalism in humans could no longer be ignored. Amid all these circumstances, it is no wonder that Victorian literature became overwhelmed by the specter of the double, of the “hidden self”.

Interestingly enough, Antonio Ballesteros in his fascinating study *Nasciso y el Doble en la Literatura Fantástica Victoriana* traces the literary origin of the double to the myth of Narcissus. The underlying idea is that the division and alterity which lead to subsequent change and metamorphosis of the individual are produced from inside the self. In this regard, we quote Ballesteros once more when he defines *doppelgänger* in *The Handbook of the Gothic*, a reference manual edited by Marie Mulvey-Roberts which

constitutes a very valuable index to basic concepts of the Gothic genre, as “an archetype of otherness and narcissistic specularity indissolubly linked to the individual” (2009: 119). It is not surprising then the importance that this idea of the double acquires in a society which in its pursuit of progress has created citizens with split identities and in which, understandably, its myths based on too ambitious overreachers are threatened by a danger which “se origina en el sujeto a causa de un excesivo anhelo de conocimiento o racionalidad o por culpa de una aplicación equivocada de la voluntad humana” (Ballesteros 1998: 40). This is in line with literary works like *Frankenstein*, *The Island of Dr. Moreau* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

Karl Miller explains in *Doubles* that this figure of the modern double is the product of the effort on the part of Mesmerists or Animal Magnetists of the eighteenth century to bring forth the second self of the individuals they subjected to hypnotic practices. This idea of the *alter ego* was not only assimilated and given full rein in the writings of Romantic authors, but it also made its way to the scientific studies of the time, since the notion of the unconscious constituted an indispensable contribution in the earliest stages of psychiatry. Karl Miller also adds that this phenomenon of the *Doppelgänger* is linked to a “heritage” that “depicts lost souls, their capture by the Devil, a traffic with darkness, and the subject has never shed the eeriness of its supernatural origins” (Miller 1987: 47), thus illustrating its negative undertones. In this same line Helen Stoddart explains that the demonic figures which had until that moment been presented as exterior threats by a religious frame of reference became inherent to the individual and, thus, “incorporated into dramas of dualism and divided selves” (in Mulvey-Roberts 2009: 118) in the Gothic literature of the nineteenth century, thereby reflecting the mindset of an increasingly secular society. One of the most obvious

examples of this could be Dr Jekyll's looming evil shadow, Mr Hyde in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) or the contrast between the evil nature of the protagonist of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian's Gray* (1890) as revealed by its portrait and his permanently young and beautiful *alter ego*. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), on the other hand, does not so much entail an inner strife of a dualistic essence enacted within the individual, as a fight with an evil brought about by the agency of the protagonist. Likewise, this latter novel would prove that the Gothic genre is closely tied to the female gender –Moers has enriched its reading with her conception of it as a birth-myth, and has insisted on the shocking assimilation produced in the novel of motherhood and creation to all that is monstrous and lethal, following Mary Shelley's early and chaotic experience with motherhood. Frankenstein, the monstrous creature composed out of *dejecta membra* of animal and human corpses obtained from, among other places, slaughter houses or graves, and which posterity has significantly named after its creator, takes part in a mutual deathly pursuit with the latter to the confines of the earth. Perhaps, the fact that through this kind of literature we lend ears to the secret hidden self, to that which can no longer be muffled has led Frederike van Leeuwen to define the feminine Gothic as “the discourse of the other” (Becker 1999: 55), and in this regard, *Frankenstein*, with its introduction of the monstrous, of the abhorrent, of the epistemologically inadmissible, is one of its first creations and most intertextualised themes.

As has been hinted above, Gothic literature absorbed the Romantic disenchantment and frustration produced by the failure of the French revolution to attain all those ideals of justice and equality which it had set out to achieve. The inadequate social network deriving from it led to instability. Amid this pessimistic background, the

concept of an undivided personality gives way to the disintegration and division of an identity constantly subjected to the “uncanny disruptions of the boundaries between inside and outside, reality and delusions, propriety and corruption, materialism and spirituality” (Botting 1996: 113). In the face of disappointment and scepticism, individuals feel attracted by the unconscious fears and longings which, though enticingly beckoning to them, have to be repressed in order to avoid physical and psychical dissolution. This visceral process of expelling, of divesting the identity of all that is associated with the “in-between, the composite, the ambiguous” and which would otherwise disturb “identity, system, order” is what Kristeva describes as *abjection*. However, in Gothic literature there is a constant fascination towards “the uncanny abjections” (Jerrold E. Hogle 2008: 17) resultant from the blurring of boundaries such as those which trace the differences between both genders, the transformation of fear into pleasure, from the confusion between life and death or the individual and what it “thrust[s] aside in order to live”. These “uncanny abjections” become a kind of hovering tempting shadows which lure the individual into incorporating them. In this regard, that no being is to appear without its shadow is clearly seen in the adoption of “doubles, *alter egos*, mirrors and animated representations of the disturbing parts of human identities” (Botting 1996: 10) for the configuration of the characteristic complex subjects of Gothic literature.

It would be interesting to draw attention to another of the classical instances of the double in feminine literature, that of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* to better understand how all those aspects of the self that the protagonist is supposed to suppress for social reasons turn into the uncanny and estranged features that characterise a haunting presence in her existence. As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar have shown in their

essay on *Jane Eyre* entitled “A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane’s Progress”, Bertha Mason stands for Jane’s hidden self, for her anger and madness, in short for all that Jane has to discard in order to live according to the parameters established by Victorian society. All those traits that a Victorian woman had to abject so as to conform to the referential model of femininity seem to have shaped the character of Bertha Mason, Jane’s foil and *alter-ego*, and, hence, a metonymic extension of herself. The fact that Bertha Mason represents in such a great measure all that is illicit and out-of-bounds has led West Indies-born writer Jean Rhys to become obsessed with Bertha’s Caribbean origin to the extent that she focused on her colonial background when she recreated her character in the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Bertha Mason, thereby, fulfils the role of a stigmatised or monstrous woman, who keeps harassing Jane and cannot be too easily eschewed. Consequently, Jane has to internalise and incorporate Bertha Mason in order to reach full development and maturity –through the assimilation of Bertha’s rebellious spirit she reaches her longed for freedom. Although the analogy may appear strained at first, we will see further on how, for instance, Liffey will also have to assimilate aspects of evil Mabs in the course of *Puffball*. Obviously, it should be emphasized that whereas in *Jane Eyre* a dramatic perspective is adopted, the treatment employed in *Puffball* is completely absurd and derisory. Even if this is not the most obvious example we could mention, I will try to show that the concept of the double may prove a useful tool and render fruitful results when analysing Weldon’s novels.

2.9. REACHING DEVELOPMENT THROUGH THE AGENCY OF *ALTER-EGOS*

The constrictive norms contributory to gender construction are ultimately

responsible for Weldon's stock-in-trade asphyxiating atmosphere characteristically rife with women's rivalries. Weldon's heroines, apart from instinctively embracing the role of submissive members in a heterosexual relationship of an asymmetrical character, are brought face to face with the horrors prompted by the unsisterly behaviour of their female counterparts, who, as often as not, contribute to make matters worse without showing any scruples – Poison Poppy in *Growing Rich* is a clear example of a female character which excels at bitchiness. In the world portrayed by Weldon, women have a natural disposition to place themselves in an abject and subdued position, they have an eerie capacity to play the role of subsidiary beings towards men and to be heedless of their female counterpart's needs. Both factors eventually lead them to very precarious situations. In sum, in a complete act of symbiosis with a hostile environment, they tend to act under the influence of "one of the principal compulsions of romance" (Miller 1987: 379), that of being a victim. Those mad isolated characters which occasionally appear in her early novels are clear instances of this drive, and so are all those characters suffering from psychosomatic illnesses symptomatic of all that is in the way of their full growth and fulfilment. In Gothic novels, and here we have *Jane Eyre* in mind once again, women have to confront a counterpart representing all that an oppressive gender construction has stigmatised as monstrous in order to redefine and liberate themselves. Something slightly similar, notwithstanding its variations, happens in some of Weldon's works. In novels like *The President's Child* or *Growing Rich* an unfolding of a sinister aspect of the personality of their protagonists, namely their uncanny propensity to let themselves be oppressed, is produced and transposed into the narrators, whose lives run parallel to theirs. The narrators' blindness or physical disability may be said to duplicate, to stand for the figurative ailments of the protagonists. Through their physical

impairment, although of a psychosomatic nature, they seem to be echoing all those disturbing features in their heroines. When these heroines eventually resolve their conflicts, their two *alter egos* finally recover their sight and use of limbs respectively. The protagonists are required to outgrow the victim status which hinders their full development and exceed and escape the adverse habitat which finds its equivalent in the maze-like plots of the novels if a favourable closure is to be reached. In the light of this, the fact that one of Weldon's latest novels *What Makes Women Happy* constitutes a kind of self-help book does not come as a surprise.

When this figure of the double appears in Gothic novels written by women it creates the "mirror-plot of female desire" (1999, 226) that Susanne Becker describes in her book *Gothic Forms or Feminine Fictions*. This secondary plot involves a departure from the main subject of heterosexual romance. Understandably, this deviation, this interruption of the heterosexual theme is a recurrent occurrence in Weldon's fiction, where, as previously mentioned, the competitiveness between women is a dominant obsession. The crossing of paths in two women's lives, the supplantation of one for the other in the hearts and homes of men is another of the contingencies which trigger what might be described as the play of foils or doubles. The first wife becomes a sort of lurking presence in the life of the second. A fascinating version of this is seen in *The Lives and Loves of a She-Devil*. After Ruth's husband has left her for Mary Fisher, Ruth, who at the beginning of the novel happens to be atrociously ugly but a decent human being at heart, becomes an avenging shadow and sets out to scheme delicate Mary Fisher's baleful fate. What is achieved in this novel through the interaction of opposites is really interesting. As we will see, Ruth undergoes all kinds of surgical operations in her attempt to emulate and replace Mary Fisher, thus, eventually managing to represent

model femininity to perfection –the fixation that goes into all these procedures may be compared to Frankenstein’s frantic compulsion to create his monster. It is, thereby, clear that the links with *Frankenstein* are obvious not only in regard to the theme of the surgical operations, which may be easily interpreted as a parody of the creation of the monster, but also in the sense that in both books positive concepts are subject to a Gothic transformation and, accordingly, made grotesque. In *Frankenstein* a usually romanticised term like reproduction undergoes demystification and as a result is conferred lethal and uncanny overtones when it is assimilated to the creation of a monster. In a similar fashion, in *The Lives and Loves of a She-Devil* words like femininity, beauty and all related words, being placed on a par with Ruth’s resultant horrendous psyche, become estranged and hideous and acquire frighteningly abhorrent associations after the whole process of transformation is achieved.

A different tale of women’s crossing of destinies can be found in *The Bulgari Connection* which presents one of those shocking reversals the Gothic so much relishes. The parameters adopted in this narrative, as well as its background are definitely Gothic despite the licenses taken in the assimilation of this style, which, like in the rest of her novels, is embraced in order to be transcended. Consequently what is purported to be a harrowing story turns out to become a funny and hilarious one. When the novel starts poor old Grace Salt is presented to us as an insane neurotic stalking woman described by press headlines as the “*Fat-Cat Spouse*” who has tried to run down Doris Dubois, her husband’s lover and the “darling of the media”. Even Grace has to admit that with her *savoir faire*, her popularity and youth, Doris Dubois represents an asset to her husband, she may give him the social status that a powerful man such as Barley requires, and Grace goes as far as to say that “If the world is ever to see the cloning of humans, these

are the pair that should be chosen to make it a better place” (*The Bulgari Connection*, 9). However, when wicked Doris wants to marry Barley, Grace is deprived of her name, she is reduced to becoming once more “that long lost creature Grace McNab” (*BC*, 11), which amounts to her complete loss of identity. The only thing left to her is to disappear, and she nearly does so when she starts growing increasingly younger.

However, contrary to what the beginning of the novel announces, its development tells us otherwise. Grace falls in love with a young painter and as a result of true love, she becomes much younger in a matter of days –it must be noticed that this is the substance of fairy tales– hence diminishing the gap of twenty two years that separates her from Doris. In addition, once Doris Dubois has clearly come across as an evil character, she urges Grace’s lover to paint a portrait of her over a previous one depicting Lady Juliet Random. The idea behind this is that being painted wearing the latter’s Bulgari necklace will make her charming and amiable: “You think it’s magic. You think if you own it you will turn into a person everyone likes, whether you deserve it or not” (*BC*, 86), as Grace puts it. In a further twist, in which the intertextual connection with a Gothic classic is made explicit, the portrait begins to disintegrate and “the paint is blurring round the edges of Doris’s body and slipping from her face and she looks cruel and evil, rather as one imagines the portrait of Dorian Grey [sic] to have been” (*BC*, 186). By the end of the novel Doris is seen as the one who has lost her identity. She is sitting on the stairs wearing a white slip and the party in search of her take her for a ghost, as one of them mockingly remarks: “the midnight thudding on the stairs, the wraith in white? I knew ghosts could come from the future as well as the past.” (*BC*, 190). The dissolution of her identity is accompanied and represented by what might be described as an adaptation of a very Gothic image, the state of decay of a

house. The Manor House she has undertaken to redecorate and refurbish starts to fall apart –the builders she had put in charge of the task were illegal and purposely badly-paid: “The bath taps that Barley turned on earlier, to no avail, have started to gush water, flooded the bathroom floor and brought down the ceiling of the master bedroom, star constellations and all” (*BC*, 289). Apart from the fact that Doris’s taste is ridiculed and the hilarity sparked by this situation, which clearly produces a distance from the idea of decomposition and collapse in its grimmest sense, the visual fix intended may serve as a reminder of the Gothic ascendancy over Weldon’s narrative.

Weldon’s prolonged literary output becomes a register of the transformations that take place in the relationships between the sexes. She chronicles what she sees “moving over time as a landscape and noticing the changes” (*Mantrapped*, 180). If we are still applying the concept of the double, even if in a somewhat lax way, the softening of the gender inequalities over the years may be evidenced by the theme of a soulswitch between a man and a woman in one of her most recent novels, *Mantrapped*, which is a mixture of novel and autobiography. Here mantrapped has the whimsical meaning of a woman, Trisha whose soul has been trapped in a man’s body, Peter’s, after coming across him in the stairs. Its import is purposely devoid of the sense of women tragically giving up their lives on account of men as was the case of the painter Cynthia Pell, Weldon’s ex-husband’s first wife or the poet Sylvia Plath which are mentioned in the novel. Likewise, this novel testifies to the fact that nowadays women can become mantraps: Doralee has somehow tied and bound Peter to her; they happily share their lives and flat. Nonetheless, and the humorousness of this image cannot escape anyone, the most obvious instance of a mantrap is old Trisha, as Peter’s soul gets trapped in her body. This is the pretext for a satirical and hilarious portrait of the genders: their

mannerisms, their physical encumbrances: to wit, the male “genitals hung indecently as appendages” (*Mantrapped*, 251) or breasts in the case of women, even subjects like the feeling guilty tendencies in women are touched upon, or the way people pay more attention when Trisha’s incongruous chatter is spoken with the authority of a male voice. On the other hand, this involvement with a double is obviously seen as decisive in the development of the characters: “They will not escape unscathed from this experience, if at all” (*Mantrapped*, 96). In fact, Trisha dies in a shooting whereas Peter’s spirit is finally restored to his body. However, as Doralee notices, he has considerably changed; he has become a more forceful and stronger person. Nonetheless, it should be noticed that the play of doubles, the light and inconsequential mirroring of the two sexes on equal terms would have been unthought-of in those of her novels dating back to pre-feminist or harder times.

Another modification, perhaps an inversion of the subject of the double may be found in *She May not Leave*, which, being one of her most recent works, is attuned to a more relaxed conception of gender formation corresponding to more favourable times for women. In this novel we witness what may seem a horrific tale of supplantation. The title in the book expresses the fears of one of the characters, Serena –a sort of alter ego of Weldon, but we will go into that later– that Agnieszka, the Polish au pair that is living in the house of Hattie, Serena’s grandniece, and her partner Martyn may stay there for good. These misgivings are the result of a chain of suspicious events which have led the narrator Francis and her sister Serena to believe that the hitherto invaluable child-minder may have a hidden agenda, may have secret designs of her own. The au pair is gradually and stealthily appropriating Hattie’s home, child and husband and wants to get hold of everything she possesses to the extent that at the end of the novel she even expresses her

wish to have her employer's hair, which provokes the latter's train of thought: "Bet you do" "What do you want now? I could cut it off and make it into a wig and you could wear it. My partner, my child, my baby, my home, my clothes, now my hair" (*SMNL*, 280). When this drastic overturn of circumstances is about to occur, the overriding anxiety that has ruled the behaviour of the employers up to that moment, that is, that the child carer might leave – since they had done their best to keep her happy– appears sinister in the narrator and her sister's eyes. Taking into account the harrowing and confusing situation Agnieszka is provoking, Hattie's major apprehension should logically be that Agnieszka may not leave. Hattie seems to have gullibly fallen for all those evil designs the au pair has been contriving around her. Furthermore, despite the "warning bells" clearly audible to the narrator and her sister, she even acquiesces to let the domestic help marry Martyn, her own partner, so that Agnieszka may avoid deportation. However, we must not be misled; she does not represent the typical Gothic innocent victim trapped in a maze-like plot. Contrary to what the unfolding of the novel seems to point to, Hattie's lack of reaction must not be attributed to the contemporary ethos of political correctness consisting in being nice to everyone, particularly immigrants —historically the foreign "others"— and which would be the only plausible explanation for such a naive and excessively tolerant behaviour: "Just let's all get along and empathise with others, and upset no one or it will end in the Twin Towers" (*SMNL*, 195). The reader is disturbingly taken aback when the heroine is not distressed by her upsetting plight; she does not seem to care and even laughs at the prospect of being replaced in the hearts and lives of her baby and partner. The secret motives lying behind her lack of reaction, the only reason for not trying to escape the web that Agnieszka has been spinning around her is, as we are to learn, that the whole process has been willingly

consented and, to a certain extent, articulated by Hattie herself. Unlike the stock heroines of Gothic novels, she is not confined into a labyrinthine structure by the wilful attitude and artifice of others or by her own gullibility, but rather she herself has contributed to the creation of this labyrinthine plot because from the first she had felt smothered under the overpowering domesticity that the birth of her baby had brought about. However, being somehow responsible for the constrictive plot instead of its victim is not the only inversion this novel presents of what we are to expect in a Gothic pattern. Susanne Becker, follows Kay Mussell when she says that in the popular gothics “what qualifies the modern heroine for her ‘happy ending’ is the *domestic test*” (1999: 85). Hence, proper subjectivity, that is, success, in this kind of fiction is achieved by means of adequately fulfilling the roles of “wife, mother and homemaker”, which is somehow the role assigned to Agnieszka in what could be taken for a very warped reinterpretation of a standard and old-fashioned Gothic formula. Nonetheless, a thorough Gothic effect is provoked which is grounded in all these variations and reversals: that of causing shock, which in this novel becomes glee as we see a heroine happily welcoming the unencumbered fate she has so craftily designed for herself.

2.10. “We are one woman split five ways, a hundred ways, a million ways”

The historical and social uncertainties that have left their stamp on Gothic literature make it still an apt vehicle of expression for individuals who are under the duress or the stress provoked by a coercive society. As we have seen, this Gothic endorsement of the subject as a divided personality is often represented as a person and his shadow or reflection. This imagery, on the other hand, has an obvious explanation,

Antonio Ballesteros refers to Frazer and even to Jung when he speaks of the shadow as “símbolo antropológico del alma” (1998: 357). However, this split individuality, so characteristic of Gothic literature may be further complicated: “Most cases of multiple personality appear essentially to represent the organism’s efforts to live, at different times, in terms of different systems of values” (Karl Miller 1987: 34). This concept of adaptation to different system of values seems to be the idea behind *Splitting*, the novel that Weldon published in 1995. In Lady Rice’s husband’s petition for divorce, he alleges that Lady Rice “had been abusive and violent, pinching him while he brushed his teeth and otherwise molesting him” (*Splitting*, 3), he also states that “her kissing of the family dogs amounted to bestiality, and her embracing of female guests amounted to lesbianism (*Splitting*, 4). He had been urged to adopt that course of action by Anthea, his present partner and, in everyone’s view, a more appropriate resident for Rice Court, his country mansion. Lady Rice feels helpless in the face of these incongruous accusations; after all those deplorable years wasted in an unrelenting exertion in order to become a proper wife to Sir Edwin, she now runs the risk of being left with nothing, not even her rightful alimony. The fortune she had made as a pop singer had gone into the maintenance of his stately home and now she has nothing to vouch for that inordinate amount of money. Consequently, when confronted with that petition for divorce based on false pretences, part of her is alerted to the danger and wants to make up for that passive being into which Lady Rice has turned. Her psyche gradually becomes a battlefield for warring personae, each of them arising as the occasion requires. If what is needed is a woman with secretarial skills to work for the firm of lawyers in charge of the divorce, Jelly has to take the reins. Through Angelica, Lady Rice, being no longer such, reverts to her pre-marriage identity, whereas Angel stands for the unleashing of Lady

Rice's so far pent-up sexuality. This protean identity, the combined effort of all these different personalities will see Lady Rice through the divorce proceedings and will help create a freer person. Accordingly, the disintegration produced here on account of a process of terror entails the deconstruction and dismantling of a personality based on the standard norms of gender formation and acquires the meaning of the long-needed and positive renewal of such an identity.

Another different and somewhat unexpected treatment of the subject of multiple personality can also be found in *The Cloning of Joanna May*, where it is intertwined with a theme invariably favoured by the Gothic genre: that of men tampering with creation combined with that of scientific ambition carried too far: "fire burn and cauldron bubble: bubbling vats of human cells, recombinant DNA surging and swelling, pulsing and heaving, multiplying by the million, the more the merrier" (*The Cloning of Joanna May*, 120). In this context birth is uncannily equated to murder: "Death will out, like murder" (*TCOJM*, 215). Carl May, the megalomaniac owner of a nuclear power plant—"Let there be light," Carl May ordered, and nuclear power stations sprung up at his command" (*TCOJM* 18)—decided some thirty years previous to the action in this novel to deprive his wife of identity. To that end she was stealthily extracted an egg following his indications. His wife had a psychological pregnancy and thought she was to undergo a termination, since from the very beginning Carl May had established that their marriage would be a childless one. The novel is set at a time in which Joanna, aged sixty and divorced from Carl May, finds out that as a result of very innovative reproductive techniques there are four clones of her "walking around unclaimed" (*TCOJM*, 128). At a given moment Joanna May blames Dr Holly, the person who had been in charge of the operation, for having stolen her soul. However, this accusation is at

variance with the general tenor of a work in which being endowed with a single identity is considered burdensome and fastidious: “If the eye offend you pluck it out” (*TCOJM*, 46), or “If thine I offend thee, change it” (*TCOJM*, 247). To prove this point further the reader is told that Joanna’s father used to be a physician and that his speciality was: “ear, nose and throat, two windows from the soul’s prison on to the outside world, one organ of communication” (*TCOJM*, 24). The idea of captivity which, needless to say, is characteristically Gothic, is here applied to the soul, above all if that soul belongs to a woman –we should take into account all those constrictive trappings that go into gender formation. The notion could appear preposterous but if this very soul is offered four other bodies through which to experiment life, the feeling of imprisonment will be inferior. In fact, the new arrangement is seen on the whole as an improvement: “They felt the inherent guilt of the female, but not powerfully; being four that guilt was quartered. The soul was multiplied, the guilt divided. That was a great advance” (*TCOJM*, 236). However, this is not the only progress depicted in this book; the clones, belonging to a more recent decade constitute better specimens of women, “are less the sum of the genes than was Joanna May” (*TCOJM*, 231). In spite of its teasing handling of the subject of the advantages of sharing one soul, that is one identity, among five bodies, an attack on the concept of a solid unified identity is evinced in the reading of this book. In *Doubles*, Karl Miller’s engrossing and comprehensive analysis of the figure of the literary *doppelgänger*, *alter ego* or the modern multiple self, the author elucidates that “the idea of the divided mind has been attended, since the Romantic period, by that of an openness to the world” (Miller 1987: 311). In this novel this position of openness to the world lies in the rejection of a unified conception of identity, of what Andrew Gibson describes as “the solipsistic closure of the cogito” (1999, 150). Hence, an

ethically acceptable stance is in accordance with the Levinasian allegiance to a constant empirical state of flight, of encounter with alterity, and in this case in a multiplication of identities. *The Cloning of Joanna May* represents a celebration of this multiplication of identities, as the title of this section, a quotation taken from this novel proves. Under the influence of Isaac, the Egyptologist working for Carl and killed at his request on account of being his wife's lover, Joanna May starts to adhere to a new conception of the universe: "One above all who demands our loyalty, our obeisance. Undemocratic. The truth is many, not one" (*TCOJM*, 98). When Isaac King tries to visualise Joanna's fortune with a Tarot pack modelled on the Ancient Egyptian cards, she, represented by the Empress, appears surrounded by the four Queens: Wands, Pentacles, Swords and Cups. This very pattern is to appear further on in the course of the novel when Joanna compares her dull and asphyxiating existence with a "false web" that Carl May had woven around her. She contemplates herself placed in the middle of it surrounded by the "the four saving and refining passions of the universe" (*TCOJM*, 187) which stretch the web from the four corners. These four clones, though originally a trap set by Carl May, turn out to be the means of escape from Joanna May's cramped reality "she was the wretched fly and he the whimsical, scuttling spider" (*TCOJM*, 185). After all, she had allowed him to engineer her whole life, she had renounced to have children because of him, he had had her two lovers killed and he was ultimately responsible for the birth of the clones. However, she is urged to act and join her clones now that their life is under threat. They are being followed by Carl May's henchman, the ones responsible for the death of Joanna's gardener and second lover. Nonetheless, it is Carl May the one who dies diving in a cooling pool when trying to prove that the radiation which had escaped from his nuclear power station causing public alarm was safe. What follows is that a

clone of him is created and Joanna May is in charge of her nurturance at her ex-husband's bidding. *The Cloning of Joanna May* is a superb illustration of the great extent to which the rejection of a restricted univocal conception of single identity is akin to the only admissible ethical attitude, that of a certain moral relativity. The ending corroborates the convenience of some degree of ambivalence. Gina, one of the clones leaves her children behind, her clones are going to take care of them, and goes back to her husband who drinks and hits her. Joanna's reaction is, against all odds, one of celebration. "We've had so many oughts and shoulds, all of us, we've all but given up being critical of one another. Good for her, say we" (*TCOJM*, 265).

2.11. CROSSING BORDERS: ETHICAL AND FORMAL OPENING OF WELDON'S NOVELS.

This relativity, which is above all of a moral nature, may be also expressed in the purposeful randomness and accidental nature of the actions in Weldon's novels. In his book *Towards a Postmodern Theory of Narrative* Gibson states that to understand narrative in terms of "inauguration" amounts to opening radical fissures in the existing dominant conception of the world based on representationalism. He defends the kind of art which does not conceive the real as something compact, determined and already given, but which rather puts emphasis on its aleatory character, on its openness and inescapable frailty. Gibson finds in Godard, just as he says Rosset does in Homer, an artistic quality which consists in posing "a latent challenge to the credibility of any given reality, a challenge founded in a sense that the advent of that reality takes place only as other possibilities are eliminated" (1996: 94). The reason why I have brought up this

seemingly inappropriate quotation here is that it expresses with accuracy a premise abundantly employed in Weldon's novels, which are fundamentally constructed following a sequence of "*What ifs*" that may even be carried too far. There is a fascinating example illustrating this in *Rhode Island Blues*. We have spoken above about Felicity and her cruel stepmother and the latter's equally unpleasant brother. However, as stated in the novel, neither Lois nor Anton would have entered Felicity's existence if the coachman who was driving the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife had not got lost fleeing from danger after Princip had unsuccessfully tried to kill his passengers. Princip, who had missed the first time, managed to assassinate them once their carriage had stopped in order to ask for directions in front of the very café to which he had repaired after his first failed attempt on their lives. "Had he not done so Felicity would no doubt still be living in London and Lucy and Guy and Lorna and Alison would not exist" (*Rhode Island Blues*, 147). The outbreak of the war was the cause why Lois Wasserman, having a German surname, had to interrupt her studies of piano, and take refuge at Felicity's mother's home, and gradually usurp her place in the household. Had Princip not killed the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife, none of this would have happened. The plots, the chain of events may turn out to be stifling and constrictive but, ultimately, they are the result of chance and contingency. Therefore, the narrative, being based, as it is, on facts of a fragile character, acquires a certain degree of absurdity which excludes and is inconsistent with mimetism, with a tradition of realism and morals. In addition, there seems to be a blatant discrepancy between the oppressive solidity of the life depicted and the underlying idea that it could be or have been otherwise and this is an idea around which Weldon's novels turn. A situation may be ludicrous as well as unreasonable and dramatic, but it does not have to be necessarily

permanent. As we know, Fay Weldon's narrative invariably bears a message of encouragement to women; it urges them to be brave enough to change their existence, not to be overburdened with unfair and unbalanced situations. In fact, this is the effect that her writings have proved to have on her readers. Fay Weldon mentions in *Mantrapped* that women who read her in the seventies approach her in literary gatherings to tell her how her novels changed their lives or how even one went as far as to leave her husband emboldened by her books (2004, 58).

In his book *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel*, Andrew Gibson refers to the distinction that Levinas makes between the Saying (*le Dire*) and the Said (*le Dit*). The second term would represent the world of aesthetics for Levinas, art would entail a fixed representation of reality, determined, isolated from the flow of time. This experience "ordered or constructed" beforehand (Gibson 1999: 135) unaffected by change or alterity, that is by the encounter with what comes from outside, would belong to a realm dissociated from that of ethics. Critchley defines the Saying as "the sheer radicality of human speaking, of the event of being with an Other" (Gibson 1999: 136). In an ethical practice in art the Saying would interfere with the Said. The Saying would produce interruptions in a hermetically sealed aesthetic timeless entity. In this regard, the irruption of authentic facts in a novel may be said to produce cracks in a closed fictional system thus emphasizing its artificial character. The example mentioned above of the assassination of the archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife in *Rhode Island Blues* is a case in point: a historical event has played a decisive role in the lives of what, otherwise, are taken to be completely imaginary characters. However, a clearer instance of constant negotiation between reality and fiction can also be seen in *The Hearts and Lives of Men*. This novel follows the fortunes of Helen and Clifford and their daughter

Nell, whom they thought they had lost at a plane crash after she had been kidnapped. Nonetheless, towards the end of a very convoluted and tortuous story, they are reunited with her once more after a lapse of some eighteen years. At the beginning of this narrative we are offered a very faithful depiction of the atmosphere of the sixties and introduced to the art world of that time. Clifford, a dashing promising 35-year-old man, is the brilliant assistant of Sir Larry Patt the head of Leonardo's, a company specialised in the selling of high art and compared in popularity to Sotheby's and Christie's. Even if Leonardo's is the name of an invented firm, we are given a very good description of its premises and precise indications as to where it is situated: "that mini-Buckingham Palace of a building which stands on the corner of Grosvenor Square and Elliton Place" (*The Hearts and Lives of Men*, 7). As the novel advances the reader gets acquainted with establishments like Cranks, which opened in the sixties, "the new health food restaurant in Carnaby Street" (*HLM*, 43) or the Festival Hall Restaurant, whose "view is the best in all London" (*HLM*, 214). Likewise, we learn that when Clifford and Helen got married he sold his old house and bought a new one in Primrose Hill or, to be more specific, in Chalcot Square. The North West was an unfashionable part of London then, but by the time *The Hearts and Lives of Men* was written this was no longer so. In fact, Clifford bought the house for six thousand pounds and, as the reader is informed: "That very house changed hands recently for half a million pounds" (*HLM*, 81). This constant allusion to and inclusion of authentic popular places contributes to call attention to the gap that divides reality from fantasy, thus objectivising fiction and stressing its parodic nature. This effect is further emphasized by the existence of a loquacious narrator who seems to belong to this external real world, but of whom we do not get a clear profile, apart from the fact that she is a socialite. Her unjustified presence contributes even more

emphatically to establish the artificial character of the work in hand or better still its literariness or even its writtenness. Interestingly enough, there is no attempt to legitimize the presence of the narrator, to evoke an agent endowed with reason behind the voice in charge of the unfolding of the story. Once more I will follow Andrew Gibson, who refers to Derrida on this point. According to Derrida, writing is traditionally considered to have an inferior status to speech insofar as the latter is “inseparable from a particular valuation of reason, the conscious will, the self-identity of consciousness itself” (Gibson 1996: 167). Speech represents the mastery that the spirit has over the external world, its capacity to objectify it. To naturalise the concept of narrative voice means a refusal to accept the unnerving character of writing: “Our trust in the power of voice thus holds the spectres of difference and non-presence at bay and maintains subject and object, language and meaning in a space untroubled by either spectre” (Gibson 1996: 167). In *The Hearts and Lives of Men*, where no pains are taken to properly justify the presence of a meddling and very intrusive narrator, the artificiality of the concept of voice is highlighted, and in that regard parodied, it involves the mere acceptance of a customary presence in a novel. As early on as on the first page of the novel this narrator starts interfering in the development of the narrative to the extent that she even advances its end proleptic-fashion: “There! You know already this story is to have a happy ending. But it’s Christmastime. Why not?” (*HLM*, 5). When the novel starts we know she is one of the persons who attended the big party at Leonardo’s where Clifford and Helen met “I was there with my first husband” (*HLM*, 7). She addresses the reader daringly on constant occasions: “You know my views on coincidence, reader” (*HLM*, 281), and has no qualms about intruding amid the narrative: “Christmas Day, 1978. What were you doing, reader? Count back, think back. We had turkey, I suppose” (*HLM*, 287).

However, in spite of so much familiarity on her part, it has to be admitted that there is no coherent identity behind this voice.

Nonetheless, if we are to insist on the subject of the transaction between inside and outside, of the interruption of the Said by the Saying, or even on the openness of the novel to alterity, to what comes from the outside, we must once again refer to the characteristic disruption of borders of Gothic literature. Furthermore, this lack of fixed boundaries, this feeling of generalised uncertainty goes hand in hand with the concept of a double or complex identity. But this subject of the split identity may be carried to its last consequences when it exceeds the frontiers of a work of fiction. Antonio Ballesteros rightly asserts that “toda obra literaria es un espejo para su autor y para sus disfraces, o dobles narrativos” (Ballesteros 1998: 324). However, this may take us by surprise when the limits between reality and fiction are purposefully transgressed as in the case of *She May not Leave* or *Mantrapped* where the entanglement of reality and fiction could be understood as an effort to deconstruct the illusory division of what might otherwise be considered two separate entities. This phenomenon testifies to the fascination Postmodern sensibility displays for the capacity “of our human systems to refer to themselves in an unending mirroring process” (Linda Hutcheon 2000: 1). Representation conceived as an activity of deferral and postponement from whence no definite meaning can be ultimately obtained may be linked to the notion of a multiple and divided subjectivity. The reader is to find a two-fold reflection of Weldon in the shape of the narrator and her sister in *She May not Leave*. Frances Watt, in her attempt to get the money’s worth from a new laptop purchased for her by her sister Serena, tells us a story of supplantation experienced by her granddaughter Hattie, who as we have previously mentioned, was driven out of her home by her Polish nanny Agnieszka. However, what

is remarkable here is the game of doubles or mirrors, as Serena, who happens to be Weldon's literary *alter-ego*, considers Frances as "some kind of extension of herself" (*She May not Leave*, 69). Serena, who started her professional career in advertising, has so far published thirty two books (*SMNL*, 138). As for her husband, he used to own an antique shop (*SMNL*, 53). We are also told that she has had only sons (*SMNL*, 119), a deplorable thing in Frances' view, or the fact that her husband died just before a divorce settlement could be reached, "thus saving dispute" (*SMNL*, 69) and hindering him from depriving Serena of what she considered her rightful assets. Anyone acquainted with Weldon's life will know that these facts roughly match some of her biographical circumstances.

Susanne Becker in *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions* refers to a modern form of Gothic filiation which consists in rewriting a classic text at the same time as recreating its authoress life. She goes on to say that "This re-vision ensues in a multiple subjectivity that 'exceeds' even the split subject of the feminine Gothic in its inclusion of life-writing – and live writing" (Becker 1999: 76). This idea of "life-writing" and "live writing" would be interesting when dealing with *Mantrapped*, although here the mixture of fiction and autobiography does not involve the readaptation of a previous work by another author. Fay Weldon describes what she does in *Mantrapped* as a reality novel which "threads the life through the fiction. Have my fiction, have me" (2004: 20) and the pretext for the combination of fiction and autobiography in *Mantrapped* lies in the play of doubles between Trisha and Peter mentioned some paragraphs above: "My suspicion is this –that just as one day Peter and Trisha cross on the stairs, so one day there is bound to be an actual crossover between the novelist's actual life and the alternative reality as presented by the novelist" (*Mantrapped*, 58). Accordingly, through

the autobiographical account or life-writing, the reader is allowed to metafictionally see the mechanism of creation that goes into the making of the narrative: live writing. After all, the fictitious story is explicitly triggered by elements taken from the life of the writer or, per contra, the soulswitch between a man and a woman, is used as a pretext to revive Fay Weldon's own past, a time when, if we take into account the fact that the representative man of that moment was what she describes as the now nearly extinguished "dinosaur man" (*Mantrapped*, 148), this exchange would have been out of the question. Nonetheless, the autobiography and the invented story are constantly intertwined. Trisha's mattress is one of the first things mentioned in the novel and it is eventually compared to that of Fay Weldon: "My mattress, like Trisha's, is nine years old and expensive" (*Mantrapped*, 10). Fay Weldon also mentions a great-aunt, Sylvia whom she has met only once and who lived in a *ménage à trois*. The idea is that Doralee is to resemble her: "I have made Doralee look like my great aunt, and she is to live with Peter and Trisha in their switched bodies" (*Mantrapped*, 87). Fay Weldon is also unequivocal about the fact that there are elements of her in Trisha, which adds complexity to the character's entity, making it a kind of *alter-ego* of her writer. Self-reflexivity may be understood here in two different ways: on the one hand there is an explicit explanation of the process of the creation of the story, on the other, aspects of the author are openly portrayed and reflected in it.

The fact that *Mantrapped* is described as a reality novel should be highlighted as meaningful. The comparison to reality TV is noteworthy in the sense that it indicates two relevant features in Weldon's novels. On the one hand, they are concerned with the personal sphere, which is no small matter. In this regard, the narrator of *Letters to Alice* mentions her admiration towards Jane Austen based on the fact that she was the first

novelist to try to establish that “the personal, the emotional, is in fact the *moral*” (*Letters to Alice*, 33). Moreover, we have to take into account that in Weldon the moral is very much linked to the idea of “moral action,” rather than to good behaviour. We can see this concept clearly expounded in *Female Friends*, where it is said that, of all the three friends, Grace is the “one most capable of moral action,” since she left her husband “on the grounds of moral principle, rather than on the promptings of female desperation” ([1974]1993: 165). Apart from showing a bullying behaviour towards her, Grace’s husband constructed buildings without the safety measures required, and, as a result people died. Because this happened at a time in which safety regulations were not completely enforced he impudently got away with it, since he was exonerated from all charges of criminal negligence. On the other hand, as we know, Fay Weldon has never shunned the commercial or even the recreational aspect of her novels, which takes us back once more to the Gothic genre. Miller refers to the American critic Paul Zweig when he contends that “Gothic began not as literature but as entertainment” (Miller 1987: 350).

Even though Weldon’s narrative is concerned with the personal there is an emphasis on all that is aberrant. This tendency towards the morbid makes her literature spectacle-oriented. However, we cannot forget that all these excesses are ultimately made fun of and satirized in order to be rectified, or at least to work as deterrents and dissuade people from falling victims to them, and therein also lies some of their moral value. It is no wonder that Sappho, the protagonist of *The Stepmother’s Tale* is good at writing soap operas and that at a time in the novel she is writing for *EastEnders* scripts. There is a clear affinity between the subject matter of scandalous dramas going on in the show-business serials and that of, for instance, *The Stepmother’s Tale*, by the end of

which there are even hints of incest between Sappho's husband and her stepdaughter: "The father becomes the man: she knew the syndrome well" (*The Stepmother's Diary*, 255). In addition, this is a story in which marriage is uncannily depicted as responsible for the dismantling of a woman's personality, as a practice which "saps your sense not just of identity but of purpose" (*SMD*, 228). Sappho marries Gavin, a man twenty years her senior and with two teenagers under his care and who only wants her for her sudden fortune, for her contacts, for her large house and, last but not least, because she has a secretary, Laura, who can type up the novel he is writing. Frustrated and manipulative, he makes Sappho believe that the literary success she obtained with her first playwright was just a fluke. His baleful influence and a new crowded household with its inherent obligations hinder her from writing her second long-awaited play: *She Liked It Here*.

To this familiar Weldonian theme of marriage as a deceitful institution which hides many a tale of horror, there is a novel addition already sketched in a story of ghoulish title in *The Spa Decameron*: "Step-step-stepping On My Dreams," which goes hand in hand with the chaos born out of "these modern, all-inclusive families of ours, created by the passing sexual interests of a couple in each other" (*SMD*, 8): that of the evil stepdaughter. Isobel, already sickly possessive towards her father even when she was as young as three, to the extent that she kept pulling him away from her late mother, will do whatever is required now to have Sappho out of her way. She is behind Sappho's involuntary ingestion of contraceptive pills for a whole year frustrating the latter's attempt to get pregnant. Among her other outrageous misdeeds she makes donations amounting to 75, 000 pounds to various animal and bird charities with Sappho's American Express card. Gwen, Isobel's grandmother and the late Isolde's mother, also hates Sappho and contributes by all possible means to dilapidate her fortune. To that aim

she takes Isobel shopping and spends large amounts of money on Sappho's credit. Laura, her disgruntled secretary, also accompanies them out of spite for having lost the privileged position of responsibility she used to have in the household when Sappho was not married to Gavin. The other intrusive female presence in Sappho's existence is Isolde, Gavin's late wife, whose portrait is hanging above the marital bed: "It was Isolde's life, not hers: she was just the body Isolde was now using" (*SMD*, 246). She was her teacher and Sappho's first play was a redraft of an exercise she had done in her class. According to Isolde, all female writers think they are impostors and Sappho is no exception, she feels guilty and thinks she owes everything to the Garners who, in spite of their guidance, took advantage of her manual and intellectual work in the first place. Emily, who apart from being Sappho's mother is a psychoanalyst, becomes aware that her daughter's life is bound to turn into a muddle soon after she starts reading the diaries that Sappho wrote when, as a student, she was employed as an au pair in their household. Her masochism led her to be used as skivvy by the Garners, then to her marriage to him, an older man without wealth but with children. The domestic encumbrances inherent in her new situation and her complete commitment to him and his family make her neglect her own career. Finally she gets herself with child and is nearly as good as expelled from her own home –she had put her family house in her husband and his children's names: "She had wandered into some extreme soap opera of her own designing" (*SMD*, 248). On account of the things that happen in the novel Emily is reminded of a French nursery rhyme that serves as a kind of *mise en abyme* of the whole account and which is about a master returning home after a long absence and, when asked about the state of things, the reply of his servant is: "*Très bien, très bien*, very good, very good, comes the answer, except the stables are burned and the horses

are dead, and the house is burned, and the family is dead, *mais très bien, très bien*" (SMD, 64). Paradoxically, notwithstanding the fact that Sappho realises that her husband has sadistically bullied and taken advantage of her all along, she is aware that she would still proceed on her course of self-destruction if he still said I love you from time to time. Nonetheless, the telling of these experiences in *The Stepmother's tale* with the help of paraphernalia of narrators: Emily, Emily reading Sappho's letters and finally her novel has a very Gothic feel to it. On the other hand, this use of multiple narrators, this characteristic Gothic emphasis on, in the words of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "the difficulty a story has in getting itself told" (in Jarlath Killen 2009: 17) corresponds to, and expresses Sappho's plight, the intricate labyrinth from whence she must escape if she wants to survive and the complexity of the feelings which have placed her in this undesirable position and which must be transformed. When she eventually puts all these ghastly events into paper she eventually manages to transcend them. The creation of her novel is tantamount to being active and taking measures to surpasses this ghastly situation. Through it she stops being a victim and she gets even with Isobel, who is trying to get hold of it. As Emily puts it: "I almost feel sorry for Isobel" (SMD, 265). Everyone will find out how monstrous she is. As for Apple Lee, "the hell-hole," the house Sappho has so generously given away, it is well rid of. Sappho's father committed suicide there years back so that his wife and daughter could claim the insurance he had bought a month before and keep his beloved property. Accordingly, the ownership of the house is, to say the least, of a dubious nature. On the other hand, thanks to this novel which is kept, along with the diaries, in a Waitrose bag, which, in contrasts to those of a supermarket like Tesco, denote certain quality, Sappho will recover the literary success that she had achieved with her first theatre play, *Ms Alien*,

but that has eluded her since her marriage to Gavin.

Taking into account the totalitarian and restrictive discourses that have determined the concept woman, the complex play of subjectivities, the idea of the multiple self which characterises the Gothic makes this genre the ideal vehicle to escape the “enclosures of feminine myths between *le propre* and the ‘monstrous feminine’” (Becker 1999: 254). That this is in accordance with what Fay Weldon undertakes to do in her fiction can be readily surmised from the title of one of her most famous works: *Praxis*. In this novel it is an older Praxis the one who speaks in the first person in those chapters which refer to the present. However, when the narration is about her previous life everything is told in the third person. This novel would constitute a clear instance of a *Bildungsroman*, were it not less concerned “with *Bildung* than *Entbildung*, not formation, but the breaking down of what has been formed” (Gibson, 1999: 44). Unlike her mother, who having been left by her lover with two children born out of wedlock succumbs to madness on account of “the accumulation of loss, trouble and social humiliation” (*Praxis*, 104), Praxis goes through all those extremes in life which no lady would like to try: “bastard, adulteress, whore, committer of incest, murderess, what else?” (*Praxis*, 147), and, not yielding to social pressure, comes out of it unscathed. However returning to the title, we should consider what it suggests: praxis as “inseparable from becoming” (Gibson 103), as constant experimentation and avoidance of clichés. The moment all the activities that may be defined in the disparaging terms above quoted are so lightly undertaken by the heroine, the words seem to lose some of their darkest associations. The absence of judgement implicit in permanent change, in the escape from set ideas makes their meanings appear to be somehow “in flight”.

There is no doubt that in *Praxis* as in the rest of Weldon’s novels we witness the

dismantling of the heroines' personalities. However in Weldon's narrative this practice does not lead to death and destruction, as it would do in Gothic literature, in Poe's short stories, for example. Having a constructive purpose, it rather results in a much-needed transformation. In the face of excruciating circumstances, a radical recomposition of character is required if the protagonists are to lead a rounded and fulfilled existence. Weldon's protagonists are offered an adventure of renewal which, though far from promptly embraced, reverses the process of personality formation riddled with constrictive norms concerning values of femininity and submission to which they have yielded during their period of growth. A clear illustration of this can be seen in the novel *Splitting*, in which there is a species of simulation of Angelica's re-birth: "She was doing it: she was the baby inside herself growing" (*Splitting*: 321). She is born once again, but this time as a new person, since she has got the divorce from her husband and has already forgotten him.

2.12 AFFECTIVE NARRATORS AND THEIR BENEFICIAL EFFECTS ON THE NARRATEES

The existence of the narrators in Weldon is in consonance with the idea of non-stop experimentation and of persistent becoming. To see to what extent they are involved in the narrative we could mention two examples to which we have referred above. The narrators in novels like *Growing Rich* or *The President's Child* work as extensions or *alter-egos* of the heroines who have to get the reins of their lives or become alert to a false situation so that the raconteurs of the respective stories may be cured from their psychosomatic illnesses, which in the case of the one of the first novel

is paralysis whereas that of the second is blindness, thus tallying with the psychical limitations of the heroines in their narratives. Similarly, as we have just seen, *The Stepmother's Diary* is the account of how Sappho leaves a "hell-hole" and stops being a victim to manipulation, of how she recovers the freedom and identity that she had lost on account of a strong masochistic streak that had allowed her to adjust to what otherwise would have been an unbearably monstrous situation. In *The Stepmother's Diary*, the fact that Emily, Sappho's mother, apart from being the reader of her diaries and novel, is the narrator produces a very interesting empathising effect: Emily has to learn alongside her daughter, she has to follow all the steps leading to her daughter's coming of age to realise that she had been wrong in her upbringing: "Poor Sappho- It can't have been much fun for her, being brought up by a simulacrum, any more than it was for me," (SD, 258). At this stage Emily, who, interestingly enough, is a psychoanalyst, understands perfectly well that after her husband's death she was not there for her daughter and that that was the reason why the latter, as a young drama student sought refuge at the Garner's household and accepted them as father and mother figures. Hence, at the end of the novel Emily offers Sappho and her yet unborn baby the new home she is going to establish with her new partner Barnaby in order to start afresh.

We have just seen some instances of the bonding that exists between narrators and the protagonists of some novels in Weldon. Likewise, there seems to be an attempt to establish a certain degree of attachment between narrator and narratee in Gothic literature, which is probably one of the factors which, according to Susanne Becker, have led George Haggarty to speak of the Gothic as an "affective form". Susanne Becker explains that this aspect is enhanced by "generic narrative gestures that draw attention to the importance of a 'you' in gothic form; the need for a narratee or addressee who will

sympathetically read, and paradoxically believe, an unbelievable story in its own terms” (Becker 1999: 23). She goes on to give the example of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* where the different narrators Walton, Frankenstein and the monster make entreaties to Mrs Saville, Walton, and Frankenstein respectively so that they may listen to their stories. In a similar fashion, the significance of the “you” in Weldon’s novels cannot be dismissed. We have already mentioned how her books may have affected the lives of some of their readers to the extent that at least one of them told Weldon she had left her husband because of their influence. Obviously, taking into account the strong satiric component of her novels and, being the correction of follies and excesses the main aim of satire, this cannot come as a surprise. Accordingly, those insidious qualities, like that of an ingrained feeling of guiltiness or the masochism which make women liable to victimization in the hands of bullies, come under scrutiny in her novels. Not only is an effort of introspection required from their protagonists, but also the acknowledgement that they are somehow to blame for the shocking situations they are in, so that what was rashly thought to be gruesome turns preposterous on reflection. The rationalization of the uncanny puts a stop to the estate of turmoil which is in the way of a fulfilled existence and produces a sense of calmness which helps women take control of their lives. This is the same impact that Weldon’s narrative may have on its readers.

In this regard, Weldon’s *The Spa Decameron* illustrates to perfection the interaction between her stories and her implied readers, as well as the soothing effect they may have on them. The narrator, a novelist, requires a place to stay over Christmas, since her husband had left the taps of the bath running and consequently the ceiling of the kitchen has fallen down. Immediately afterwards he had to fly to Wichita to visit her mother who had a broken hip. As a result, Phoebe, the narrator, resorts to an expensive

Spa in Cumbria in order to spend there the period between Christmas and the New Year, a time when, incidentally, people are susceptible to acute emotional crisis and breakdowns. Castle Spa is the neo-Gothic framework which serves as a setting for this updated and unpretentious female refashioning of *Decameron*: “Based round the foundations of what had once been a Roman bathhouse, then a convent, then a fortified mansion, it had been renovated in the mid-nineteenth century by William Burges, he of the extravagances of Cardiff Castle” (*Spa Decameron*, 21). However, Phoebe finds the spa in the same state of neglect as her house. There have been some drawbacks obstructing the proper running of the place since Lady Caroline, the owner, is a gambler going through a patch of bad luck. Understandably, the staff, with their salaries overdue, has abandoned the precincts. Nonetheless, we will see how the chaos inside the building finds its equivalent outside it. Likewise, the narrator is plagued by feelings of anxiety which had been triggered before her Christmas journey by the blood bath caused by a former friend, Belinda, when she stabbed Eleanor, the woman who had seduced her husband, before killing herself. The husband, whom she loved, was the only person left alive in the scene of crime. A reputation for usurping husbands had preceded Eleanor—she had already dumped the one she had appropriated from poor Nisha, a client of the same Hair Salon as Phoebe’s— but Belinda had not deigned to pay attention to Phoebe’s warnings. This encounter with evil has completely unsettled Phoebe: “There were real things to be fearful of: nasty imaginings that came true,” she muses (*SD*, 207). She is assaulted by all kinds of wild fears and forebodings sparked by unresolved past events. She worries, among other things, in case her husband might be unfaithful to her with her friend Jenny, who had already tried to take him away from her when they were young. Moreover, at this time at a previous Christmas, her son and his family, though they

survived, had been caught amid the tsunami disaster in Sri Lanka, and the external threat does not seem to be abating this year. There are rumors of Sumatra flu spreading and they are accompanied by those of a nation-wide computer virus, as a result of which people are advised to shut down their pcs. and mobiles, and which many attribute to a “government ploy to censor the internet and bury news about Sumatra flu” (*SD*, 78). To the dismal picture of invasive flu with “its paranoiac blogs” (*SD*, 286), satellite phones and computers out of work, we may add the snow storms and train strikes which isolate the variegated group of women who have repaired to the Castle Spa for the procurement of care and comfort of their bodies from the rest of the world and force them to fend for themselves. They end up assuming control of the place and settling around a Jacuzzi baring their souls and bodies to one another. And this seems to be the best possible treatment for the pointlessly agitated Phoebe. However, she is not the only momentarily unsettled character. Mira, for instance is also presented as such. She is a journalist and former foreign correspondent who has just been sent on an assignment to the spa because Alistair, her editor and married lover, wants her out of the way for Christmas. When they meet for the first time on the train, Phoebe takes her for a competent and busy woman but this first assumption is readily discarded when Mira sheds a tear. She is probably just a farmer’s daughter ditched by her boyfriend, she thinks. These well-to-do professional women come across as defenseless beings temporarily crippled by their emotions and we are forced to concede that a great deal of absurdity lies in the fact that “such seemingly, strong, cheerful, independent women, a credit to themselves, their families, indeed to the nation, should so often end up in this sorry masochistic state, crumbled crying on a bed” (*SD*, 316). Since, as Phoebe and Mira wryly comment, if you are a woman “there’s no such a thing as an outer reality, just the sum of one’s

experiences, and one's emotional responses" (SD, 168). This assertion, on the other hand, is sadly strengthened by their state of agitation. Hence, listening to all these intimate stories of these completely unknown women is the therapy Phoebe needs to gain the strength to take her mind off cataclysmic visions of the kind of a massive cosmic hotting-up or the complete destruction of the planet. The case of Mira seems more complex, there are hints that she might be one of those "witch bitches" bent upon destroying other women's lives for the sake of it: once rejected by another woman a man has no value to her. She reminds Phoebe of nasty Eleanor when she does not receive the news that Alistair is leaving his wife for her with the alacrity that could be expected. Nonetheless, the resolution of Phoebe's inner conflicts strikingly intersects with a benign answer from the exterior world: "at just about the time I was wrestling with my nature and winning, Lady Caroline had been at the blackjack table, playing for impossible stakes, and fate had smiled on her. It was just a coincidence" (SD, 364). Furthermore, the technological and biological virus apparently dissipates. Everything is seen in a new light now that Phoebe's irrational crisis is over.

García Landa in his essay *Acción, Relato Discurso: Estructura de la ficción narrativa* states that the literary process may be interpreted in psychoanalytical terms as a cathartic phenomenon. He follows Castilla del Pino in his description of the narrative structure as consisting in "un preclímax, en el que la tensión se suscite, un clímax en el cual la tensión alcanza su plenitud; y, por último, el anticlímax en el que la tensión se relaja y que permite fácilmente la *abreacción* que el sujeto precisa necesariamente" (in García Landa 1998: 453). Phoebe in *The Spa Decameron* could be said to represent the ideal implied reader of Weldon's novels. Listening to how the extreme stories of other women come to a good end, experimenting and reliving with her peers those repressed

and painful emotional experiences and liberating the tensions produced by them has helped assuage her restlessness and solve her inner conflicts. She has reached a peak beyond which there is no room for shock. She, along with the others, have been witness to murder by poisoning, change of sex, a stay in a Greek prison, incest between old siblings who had overcome the initial urge to kill each other, ghosts hampering the existence of a vicar's wife and so on and so forth. It must be noticed that all of them are narratives in which the normative social patterns are momentarily destabilized or, to say the least, criticized. But let us focus for a brief moment on one of these tales with a happy denouement to which Phoebe, who is a novelist and the extradiegetic narrator of the whole account, listens eagerly but to which, paradoxically, she does not contribute –she clearly plays the role of a narratee or listener. Everyone is taken aback by the inordinate reaction of the mortgage broker when a cat appears chasing a mouse in the kitchen. She then goes on to explain that she suffers from cat-phobia as well as from eating disorders and a compulsion to steal food which leads her to attend the weddings and funerals of total strangers uninvited. These severe deficiencies in an otherwise successful personality cramp her chances of a rich and fulfilled life and have their origins in a troubled childhood. On the one hand, her father, a poet, did not earn enough money to provide for his large progeny and they lived mostly on children's allowances. On the other, the mother, a lover of pets would take in all the stray animals she found on her way and would be outspoken about its existence to the housing authorities, who could not then overlook the fact that they kept pets in breach of the rules that forbade the care of pets in state homes. As a result, the mortgage broker and her father would invariably have to roam the streets in search of a new house and food for her four siblings. In the face of so many hardships, it would not be beneath her to steal the odd

sandwich. Her mother died of an encephalic fever, which she suspects she caught from some dog or from the cat's litter tray when the mortgage broker was only thirteen and, to the child's chagrin, she could still recognize her pets but not her family. Her father died soon afterwards. As a young woman she had successfully helped her brothers and sisters to get by to the extent that now all of them lead a stable family life. However, all this prolonged effort has left her with the character flaws we have already mentioned. At the point she is telling this story she finally makes up her mind to take the next train to London, the strike in process allowing, and try to rescue a cat she saw falling from a window in the last funeral she attended and which would inevitably die if no one went to its rescue: "by saving the cat she would save herself," the narrator believes (*SD*, 268). As elucidated above, Phoebe's brief sojourn at the Spa may be compared to the experience of Weldon's implied reader. At the climax of stories she goes through a spell of irrationality, her worst fears are allowed to surface in mimetic response to those of the protagonists-cum-narrators of the hypodiegetic level of the novel and she eventually manages to liberate her pent-up tensions solving her repressed conflicts at a par with the restoring process of these raconteurs contained in an inner stratum of the narrative.

2.13. NARRATORS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

In the previous section I tried to exemplify how the exchange between narrators and narratees in *The Spa Decameron* may help illustrate the alleged bond created between Weldon's narrators and her readers, the impact her novels may have on the lives of its prospective readers. I tried to show how the narrators confided their personal stories to the narratees managing to attract the attention of, among others, a distracted

Phoebe and eventually soothing her down. In the end such a close link is established between these women that when Alistair comes to Castle Spa in a helicopter to pick up Mira –they are as well as marooned there on account of a snow storm– her first reaction is to retort: “I’ve found a family here. Who needs men?” (*SD*, 368). Nevertheless, if Weldon’s narrative is to all appearances of the same “affective” character as the Gothic literature it absorbs, we must not lose sight of the fictive nature of these narrators whose presence on occasions is not even justified in the form of characters, but may merely be parodic entities resembling the narrative artifice of voice as in classical novels of a satirical bent –this phenomenon is produced in *The Shrapnel Academy* or *The Hearts and Lives of Men*. However, the importance of these narrators, the way they try to reach out to the narratee like in *The Shrapnel Academy* when an unidentified voice invokes her or his erotic consciousness: “Reader, what is etched in yours? What collar-bone, what little patch of textured skin, what dangling pendant? Think! Remember!” ([1986]1994, 23), is in line with the prominence generally given by feminist thought to voice over vision –we must take into account that vision is sadly connected to the traditional male voyeurism which turns women into passive reflections of their gaze whereas their capacity to be heard has been a conquest achieved in recent times. Women are considered human beings in their own right at last through the agency of their voices. Accordingly, like in Gothic literature, we cannot find in Weldon’s fiction any detached spectator or witness seeking to coherently grasp, and objectify the world. As we have so far tried to prove, Weldon’s novels are not static and closed phenomena which demand no response. In consonance with the idea of non-stop experimentation and of constant becoming for which the title and the name of the protagonist of one of her best-known novels, *Praxis*, stands, we are required to be impressed and moved by the narrative and

to react to it with all our senses. No wonder we can come across narrators as extreme as Sonia, who believes that it “takes a mad woman in a loony bin to actually” (*The Heart of the Country*, 150) make us desist from previous assumptions or fixed conceptions and whose social conscience has ultimately landed her in a psychiatric hospital. Ultimately, this is a kind of literature which implies agency and ethical involvement, of subjects in constant composition and interaction with all that comes their way, and thus with alterity. Better, according to this criterion, an exacerbated and exasperated narrator affected by events than, following Heath on the cinema, the vision of a “detached, untroubled eye ... an eye free from the body, outside process, purely looking” (Gibson, 1996: 86).

Specularity and mimetic or realist representation lose the ethical content they may have the moment they become detached activities proper of an epistemological frame of reference predicated on the existence of binary oppositions, of the disjunctive and dichotomous character of subject/object, inside/outside, and unconscious wishes and the psychical space involved are blatantly kept out of the equation, that is, discarded and abjected. Thus we see, for instance, in *Down Among the Women*, the way the narrator refuses to identify herself until the end of the story when she is finally able to acknowledge her psychic needs and attend to the demands of a body that she has so far neglected: “Jocelyn, out of kindness to her husband, trains herself in sexual disinterest, even distaste” ([1972] 1991: 104). She has suppressed her needs and instincts for the sake of a man who divides women between those with whom he can obtain pleasure and those he can respect. Therefore, Jocelyn has to become frigid in order to be a proper wife to him. By the same token, looking backwards, she realizes that she and her friends had been under similar delusions and, accordingly, had yielded to their deep-seated need

to serve a man and had unconsciously refused to pay attention to themselves, to what they felt. For instance, before her marriage, when Jocelyn is at her friend Audrey's wedding, she cries out of disappointment at the brevity of the ceremony, or, above all, because, in contrast with her friend she is not getting married. The fact that Audrey's husband-to-be has insisted on a new name for her and she has sheepishly accepted it is of no concern to Jocelyn: "She is not upset because Audrey is married in the name of Emma. She thinks such devotion to a man is admirable: she predicts a happy future for them. Everyone does" (*DAW*, 84). Most women in this novel, probably with the exception of Wanda, let themselves be ruled by the clichés and imperatives imposed by a patriarchal society and are judged according to its criteria. We can see this clearly in the description we are given of the forty-five-year-old unfulfilled spinster who, in spite of herself, likes to serve and be available at all times: "And off she goes, carrying her basket of goodies to her old people, an Aged Red Riding Hood with no wolf pursuing" (*DAW*, 1749). This state of affairs in *Down Among the Women* is reflected in the psychosomatic illnesses which afflict its main characters: Susan's popping eyes, Sylvia's problems with her fluctuating eyesight and hearing or Jocelyn's proverbial clumsiness: "There is very nearly a nasty accident. Jocelyn's life is full of them" (*DAW*, 103). We can see that all these characters sink low; they are victims to abusive relationships or, as in the case of Scarlet, Wanda's daughter, choose the easy way out in life. Scarlet marries a ridiculous and unbearable older man, Edwin or Skinny Winny – as her mother calls him. She remains with him until the degrading nature of the relationship finally dawns upon her when Edwin exacts of Kim's new wife the 7 pounds. 10s.0d. Kim owed him – when Kim, Scarlet's father, had been required the amount of 57 pounds. 10s.0d. for the wedding expenses he had been "too astonished to resist" (*DAW*, 114), sending Edwin at

least most of the money, a cheque for 50 pounds.

However, in this novel, “where sex is a strange intermittent animal spasm; where men seduce, make pregnant, betray, desert: where laws are harsh and mysterious, and where the woman goes helpless” (*DAW*, 34), there are two characters who succumb to this chaos, who carry their vulnerability to its last consequences and are not afraid to face death. The painter X commits suicide because her husband Y, a less successful painter, betrays her with her friend Helen. When X dies, Y blames Helen for it. Helen ends up killing herself and her daughter whom she did not want to leave alone to cope with a kind of existence from which her mother wished to desist. X and Helen’s suicides, that is, their last acts of self-exposure, are the means by which degradation is averted. In similar situations, Gibson explains that this complete and sought after defeat can be interpreted as “inverted power, power wedded to hopelessness and therefore issuing in a will to self-destruction” (Gibson 1999: 169) in a patriarchal society. There is also space in this novel for the praise of another kind of victims of patriarchy, those fallen women who were unwillingly forced to humiliation and debasement, “lost to syphilis, death or drudgery” (*DAW*, 185) during the war. Accordingly, the need to raise a monument, “The Tomb of the Unknown Whore” in honor of these male soldier’s counterparts who had been sold and reduced to sexual slavery is remarked upon. This is attuned to the undercurrent of bawdy jokes which overflow this novel, jokes about cutting willies, about an angler marrying a woman because she has got worms, or about an upper-class brothel where brother and sister meet. Thus, if in this novel the characters reveal their unheeded needs and unconscious wishes through constant somatization, sexuality and reproduction are similarly and persistently demystified. It is a women’s perspective, but one which, by means of confronting fears, transcends their worst

scenarios, as is typical of the Female Gothic. This allaying of fears, which is generally done through terror, in Weldon is done through humor. When Scarlet announces to Wanda that she is with child, Wanda is instantly reminded of the story of the mother in a maternity hospital who, on being asked by a member of the royal family if the lovely red-haired baby took after the father, answered that he never took his hat off.

In the world of *Down Among the Women* the mere acknowledgment by women of their bodies and of each other would be a threat to their ingrained certainties founded on their false expectations and self-deceptions. Consequently, they let themselves be happily subsumed within and absorbed by those phallic and indifferent tower blocks they inhabit anonymously. We must take into account the fact that the first thing an infant has to abject or reject in order to gain identity, to enter the symbolic stage, that of language and socialization is the maternal body. Hence, according to Victor Burgin, the latter “is chronically organized to remind us of our common condition as brief events in the life of the species” (Fletcher 1990: 118). Clearly, the term woman has come to be characterized by its ambivalence. On the one hand, it assimilates that which is most desired: a state of painless undifferentiation for which “the pre-oedipal bliss” stands for, but it also represents that which is most abhorred: lack of social identity and physical death. The moment of birth connotes ambiguity, the in-between, that which escapes delimitation, we are inside and outside, alive and dead, it stands for the original beckoning chaos that we have to avoid in order to be, in order to become definable beings. This idea, as apprehended by patriarchy, results in women’s bodies being socially abjected and ignored as something improper and out-of-bounds in a civilized existence. Besides, the fact that these bodies seem to exist to contravene women’s reproductive wishes add a new sense to the term abjection, it places them in uncharted

territory –the maternity wards riddled with paradoxes constantly alluded to in Weldon’s novels, a woman with an unwanted miscarriages lying close to the one with an undesired pregnancy, is an apt image to prove this. Women’s bodies seem to have a will of their own and uncannily contradict their expectations, that is why in a story like “A Libation of Blood” the protagonist’s mother is happy when her daughter has a miscarriage considering it the sacrifice required by the God of Chance so that the next time she might be luckier –she had been pregnant with twins and was willing to go through the whole pregnancy in spite of the fact that they might have Down’s syndrome. It is even worse when the reproductive age comes to an end: “Bleeding and drying and fibroids and cysts and backache –you name an unhealthy state, the woman has it” (*PAOS*, 105). Women, on the other hand, have internalized this feeling of being as marginal as their bodies, turned taboo and forbidden territory, seem to make them. In addition, the fact that they are the infant’s primary caretakers does not do much to enhance their public status. All these may be reasons why they remain down there, occupying the lowest rungs of society. Nonetheless, as inferred from *Down Among the Women*, women are the ones responsible for this state of affairs. As the forty-five-year-old unfulfilled spinster puts it: “I used to blame men for women’s condition, not now” ([1974]1991: 173) – she regrets not having got married for the simple reason that she likes to serve, she needs to be helpful. Therefore, we see women in this novel perpetually debasing themselves one way or another: Sometimes they remain in unfair and unbalanced relationships, some other times they betray their women friends. There is all kind of uncouth behavior going on: Jocelyn marries Sylvia’s boyfriend, Susan deprives Scarlet of her father and Wanda of her husband.

Yet, for all these tragedies, this is an optimistic novel, a novel of experimentation

and of sorting out obstacles and, above all, of disclosures. On the other hand, this is done through the agency of the narrator, Jocelyn. When she is in a satisfactory relationship and, with hindsight, she becomes aware –referring to a previous time– that “Jocelyn is not stupid. Let us say she is going through a stupid patch, as people will when they are attempting to evade unpleasant truths; and Jocelyn, these days, maintains that she is happy” (*Down Among the Woman*, 127). Her use of the third person indicates her attempt to distance those rejectable aspects of herself, to disallow all that time of sleepwalking. All her friends go through similar processes and eventually regain control of their lives and stop being “stupid puppets” whose strings are pulled by fate.

2.14. BORDER-CROSSING: *Remember Me*

All these novels entail a process of transformation and improvement. However, as in Gothic literature, the past as background for personal history is all-important. Sometimes it is there lurking behind and constricting the existence of the heroines, hence the importance of journeys and quest, which are both of a physical and spiritual kind. The protagonists are forced to cross borders to overcome the obstacles which hinder their way to a life unencumbered by unnecessary constrictions. However, this crossing of borders can be taken a bit too far for a contemporary setting. This is the case of Madeleine in *Remember Me*. When her husband leaves her and their daughter for a younger woman, a paragon of femininity, she feels wronged and becomes stuck in an inflexible pose of rage and revenge which she is incapable of overcoming. She is paralysed by the terror produced by her new situation, by the “loss of status, and the general humiliation of being a woman without a man” (*Remember Me*, 49). In fact, she

becomes aware of her shortcomings, of all those things she has been missing out of obduracy just before the lethal car accident returning from Cambridge to London after her date with Quincey. The latter is a sad lonely middle-aged computer programmer who has been twice in a mental institution. Their encounter at least means that, albeit late, she is to take the steps required to regain control over her life: “Could I change? Am I still young enough? Or is anger now etched so deep into me that to change would be to break? That is my fear: break my habit, break me” (*RM*, 76). Thereupon, the fact that she dies and reappears as a ghost to sort her problems out and make her peace with the past is symptomatic of her previous inability to cope with and welcome all those novel events, which, even if they had come in the shape of misfortunes, could have helped her to acquire a new, better, more mature existence. It also attests to the high degree of the stubbornness she shows in refusing to traverse boundaries which, although of a challenging nature, would open the doors to fuller and more satisfactory experiences. In fact, the novel illustrates how she has wilfully chosen a very narrow path of life in contrast with Jarvis who predictably will leave this world richly “by virtue of his temperament, his masculinity, his will to life and sex, his attachment to domesticity and the trivial trappings of this world – all these things which Madeleine in her pride and in her youth, rejected” (*RM*, 146). Nonetheless, this state of affairs involves a certain degree of injustice, to make up for which, as a corpse, she acquires the importance and transcendence she ought to have had when alive and was not granted to her on account of her sex. This, which must not go unnoticed, should be linked to Kristeva’s concept of *abjection*, that is, the process of ejection and expulsion of those elements which threaten our identity as subjects. By means of our feelings of revulsion towards rot, faeces, waste and so forth, that which was part of our body but is now detached and no longer

contained in it, we create our own boundaries or defensive lines in order to enter the symbolic stage. Every civilisation traces a border between nature and society, between the semiotic and symbolic, and everyone is required to cross this line to become a full-fledged human being by erecting a line of demarcation between her/him and those “unnameable” elements which would bring about the complete dissolution of identity as we know it. Taking into account the fact that very early on infants have to separate themselves from the maternal body so that they may acquire their own identity, it is no wonder that women, always represented by their bodies, are positioned on the borders of society, are *abjected* from it and are reduced to the condition of outcasts.

In a great number of Weldon’s novels there is a tacit acceptance of this stigmatised status as a starting point for her female main characters. Most of her books commence at the point where fairy tales end, that is with women whose marriages have failed, and whose longed for wishes, when made true, turn into nightmares. Thereby, it should not take us by surprise the predominance of black humour employed to depict stressful situations, its resultant aggressiveness is the cue Weldon’s heroines have to heed in order to finally adopt an attitude of self-defence and start to assert themselves effectively. Indeed, the fact that the chosen heroine in *Remember Me* is a corpse takes marginality to the furthest extreme. As a corpse Madeleine has lost all claims to identity, and yet this is the extreme nullified position from which she is going to fight back, and from which, paradoxically, she gains her strength. Kristeva says of the corpse: “If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and permits me to be, the corpse, *the most sickening of wastes*, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who spell. ‘I’ is expelled.” In this novel, by contrast, it represents the last victory of body and materiality over spirit, and the weapon Madeleine wields in her

search for revenge. As a corpse, she will have the power she lacked alive.

Her death is accompanied by a host of supernatural and uncanny phenomena, which are a stock-in-trade feature of the Gothic genre. Since the genre's inception, where neo-classic forms were parodied, these supernatural elements have been there, for the sake of creating a sort of moral and formal provocation, in order to mock the expectations of readers accustomed to a literature where realistic patterns were the norm. In the Gothic classics they were even accompanied by paraphernalia of narrative devices in the form of letters, manuscripts, prologues and so on and so forth, which served the purpose of trying to justify these eerie outcrops. In Fay Weldon's novels there is no need to support the supernatural occurrences with facts or explanations. "The unspeakable" is part of the fun, it is the recognised assumption of belonging to a tradition based on hyperbolic, parodic and emotional excesses, and where everything undergoes the scrutiny of an ironic gaze. William Patrick Day has written: "The relationship of the Gothic to the conventional world, and to the forms from which it derives can best be described as parodic" (Becker 1996: 26). So, when Madeleine dies in *Remember Me*, more or less at the time where her ex-husband is drinking in her honour "A toast! I offer a toast. Death and damnation to all ex-wives" (1992:80), all sort of trouble and eerie events ensue. The smell of toothpowder which characterizes Quincey's room, the last place where Madeleine was, is experimented again on other occasions in the novel; the lullaby Madeleine is singing before she dies is automatically repeated by Margot and, later on, inexplicably sung at different moments by Clarence and Goliath, the men in charge of the mortuary where Madeleine's corpse rests; the clock stops and a strong gust of wind is felt in her previous home, where Jarvis, her ex-husband is having dinner with Lily, his new wife –Madeleine's usurper– and two other couples, one of them formed by

Margot and her husband Philip, the doctor. For all this plethora of supernatural elements, the most remarkable event takes place when Margot starts to convulse with pains in her leg and chests, echoing Madeleine's cut leg and the impact on her chest in a sort of repetition of the car-accident where the latter had just lost her life. Henceforth, Margot becomes a sort of mouthpiece for the dead Madeleine. It is as if the latter had taken hold of Margot's body and seized her spirit –she has become her *alter ego*. Through her Margot incorporates and gives vent to the rage she has meekly and submissively suppressed for so long. We see this clearly when she begins to act in strange ways, or when her voice turns hoarse, but, above all, in her concern for Hilary, Madeleine's daughter, and in her new-found neglect of Jonathan, Lily's son and still a baby. At a given moment he is about to fall down the stairs and she just remains impassive, not hurrying to his aid, and expecting the worst outcome. All sorts of mishaps and nasty accidents happen to Jonathan after Madeleine's demise, and Hilary turns out to be his only protection, "standing, as was her custom, between her half brother and her mother" (*RM*, 144).

Margot does not become a vehicle through which Madeleine's wishes find expression out of the blue. Nearly at the beginning of the novel, before the latter's death, there is a strong moment of complicity between both women sparked by their mutual dislike for Lily. After all, Lily could be said to be an extreme case of femininity, that which "they would hate to be, yet want to be" (*RM*, 44), that end-result of gender formation towards the embodiment of which a phallocratic society presses women and which establishes the standards of what the pinnacle of womanhood should be. The attainment of this vague concept of femininity which women have been compelled to typify is virtually impossible and requires an arduous suppression of their corporality.

To even approach this ideal entails a prolonged strenuous task which most women unsuccessfully set themselves to achieve, many in spite of themselves and against their deepest convictions. Nonetheless, the acceptance of the norms that govern femininity would mean a first step in their access to a life of fulfilment and away from ostracism. In this regard, it is no wonder that this frail ideal fills them with such ambiguous feelings. They cannot help being under its influence while, at the same time, resenting this elusive and out-of-their-reach goal. In *Remember Me* Lily and Madeleine represent opposing approaches to femininity, polarised degrees of success with regard to the axis of gender construction, that is, the historically and socially conditioned imposition on women of an identity based on the implementation of constrictions. What has been traditionally considered ladylike finds its last expression in the control of posture and movements, in the smallness and physical weakness which attest to the general restraint which maintains them in the domain of the proper. The deeper a woman is imbued with femininity and the better she manages to obliterate her materiality the easier it is for her to keep *abjection* at bay. As already mentioned, we can interpret abjection here as separation, as a withdrawal from the symbolic order which articulates the social sphere of human interaction.

This position of social outcasts has been invariably enforced on women on account of the stigma attached to them of being mere corporality and no spirit in reference to a dichotomous system of values where soul or spirit prevail over body. In *Remember Me* we can infer Madeleine and Lily's differing position towards femininity from their attitudes in relation to the house that they have successively inhabited. In this respect, we should take into account the importance of the linkage established in Gothic literature between women and their houses whereby the latter become metonymic

representations of the former. Whereas Madeleine considered the house “a place of safety, the suitable background to their lives, workaday and practical”, when Lily is in charge of this same house it becomes a “monument of sickly self-esteem”. She spends fortunes on it and resents the money which goes to her husband’s ex-wife and daughter and which would be better spent on decoration. However, we would obtain even more revealing results if we were to examine the state of their trash cans. Madeleine’s “were of battered, honest, rusty tin, much impacted with old food along the bottom seams” in contrast with Lily’s, which are “plastic, clean and lined with polythene”. And while Lily would probably move house if she saw a maggot, Madeleine favours them as a “monument to our essential corruption” (*RM*, 42). The fact that the main reason of Lily’s success lies in her physical beauty, is symptomatic of how far she goes to avert any intimation of decayed corporality or materiality.

Through her symbiosis with Madeleine, Margot learns to be outspoken about her claims, just as the former had been, and she realises she has made plenty of sacrifices for the sake of keeping her house and family in order. As for her body, she becomes aware that she has “muffled it up with respectability and the terror of experience” (*RM*, 187). Having the spirit of Madeleine taken possession of her, she finally accepts in Madeleine’s name and in her honour Renee’s invitation to go to bed with her. Renee was Madeleine’s young lesbian neighbour, and the latter had always refused her offers of comfort and consolation. Madeleine may be said to have become Margot’s *alter ego* thus creating in the novel what Susanne Becker describes as a mirror-plot of female desire by which the main romance plot in traditional Gothic novels is traversed by a story of attraction or empathy between women. This gives the texts an interrogative quality, in the sense that the narrative is swerved from its original heterosexual purpose.

However the reason why Madeleine's spirit uses Margot as a channel to deal with all her unsolved matters has nothing to do with their affinity, but, rather, it is triggered by a hidden past event, just like the secret plots lurking behind Gothic stories. Madeleine had been "Bold, too bold!" (*RM*, 50) during her marriage. She had neglected the housework and had gone on holidays leaving her husband behind and making up stories of her infidelities. However, with the unravelling of the past, Jarvis gradually comes to realise his unfairness towards her. He had always found justification for his relationship with Lily in the fact that he believed that he was a child of the road. His true father, a lorry driver called Harry, had left his mother when she was pregnant with him: "Madeleine, I hate you. Lily, I love you, you are Poppy to my Harry. Nightly I defile, delight, relive. Madeleine, die" (*RM*, 83) muses Jarvis. However, he eventually realises that this had been a figment of her mother's imagination; his father was the same as his brother's and sister's, her mother's husband, the boring stockbroker she so easily ignored. Likewise, a sort of re-enactment of Jarvis' twenty-ninth birthday takes place to right the wrongs of the past, in which a no longer existing casement window keeps banging. Margot becomes both Madeleine reproaching Jarvis for past misdemeanours and herself going to bed with him in the spare room during a party sixteen years before. Jarvis eventually recognises how unfair he had been to Madeleine. Margot had just aborted Philip's baby on his parent's insistence. Philip was probably coming upstairs looking for Margot and came across Madeleine, instead, who had been witnessing, horrified, how her husband was in bed with someone else. Now, after many years, nagging doubts assail Margot as to who may have fathered her son Laurence, whether Philip or Jarvis, until, by the end of the novel, the similarity between Laurence, Hilary and her husband's hands makes Margot wonder: "Where was Madeleine sixteen years ago when Margot was with Jarvis

– in the shadow of the peeling pink roses? Where was Philip?” (*RM*, 230). This is probably the reason why Philip is not taken aback when Margot is transformed into Madeleine and starts to tell him all her, Margot’s, grievances. This is the cue Philip heeds when, out of the blue, he offers to welcome Hilary to his house: “Oh, I am the doctor. I have seen the past resurrect itself in the lives of my patients. I thought I was immune, but I am not. The dead rise up and speak to us with our own voices” (*RM*, 224). Accordingly, Hilary stays to live at Margot’s house with, as it transpires, her father and half-brother, and is saved from the sad fate of being like a planet revolving around star-Lily and her whims. She is to visit Jarvis and Lily at weekends, and Lily, who by the end of a novel is portrayed in a better light, perhaps because it is out of the scope of this kind of literature to offer moral judgement, allows her to choose the wallpaper for her room. The wallpaper happens to be a revival of the twenties: “great splodgy roses on a fawn ground” (*RM*, 159,228), which is similar to that which had been on the wall of this very spare room when Madeleine was in charge of the house, and which had remained there since Phillipa Cutt’s father had put it up in that same place. In a further turn of the screw, the latter had been courted by Margot’s father-in-law.

As we can see, in this novel every little detail is so closely interlinked with the others that the effect produced is that of a suffocating tight-knit system. Human beings are compared to “the basic materials of matter: that we cluster, in fact, as do those complex molecular structures which we see as models in physical laboratories” (*RM*, 54). In the face of this stifling pattern of interconnections, we are advised to adopt a calm attitude, to play along with coincidence: “and in general help the linkages along instead of opposing them –as sometimes in our panic at our very un-aloneness, we are moved to do” (*RM*, 54). *Remember Me* contains several plots and all of them are

connected through Madeleine-Lily-Jarvis' house, which, needless to say, may serve as a metonymic extension of these women. In fact, Madeleine felt completely aimless when she lost it: "the shape of the gothic house has always shaped the gothic text as a feminine form" (Becker 1996: 96). One of the riddles of the novel, also connected to the house, is "Dotty old Miss Maguire", who keeps appearing at Philip's surgery on Mondays, his busiest day, and consequently he is unable to ascertain what is wrong with her. However, at the end of the book we find out that she had remained buried some six days under the stairs of the house on account of the German bombings in the war. As a result, she suffered from shock and had never recovered completely from it. Karl Kominski, who was at the time the owner of the house, had taken care of her for some years. In fact, she had been as much the victim of the Nazis as he had been himself, a Jewish of German origin. When he receives the reparation money he leaves for Italy and is unable to keep in contact with Miss Maguire. On the other hand, Enid's husband—a state agent—makes his first sale when the Katkins, Jarvis and Madeleine, buy Kominski's house. Incidentally Enid—a friend of Margot's—has a plant in her garden which originated from one which belonged to Karl Kominski's mother in Hamburg. Likewise, Karl Kominski's sister, Renate, settled in New Zealand and became a friend of Lily's mother, Ida. She was the one who paid for Lily's trip to England. This way, we get a glimpse of Lily's past: "the tea-lady's daughter, the tired U.S. serviceman's delight" (*RM*, 145). Her mother was English gentility married to a Bay of Islands butcher. With her advantageous marriage Lily is aware that she has socially and sexually surpassed her. These feelings of rivalry towards her mother are further on transferred onto Madeleine, as the narrative voice tells us: "she wants everything of Madeleine's she can get hold, now as always" (*RM*, 199). We also learn how her mother and father separated

for a while because of the birth of Baby Rose, “that little bundle of sorrow and shame” (*RM*, 111) and how Ida and Lily spent some time in Long Bay serving in the Kiwi Tea House Ida had opened. Their only customers were swimmers, ornithologists and American servicemen on leave from Okinawa. Ida and Lily remained there until Baby’s Rose accidentally drowned in a rock pool and Ida could consequently make peace with her husband and return to Bay of Islands.

The plot of *Remember Me* seems to be made up of different tightly entwined stories which leave no space for gaps or chinks. However, this appearance of an indestructible and adamant structure turns out to be somewhat deceptive. We are made aware that things happened this way but that they could have happened otherwise. After Madeleine dies, Lily does not want Hilary to skip lessons and stay at home mourning her loss. This may appear to be an evil and unnatural reaction on the part of Lily, but we should take into account the fact that trouble began the moment she took Hilary out of school to have her hair cut at the hairdresser’s. The hair-cut was a flop –Hilary’s hair was her best asset, and most importantly, all sort of nasty incidents and supernatural phenomena ensued when Madeleine, enraged at Lily’s outrageous daring, approached Jarvis’ home: “Madeleine was lured back to her one-time home; an unholy bond sprang up between her and the doctor’s wife, and now look. ... Better she’d stayed safely at school – or as safe as her platform heels would let her be” (*RM*, 142). The platform heels had been a present from Lily and, as we know, Lily is a bad influence on Hilary, she cripples her. When Hilary hears her name through the loudspeakers she trips up and breaks a video-tape worth 115 pounds. Even if every small detail in the plot of *Remember Me* is exhaustibly accounted for and connected to the rest in a cause and effect sequence, there is an implicit acknowledgement that the balance achieved is as

frail as that of Hilary on her high heels. What if Lily had not gone to fetch Hilary from school that day? Events would have developed differently. In this respect, we could once again mention Gibson quoting Rosset when he writes of “a latent challenge to the credibility of any given reality, a challenge founded in a sense that the advent of that reality takes place only as other possibilities are eliminated” (Gibson 1996: 94). Thus, we see how the concept of a received solid reality without cracks or crevices represented by mimetic literature is contested here in more than one way. It is also important to take into account the presence of the supernatural in *Remember Me*, which might be understood as “the eruption of the figural into the discursive” (Gibson 1996: 60). All Madeleine’s hidden wishes, all her inarticulate rage break loose in the novel without restraint and disturb the patterns of what would be otherwise an ordinary existence. As we have already seen, if established reality is called into question, so is the concept of identity as we understand it. *Abjection* hovers around it threatening stability and Weldon’s characters are forced to reinvent themselves, to overcome the obstacles which stand between them and a rich and fulfilled life. In *Remember Me* the reconciliation with the past, required so that everyone may lead a better existence takes place when the heroine has already traversed the last boundary. Thus, she does not benefit from it, but at least her daughter does, which goes to show that motherhood is all-important in the novel, as reflected, for example, in the fact that Jonathan’s eerie ailments are the cause of Lily’s improvement. However, this is merely an extreme instance of border-crossing.

2.15. DECEPTIVE MATERIALITY OF OBJECTS

I have been trying to prove to what a high degree the parameters of the Gothic

genre are used and even abused in Weldon's novels. At this stage, I will try to show how an apparently dominant realistic vision is breached by resorting to the fantastic mode. I will focus for a brief moment on the imagery or, rather, the lack of it, since it consists of objects turning sinister when impressed by human thought, thus emphasizing the gap between an unresponsive and hostile external reality and the inner unsatisfied state of turmoil of characters on this account. The constant surfacing of inner worlds, of unfulfilled wishes and desires onto an apparently unbreakable materiality owes much to the contradictions at the basis of a neo-Gothic framework. García Landa paraphrasing Serge says that culture offers all the stereotypes required to speak about reality, the writer for his/her part "da forma a una realidad entera, un mundo, confiriéndole una estructura homóloga a la del mundo por él experimentado" (García Landa 1998: 43). Consequently, my aim has been all along to try to interpret the nature of the world Weldon conjures up for us, a world mainly peopled by women and where the main roles are accorded to them. In this regard, after reading the bulk of Weldon's production we have the impression that we have obtained a clear and realistic view of the kind of life several generations of British women have led. We may think that after thorough and detailed description we know the clothes they have worn, the houses they have lived in, the food they have eaten, the sort of parties they have attended, or the furniture they have favoured. At first glance, her novels seem to be so completely grounded in reality, their approach to the world so entirely down-to-earth, that the symbols or metaphors employed in her novels, if any, could be described as being of a completely materialistic nature. They are of the kind that would get "an inquisitive small child" into trouble with the nuns. In *Mantrapped* we are told the matter-of-fact way in which Weldon as a child in New Zealand coped with the abstruse concept of soul to the nuns' chagrin. As an

older and wiser raconteur, Weldon expounds: “I had the idea that they hovered over our heads like the proud milky cloud in Pooh bear, tethered by a golden cord and rather talkative” (*Mantrapped*, 106). Nonetheless, given the nuns’ dissatisfaction with her notion of soul, she would have to come up with another idea: “perhaps they were like the white inner sole of a slipper – they would have to be thin and flexible”. But the nuns, still discontented with her clever pun, threatened her with limbo. Puzzled by this new term, but perceiving something was amiss, she merely resorted to visualising the souls of the nuns: “Mother Martha’s –soft, round and squishy, sister Alexi’s was thin as a rake and dug into her ribs, and yapped for joy like a little dog while she rapped my knuckles”.

This brief episode announces the customary basic approach to symbols in Weldon’s novels as well as a deliberate, even stubborn, rejection of abstraction in the conception of the world they portray. Ordinary objects, thoroughly and scrupulously catalogued and described, cram her novels. On occasions, as we have seen at some point, these detailed recordings are an artificial attempt to parody realism, to carry it beyond its limits and, thus, serve comic purposes. Hence, before taking every description at face value we should have in mind those nuns in New Zealand and not be misled by the apparent simplicity, objectivity and even grossness of the bare exposition of items employed in Weldon’s work. We would run the risk of judging them harmless, inconsequential and matching a naive idea of the world, in which case, we would be in for some unexpected surprises. There is always a chance that these realistic and inoffensive images turn dismal and ghastly. This happens to the protagonist of *Worst Fears*, Alexandra, when she is at pains to concentrate on her computer. At a certain point she is trying to get hold of the mouse when all of a sudden this technical device finds expression in a real mouse running out of the cupboard in front of her. Her

thoughts unexpectedly become real. If we follow Freud on his essay on the uncanny this overpowering precedence of psychical reality over materiality could constitute an example of one of the factors which produces feelings of uncanniness, it would be a case of what he calls “the omnipotence of thoughts”. In Weldon’s novels over-excited narrators or characters living extreme situations introduce us into a world where material reality turns out to be as nightmarish as their psychical reality. Alexandra is under the overwhelming impression that what is on her mind, what belongs to the realm of imagination has materialised: “The mouse seemed to exist as a demonstration of the way the spirit always tends to become flesh; the way a psychological phenomenon offers itself up in concrete form” (*Worst Fears*, 118). Apart from this uneasy blend of flesh and spirit there is another significant factor to take into account. The counterpart of the aseptic computer mouse is no less than a real rodent and, accordingly, a truly repulsive image which, with its irruption into what we might describe as an otherwise unobjectionable scene, creates a really grotesque effect. However, it must be added that in view of the choice of creature, characterized by a not very dignified size, the imposing style aimed at creating horror is somewhat deflated. Something similar to this goes on at a superior level, that of structure. García Landa refers to “la sobredeterminación semiótica” of literature and goes on to explain that: “Las convenciones lingüísticas ordinarias operan plenamente, pero se ven subsumidas en una estructuración pragmática más compleja” (1998: 265). Taking into account that we are talking of literary works, and, as such, they are constituted by intricate patterns where signs are semantically reactivated and their meanings enriched, it is no wonder that this style based on descriptions verging on hyperrealism but with inherent dark overtones which take us unawares is amplified to all the levels in structure of Weldon’s novels.

The grotesque, though at the same time bathetic, effect of the scene of the rat is amplified to the level of the plot. It reverberates throughout the whole structure of the book. Accordingly, this novel deals with an outbreak of absurd nastiness into a hitherto calm existence. Everything in Alexandra's life is turned upside-down, all her worst fears come true one by one, creating a suffocating atmosphere which seems to defy rationality, but which is ultimately of a preposterous nature.

In *The Lives and Loves of a She-Devil*, the lack of success of Mary Fisher's last romance, *Ace of Angels*, is accounted for by the fact that "a kind of gritty reality kept breaking in" (1983: 114). Incidentally, we should consider that there is a certain element of metafiction in this description of style. It could be easily applied to any novel by Fay Weldon. Of course gritty here has the basic meaning of coarse and it may be applied to the harsh reality of Mary Fisher's new domestic life, which obstinately crops up in her last novel in blatant contrast to the purport of her previous uncomplicated ones. Mary Fisher had led a pleasant and luxurious existence before Ruth decided to take revenge. From then on she has to cope with Bobbo and above all with his two children and her own mother, who are left in her charge. However, the term gritty also stands for granular and, being attached to reality, it changes the texture of the latter so that we cannot talk of realism anymore. As we have seen above, and we will see further on, objects are endowed with the emotional significance impressed on them by characters, as a result, an eerie effect is produced by means of which the limits of reason and judgement are surpassed.

Perhaps some would consider extremely far-fetched to bring up here a reference by Fred Botting to a feature of Gothic literature in the 18th century. However, I think it would come in handy so that, in spite of the apparently conspicuous differences between

both styles, we can go on assessing the resemblance they bear to each other or, rather, how Weldon has appropriated the fundamental features of the Gothic for her own ends. According to Botting: “Natural and artistic objects were seen to evoke emotional effects like terror and wonder which marked an indistinct sense of an immensity that exceeded human comprehension” (Botting 1996: 24). Let us just think once more of Alexandra’s train of thought trying to concentrate on the mouse of her computer and being confronted by a real mouse which has appeared out of nowhere. The fashion her thoughts materialise in the worst possible way is horrific and uncanny –though if we take into account the unremarkable and inoffensive, yet repulsive nature of rats, an inversion of terror into facetiousness might be appreciated. This Gothic or fantastic element is, therefore, a contributory factor for the departure from the characteristic realism of Weldon’s novels. Hence, the apparently faithful and realistic account of the reality we are rendered by Weldon’s seemingly pragmatic narrators is deceptive. On the one hand, there is this mock-Gothic approach conducive to creating a harrowing and dismal atmosphere, even if of an absurd nature. On the other hand, this illusive subjection to referentiality may provide the best weapon to combat the sombre mood, though never devoid of humour, conjured up for us in these novels. Insofar as Weldon is an author who shows more than what she tells, the didactic element is not explicit in most of her production. As is mostly the case in contemporary narrative we are not given lessons, yet value judgements, above all, of an ambivalent character, are far from being excluded from her work. She could be said to play “con el elemento de proyección objetiva de la palabra, aparentando haber suprimido de su lenguaje toda función menos la referencial” (García Landa 1998: 404). In this regard, somehow, her narrators ultimately manage to distance themselves from their accounts –whether this is due to the

experience acquired during the unfolding of the action or to another reason is a different matter. This detachment on the part of the narrators creates a sort of double code, or rather a strong ironic effect which serves to unveil, in the shape of nasty surprises, all those harsh and grim aspects of reality which had previously been hidden from us. The fact that what produces horror in Weldon's narrative verges on the absurd, hence conveying the idea that if things are frightening they are not necessarily so, since they may easily be changed, is symptomatic of the satiric and, thereby, positive essence of her fiction. However, this display of the clash between the way things are and the way they should be is not always made through the agency of her narrators. In novels like *Trouble* the ironic effect is also achieved by means of its revelatory and apparently innocent dialogues.

2.17. THE SINISTER MATERIALITY OF WOMEN'S BODIES

The depiction of "women with warts and all" is a motto familiar to any avid reader of Weldon, and by now we should be warned that any realistic portraiture such as this involves a certain element of danger. We should be cautioned to believe they are just innocuous descriptions. In Weldon's literature women are as constricted by their materiality as the metaphors, if we can term them like that, employed in her novels. On the other hand, this materiality, as we have seen above in the case of metaphors, goes hand in hand with and is productive of all that is uncanny and grotesque. In a reverse instance of "the spirit always tends to become flesh" (*Worst Fears*, 118) quoted above, women's bodies are there to contradict their wishes in what may seem tenacious patterns of women's worst nightmares becoming real, as if an evil spirit was behind the workings

of their bodies. A frequent image in Weldon's novels, familiar to us by now, is that of the maternity-wards riddled with paradoxes and frustrated women. The images offered to us are so bizarre that they could well belong to a fantastic tableau. They exceed rationality, reversing the concept of the sublime into its opposite: horror. In this regard, Neil Cornwell quotes Kayser when explaining that the grotesque requires a "mysterious and terrifying connection between the fantastic and the real world" (Cornwell 1990: 8). Women who have just had a miscarriage, in spite of their eagerness to carry their pregnancies to good term and have children, lie next to those who had to undergo a voluntary abortion because they were too young or too poor to be able to support them. To this it must be added the awful way in which women are attended or, rather, left unattended in these maternity-wards. Accordingly, it transpires that women find themselves in these predicaments as often as not on account of their bodies, and women's bodies is one of the examples Kristeva offers us of the term *abjection*, that is, something that is out-of-bounds, expelled from what is considered proper and social. In a patriarchal culture, women are under constant threat of crossing the borders to a world depicted in grotesque terms where "chaos is the norm", a world

where the body is something mysterious in its workings, which swells, bleeds, and bursts at random; where sex is a strange intermittent animal spasm; where men seduce, make pregnant, betray, desert: where laws are harsh and mysterious, and where the woman goes helpless. (*Down Among the Women*, 34)

This is what Susan, one of the characters in *Down Among the Woman*, in her immaturity fears. She abhors the idea of entering a grim world of marginality as dictated by female bodies. Accordingly, women's bodies enforce their lack of a proper social identity in a phallocracy. However, accepting the a-social status, the want of limits dictated by their bodies may be an asset if they know how to avail themselves of their proverbial impersonality, their pliability. Paradoxically, in what we could describe as

tales of loss of innocence, we will see how some of Weldon's heroines cunningly benefit from their position of outcasts and, tramp-like, sort out obstacles and cross borders to their advantage. Likewise, their suppleness, an ingrained female feature, which to all intents and purposes may seem a liability, finally lands them on their feet in their journeys of self-discovery.

3.18. SOME OF THE CONTRADICTIONS AT THE ROOTS OF THE GOTHIC GENRE

It may seem that I am going to some lengths repeating things previously dealt with. However, if something is to be inferred from this is that Weldon's fiction greatly partakes of the Gothic, imbued, as it is by what we could term a neo-Gothic gist. As such, women's pliability, the quality of being for others or *ethical alterity*, to borrow Levinas' words, could be otherwise interpreted as the ambiguity or ambivalence which is behind a constant reformulation of personality and which is in line with a creative ethics based not on set values but in a continuous process of active self-formation. Furthermore, ambivalence resulting from the dissolving of boundaries or limits would be an appropriate formula when trying to describe the Gothic literary genre, which has been defined as a literature of unreason and excess. It has been said that with its emphasis on sentimentality, the Gothic uncovered the darkest face of the Enlightenment and its insistence on rationality. Plenty of the traditional features of this genre are still in force now. Fred Botting says of Postmodern Gothic that it "is akin, in its playfulness and duplicity, to the artificialities and ambivalences that surrounded eighteenth century Gothic writing and were produced in relation to the conflicts of emerging modernity" (1996: 157). Therefore, born in the 18th century, the Gothic genre significantly reached

one of its peaks of popularity during the decade of the French Revolution. Novels like *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and *The Italian* (1797) by Ann Radcliffe, Roche's *The Children of the Abbey* (1796) and *Clement* (1798) or Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) were published at that time. The strife between the dominant values defended by the old regime and the new revolutionary principles ready to supplant them is, accordingly, dramatized in these works. Neil Cornwell goes on to remark that the imagery and rhetoric of the Gothic became so pervasive that Edmund Burke employed them in his political treatise published in 1790: *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1990: 48), and this book, in its turn, greatly influenced Gothic novels, thus showing the fluid interaction between Gothic literature and reality, in this case, political events.

From the very beginning the genre was structured along very contradictory parameters. Its first products are generally described as Gothic romances, in spite of being a source of inspiration for a host of subsequent novels. Similarly, the "overflow of emotions" which characterises it is disruptive of aesthetic boundaries and social limits, but most critics agree that, by contrast, we are dealing with a conservative genre. Moreover, as is well known, one of the main themes of the Gothic is the irruption of a conflicting and averse past into an apparently harmonious present. All the same, the play of antithesis does not stop here. As we have already stated, in Gothic literature reason clashes with unreason, and the frontiers between the inner and outer worlds are not clearly delineated, which may be a source of terror and contribute to encourage a slackening and relaxation of social norms. Gothic novels are per force distinctly contradictory, or morally ambivalent. On the one hand, their import is, in many cases, conventional, on the other, they are an appropriate vehicle to give vent to very irrational and antisocial impulses. Likewise, in *Gothic and the Comic Turn* Avril Horner and Sue

Zlosnik refer to a humorous side to the Gothic, melodrama easily turning into its opposite, which somehow seems to contradict the function of inducement to terror and fear inherent in this gender and, which is already present in Walpole's work.

The genre's popular origins and "its" inclination towards the supernatural have made it a perfect and somehow covert channel to approach female sexuality and reproduction, traditionally marginal issues hardly ever subject to rationalistic treatment. Through a confrontation with fear specific female experiences are demystified. In this regard, *Frankenstein* can be seen as a horrific tale of motherhood with its emphasis put on the depression and anxiety of the afterbirth. And, "It" is still a dominant genre among women, since its characteristic technique of estrangement —what is natural and familiar stops being so and becomes spooky and uncanny— makes the Gothic genre a good medium to denounce domestic violence. According to Ellen Moers, women have naturally and from "its" very origins adopted "it" as a perfect means to express "the self-disgust, the self-hatred, and the impetus to self-destruction that have been increasingly prominent obsessions in the writing of women in the twentieth century" (Moers 1977: 107). Women's anxieties, their worst nightmares are freely expressed and tackled in a literature where reality and unreality intermingle. We should underline the fact that in the epistemological framework of Gothic works, realism vies with fantasy for predominance and that the prevalence of the latter gauges the degree of discontent towards the reality portrayed. This can be seen reflected in Weldon's parodic creations and in their insistence on women's biologism. The self-disgust and inadequacy felt by women educated in order to conform to ideals based on very rigid gender parameters which sanction a regulatory neglect and suppression of all that characterises them, starting by the requirements of their bodies, and which grimly restrict their liberties have

to be confronted. What is beyond the norm becomes an engulfing abyss which is to be faced in order to survive. That which women have repressed or *abjected* so that they may live as social beings beckons them threatening with alienation and the dissolution of their personality. However, instead of entailing destruction, this dismantling of a socially accepted identity involves a joyous and long-needed renewal. For these necessary alterations to take place extraordinary backgrounds disruptive of anything known so far are conjured up. Let us think for instance of the exceptional setting of “Queen Gertrude PLC”, one of the stories compiled in *Nothing to Wear and Nowhere to Hide*. It takes place in the Penthouse Tower, claimed to be the tallest building in Europe and the extra height of which “creates an unexpected design flaw, moving us from the linear to the non-linear dimension in which patterns will not settle and the unexpected happens” (*Nothing to Wear and Nowhere to Hide*, 200). The case of the female protagonist of this story is not a common one in Weldon’s narrative in the sense that, contrary to the majority of her heroines, this one fails to adapt to the exceptional circumstances presented and, accordingly, dies.

Fred Botting states that the Gothic genre has been “a hybrid form from its inception, the Gothic blend of medieval and historical romance with the novel of life and manners was framed in supernatural, sentimental, or sensational terms” (Botting 1996: 44). In addition, the Gothic has absorbed other genres throughout its trajectory. “It” is linked, for instance, with the ghost story. We can also speak of detective novels with a Gothic slant or think of the connection “it” has had with science fiction since *Frankenstein* was created. If we take into account the fact that the borders between literary genres have become fluid in present-day literature, it is only natural that this tendency to blend genres is heightened in contemporary Postmodern Gothic. This

mixture of genres is another distinctive feature of Weldon's novels. The descriptive sentence employed to refer to *Ace of Angels*, Mary Fisher's flop in *The Lives and Loves of a She-Devil*, "One page romance, the next fable, the next social realism!" (1983: 114) would, to a certain extent, serve as an apt characterization for most of her works. For instance *Remember Me* can be described as a mixture of domestic novel, comedy of manners and ghost story, *The President's Child* shows a lot of affinities to a thriller and novels like *The Cloning of Joanna May* or *Leader of the Band* have a strong component of science fiction. Therefore, Weldon's fiction entails a refashioning of old formulas following the parameters of the Gothic genre. Against a milieu in which inner and outer aspects of the being merge, that is, in which women's worst nightmares become real, Gothic tropes are employed in order to emphasize concerns that afflict contemporary women. The satiric exercise which magnifies and decontextualizes women's anxieties represents an attempt to call the reader's attention towards the kind of attitude that must be changed in order to avoid unfair situations or so as to right old wrongs. Nonetheless, this last remark should be taken with certain reservations, since at the same pace as inner conflicts are illuminated in Weldon's narrative, they are also diminished on account of the convoluted channel initially employed to highlight them, but which ultimately contributes to swerve our attention to the ambiguity and artificiality which characterises this evasive and, somehow, uncompromising genre. What initially seemed concerns of enormous proportions are made insignificant after playful adventures of experimentation in which humour plays a component part and from which fundamental truths are completely excluded.

Weldon's narrative involves a recreation, a parodic repetition of previous materials in the sense that once again we come across what Moers would describe as

“the haunted and self-hating self” who appears here in the shape of “helpless” heroines and who have to overcome all sort of obstacles to come out unscathed against all odds in what we might call tales of loss of innocence. Weldon’s novels represent a process of revision, a route to self-discovery by means of which the protagonists eventually learn to be independent and fend for themselves. Gothic stories are recontextualised in an up-to-date domestic environment, which, in most cases, replaces the old sombre threatening castles –in this regard, we should be reminded of Henry James’s notion that the best source for terror and the uncanny in literature lies close to home. The evil which has to be overcome would be somehow personified by the bullying and cruel male characters and by women’s uncompassionate fellow-sisters, by all those who stand for a society which victimises and undervalues women. However, the most unflattering portrait we obtain in Weldon’s novels is that of women who resignedly accept this inferior position. Their passive and submissive behaviour will place them in a Gothic maze erected in the shape of the labyrinthine structures of her novels. By labyrinthine I mean that one thing leads to another until we are overflowed by a surfeit of detail and get the impression that everything is suffocatingly connected, as Sandra Sorenson, the protagonist of *Leader of the Band*, comments: “What terrifies me is the way it all ties up” ([1988]1991: 133). In most Gothic novels the turning point in the development of the characters will triggered by horror or, what has been described as the horrific sublime. They invariably experiment a moment of visualization transcending reason thanks to which they are allowed a glimmer of the abyss between things as they are and things as they should be. In Weldon’s particular remodelings of this genre the shock of recognition is produced not by horror but, rather, by the acknowledgement of the glaring absurdity that inadmissibly governs their lives insofar as it escapes understanding. Realising the

preposterous nature of the plight they are in, they will finally react and take the reins of their lives. Yet, in this regard, something else should be made clear about Weldon's fictions. They could never be defined as self-referential parodies or mere imitations of Gothic models. The strong element of satire and farce they contain defies such a description. As we have previously seen, they are outward-looking novels in which the asymmetrical character of heterosexual relationships as well as women's rivalries and their attendant nastiness and spitefulness come under scrutiny and constitute the target of Weldon's bitter satire.

2.19. "A whole spew of nastiness and corruption"

One of the features of the Gothic genre is the use it makes of those irrational elements which distinguish it. They are usually channelled to good ends, and this apparent paradox is one of the factors that contribute to impress the genre with its ambivalent stamp. In his essay on the Gothic, Fred Botting explains the important role that terror plays in the development of Gothic novels as well as of its characters: "terror activates the mind and the imagination, allowing it to overcome, transcend even, its fears and doubts, enabling the subject to move from one state of passivity to activity" (1996: 74-75). In Weldon's reinterpretation of the Gothic recourse to the irrational, some women are nearly driven into a state of mental collapse or derangement on account of the vulnerable position they occupy. *Trouble* and *Worst Fears* are clear instances of novels where its heroines are subjected to a process where terror or feelings germane to it are constantly triggered by what was once cosy and familiar. It is a similar experience to that which Weldon describes in *Auto Da Fay*: "You could be going calmly and

cheerfully, and suddenly the ground beneath you would erupt and a whole spew of nastiness and corruption would toss itself out like lava from a volcano” (2002: 134). The world that has so far surrounded her heroines instantly becomes sinister and uncanny, mirroring the “*unheimlich*”, the German translation for uncanny, the root of which is “*heimlich*”, that is homely. Since, according to Freud, one of the conditions for the existence of the uncanny is its familiarity. The perception of the uncanny is produced by something well-known, not novel, but, that has been repressed and alienated from the mind. Likewise, Alexandra, the protagonist of *Worst Fears* has to confront that “whole spew of nastiness and corruption” which has been part of her existence all along, even though she has managed to ignore it so far. When it suddenly erupts into her life there is no way of avoiding it. Her previous existence turns out to be a sham, a fragile construction, based on what appears to be self-deception: “She was like some charming villa in a hot climate, set in a ravishing and luxurious garden, built on stilts, and termites had been gnawing away at the stilts for years..., the whole edifice was about to tumble into mud” (*Worst Fears*, 153). When Ned, Alexandra’s husband, dies her worst fear becomes true, she is despondent, dejected and left to cope with what for her is an intolerable position. She thinks that her social status is exclusively dependent on his existence and cannot represent herself as a being separated from him. She needs Ned to interpret the world for her. Interestingly enough, the starting point of the novel, of the decomposing process, or rather the course of deterioration which is going to take place, is a corpse. We could appropriately read Gothic resonances into it, a cadaver, productive of horror and which constitutes a clear example of Kristeva’s *abjects*, “the most sickening of wastes”. As the uttermost corporeal limit, the corpse is no longer ruled by human faculties, there is no transcending it, since it bespeaks mortality. In addition, it is

not uncharacteristic of Weldon's novels to place the concept of death on a par with that of divorce. In this regard, here we are offered a very graphic image of death or divorce as a "raw shank of beef hanging in the kitchen bleeding" (*WF*, 97). It is again a vision of waste and *abjection* that fills Alexandra with horror, just as what she interprets as her new condition of social destitution, or *abjection* does. Botting describes horror as a characteristic feature of Gothic narrative: "It freezes human faculties, rendering the mind passive and immobilising the body" (Botting 1996: 75). This is the state of panic Alexandra Ludd is in when the story begins, hence resembling the stock terror-stricken Gothic heroine.

Alexandra Ludd, "probably the best serious artist the country [has], natural successor to Vanessa Redgrave" (*WF*, 164) is resting from a performance of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* in her London apartment one hundred and thirty miles away from The Cottage, as the old house she shares with her husband is respectfully called in the area, when the latter dies. From this moment onwards, Alexandra separated from Ned on account of his death, becomes petrified and her life turns into a shambles, as could not be otherwise: "Now Ned had gone, had toppled in death through the linking of a protective fence of their own devising – the one that kept the boring and pitiable out – and broken it, now heaven knew who'd come rushing in" (*WF*, 37). As we have mentioned before, she is abruptly placed in a position of social destitution or abjection and vulnerable to what appears to be a coordinated onslaught against her. Out of the blue, she feels that she is observed with hostility, and that everything she does is maliciously examined by all and sundry. Even a small triviality like her friends' going to the morgue to visit her husband's corpse before she has the chance to do so is seen as strange. Theresa, her child's carer, accuses her of neglecting her child while going away

to work in London, and of having had Sascha merely to save her marriage. Her mother, Irene, wants to keep the four-year-old child with her because she thinks Alexandra may be a bad influence on him during her mourning. Her husband's brother, Hamish, blames her for not having prevailed on his brother to go to the doctor. She suddenly realises that she is resented by friends and neighbours and that the general impression is that she is stand-offish. Moreover, the consensus seems to be that she is an unobservant person, and, in fact, all that has been going on around her takes her completely unawares when it starts to unravel. With her husband's death the intricate structure that he had built for them suddenly tumbles and she is about to fall with it.

The novel begins with the scene in which Abbie and Vilna, the former a close friend of Alexandra's, the latter not so much so, go to the morgue to see Ned's corpse which is back from the autopsy. When Mr Lightfoot, the man from the mortuary, called they did not want to wake Alexandra up. She finds a note on the "bleached elm" antique table informing her of that, and she resents the fact that Vilna is going to see the body of her dead husband before her. We also learn that when Alexandra reached the house, in her return from London, everything had been left spotless, sheets washed and all. Abbie had been active in domestic chores since the moment she had found out about Ned's death. As in the first chapter, the rest of the book is constituted by dramatized scenes filled with revelatory dialogues interspersed with fragments which correspond to a third person narrator. The perspective of this narrator is that of Alexandra, who, accordingly, is the focaliser of the action. Thus, we are going to witness the "spew of nastiness and corruption" which comes her way after her husband's death. These events form an uncanny pattern of incidents on two accounts. First, they make real that which would be unthinkable for the initially uncomplicated Alexandra, but constitute her most powerful

fears when the worst scenario begins to emerge. It is seen by her as an overwhelming instance of the preponderance of thought over reality. Secondly, the systematic recurrence of hideous circumstances creates a sinister and fateful atmosphere which suffocates and subdues her. According to Freud the “compulsion to repeat” intrinsic to the unconscious mind is even stronger than the pleasure principle. Hence, the relentless sequence of dismal circumstances that takes place after Ned’s death forms a labyrinthine structure in which Alexandra becomes trapped and from which it is very difficult to escape. Fred Botting has highlighted the importance of the metaphor of the maze in Gothic romances. It represents a hidden and horrific place where the socially established laws of reason and contention no longer apply. In traditional Gothic “it came to be associated with fear, confusion and alienation: it was a sight of darkness, horror and desire” (1996: 81).

The first hint Alexandra receives as to her dead husband oversexed nature is Vilna’s comment. “You know Ned, darling, Always the ladies’ man” (*WF*, 49). Incidentally, Vilna, who comes from the former Yugoslavia, had been as ignorant of her husband’s true character as Alexandra herself. She had been living with a criminal for four years before his jail sentence without noticing that anything wrong was going on. She finally learnt the word “crim” from his friends. Next, after efforts on Lucy Lint’s part, it is brought to Alexandra’s attention that a woman called Lucy Lint claims to have been involved with her husband, although she discards this idea as absurd. However, there are indications to the contrary, like the fact that her dog Diamond is very familiar with her. Through Diamond she also ascertains that Ned and Theresa, their son’s carer, had been in bed together. Diamond returns the latter’s plastic bracelet to Alexandra’s bed, as was his custom. When discovered, he invariably retrieved the hidden objects and

put them back in the place from whence he had snatched them. Ned, on the other hand, had described Theresa as an ox and had even said that she was unfit to look after their child. Alexandra realises it would be useful to apply the theory of Occam's razor to her life, as advised by her mother: the simplest solution to a mystery is always the best. If there is a woman claiming to be involved with her husband, it is probably true even if in her view it seems highly improbable. Accordingly, Ned and Lucy's sentimental liaison is eventually corroborated by the latter's husband, David Lint: "What was unrequited about it? Why do you think she and I aren't together?" (*WF*, 82). Then again, he even reproaches Alexandra for her blindness: "It's really warped. Why are you pretending you didn't know what was going on" (*WF*, 83). According to him, they would even grope each other in front of her. And, in case Alexandra does not have enough evidence of Ned and Lucy's connection, Stenstrom, whose gay partner died of AIDS, tells her that Lucy Lint was the only woman he managed to have sex with –his attempts with Alexandra had been to no avail. Alexandra understands forthwith the origin of the herpes her husband blamed her for. To add to her husband's infidelities, her agent Harry Barney also informs her that Daisy Longriff, who had been playing alongside her in a *Doll's House*, had been Ned's lover and that he had insisted that the role of Nora be granted to her instead of to his wife. And now, as fate would have it, she was replacing Alexandra as the leading actress and she was excelling at it, not on account of her theatrical skills, but, rather, for the simple reason of doing the Tarantella scene nude. On the other hand, taking into account that the advance bookings rate had improved, no one from the theatre had bothered to warn Alexandra that management was going to take advantage of the fact that she was in breach of contract and that if she had wanted to take some days off because of her husband's demise, she should have had to produce a

medical certificate. Also, in her apartment in London she meets Chrissie, Ned's ex-wife, who enlightens her about the future of the flat. She is legally entitled to be there because Ned, having behaved abominably at court, had only the right to it while alive. Likewise, as if losing her job and apartment were not enough, on a phone call to Mr Quatrop, the state agent in Eddon Gurney, she finds out that Ned and Lucy Lint were planning a property deal by exchanging The Cottage for Elder House, the language school belonging to her friend Abbie. This new shocking piece of information leads Alexandra to confront her friend Abbie, who tries to clear herself saying that that was the only way Alexandra would notice what was going on: "You might just about notice a For Sale sign going up" (*WF*, 174). Thereupon, Alexandra, who was rumoured to have been involved with his co-leading actor Eric Stenstrom starts to make wild guesses and interrogates Abbie as to whether she went to the surgery as soon as she knew that his partner had died of AIDS. Abbie finally ends up by confessing that she was the one lying next to Ned when he died. "Lucy's excessive hysterics" and Abbie's "excessive house-cleaning" (*WF*, 176) the morning following Ned's death become intelligible now. The plot would look merely farcical, were it not for the realistic style of the narrative, which makes it sinister and, as we have been able to surmise from this summary, saturated. The latter is traditionally the case of popular, not very sophisticated or highbrow narratives where everything in the action is explicit and there are no ellipses or gaps to be filled by the reader after a process of inference. But, as mentioned before, this accumulation of harrowing or, rather, grotesque circumstances creates, at the level of plot, the effect of a maze around the heroine from which it is difficult to escape, which is, ultimately, what this novel is about.

In the words of her agent, Harry Barney: "Ned's trouble was that he was eaten up

with envy” (*WF*, 161). He was a drama critic and he loved the theatre, but in contrast to Alexandra, he did not excel at anything related to it. Girls would go out with him in exchange for a good review which, anyway, in the end he would not give them. In the face of so many misdemeanours, Alexandra wants her dignity back and stops thinking of herself “as a humble little thing, dismissing her celebrity as meaningless, a by-product of the world’s folly” (*WF*, 189). She gains autonomy when she is aware of the fact that that image of her is a construction of her husband’s making, probably on account of his own frustrations. Now that the values both her husband and herself held and shared have become invalidated, she has to start anew. Alexandra realises that she was not the only woman in his life, she was one among many: “If there were too many she might all but vanish away, dwindled to the point of invisibility” (*WF*, 166). Despite her initial bewilderment, her new awareness helps her react. Thereby, the first step she takes to escape from the maze in which she is trapped, to release herself from the identity that she had let her husband impose on her, is, in an act of defiance, doing the only thing that, according to Harry Barney, her agent, she is not supposed to do: “The only person you couldn’t stand up for an audition was your husband’s corpse”. Because, after all, “that was the way the cookie crumbled” (*WF*, 160). Alexandra somehow challenges fate and breaks down the barriers that are constricting her. She attends the audition for a leading role in a film opposite Michael Douglas instead of her husband’s funeral. Thus, it is up to all the other women to weep and mourn for him.

On seeing a photograph of Lucy Lint weeping at Ned’s funeral in the local press with the captions identifying her as Alexandra Ludd, Alexandra laughs. Some minutes before she had dreamed she was the woman in the Munch painting, filled with horror, but now she breaks into laughter. Linda Hutcheon compares the social and psychological

function of laughter with that of irony: “Irony can be both including and excluding; it suggests both complicity and distance” (Hutcheon 2000: 67). Alexandra finally manages to laugh precisely because of her previous complicity with her husband’s construction of her, and her detachment is the result of a slow and painful process of assimilation. Similarly, at a superior level of the narrative there is a constant game of involvement and detachment, ruled by its ironic style.

The adoption of a certain set of parameters entails implication and acceptance, whereas the distancing from the tenets that rule a particular genre may be done implicitly without resorting to overt criticism, as Linda Hutcheon states: “parody is more synthetic than analytic in its economical ‘trans-contextualizing’ of background material” (Hutcheon 2000: 51). At first sight, this might not be the most suitable quotation here because *Worst Fears* does not follow any specific model, it is not a reinterpretation of another novel, but, rather what Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnic would describe as “a parodic appropriation of Gothic tropes and devices” (2005:12). As we know, the Gothic genre represents a long-standing source of creative inspiration and tradition. All its adaptations, all neo-Gothic works must perforce have a strong element of repetition and, accordingly, of parody inherent to it, that is, there is a constant activity of assimilation and detachment. Many features of the Gothic genre have been assimilated in this novel. We have seen how baleful circumstances have been relentlessly accumulating in order to form a sinister pattern which might be said to recreate an oppressive Gothic atmosphere. The labyrinthine harrowing structure built up around the heroine follows the Gothic model, whereas, as we have just seen, there is a perceptible detachment from it. Even if this cramming of the plot, where there are no loose ends, is intended to reflect a maze-like unendurable process, we cannot help but notice the banal character of some of its

threads, even if they are as tightly-knit to the plot as the rest. Thus, intertwined with the relentless sequence of excruciating factors which form a kind of constricting barrier around the heroine, there are some trite, or even comic and preposterous strands of plot. Alongside dramatic circumstances like death, infidelity, theft –Theresa appropriates some of Alexandra’s valuable antiques and keeps them at her home–, there are humorous incidents like those pertaining to the language school where foreign students keep having accidents and choking on bones of the plums they pick up from the tree in the middle of the garden. Equally, Kevin Crump, a farmer and an admirer of Alexandra’s, who appears with a broken arm by the end of the novel as a consequence of a hit-and-run accident caused by Abbie’s bad driving, is the person chosen by Alexandra to be Diamond’s new owner. Diamond is Alexandra’s dog, and she considers that it will be better employed doing something useful in a farm. Likewise, since everything is closely linked, Kevin Crump becomes engaged to Sheldon Smythe’s secretary. Sheldon Smythe is the lawyer responsible for reading Ned’s will, and his secretary is a drama ex-student of Alexandra’s. Everything is connected in a game of clever virtuosity and the end-result is to produce the claustrophobic effect achieved. The seemingly indiscriminate assortment of events of so disparate a nature and the comic treatment conferred to such truculent matters as infidelity or death contribute to produce the black humour which characterises the novel and renders it its lightness of tone.

The same process of assimilation and detachment also takes place at other levels of *Worst Fears*. We sympathize with Alexandra when she talks to Leah, Ned’s psychologist, in a scene which works as a *mise en abyme* of the novel or, to borrow García Landa’s words, as: “una metáfora de una macroestructura semántica de la obra” (1998: 361). This scene could be said to encapsulate the plot, the general tenor of the

novel. In the conversation with the psychologist, Alexandra starts imagining herself as a cunning vixen stalking hens only to end up feeling like a fox hunted by a man in Wellingtons once all her words have been twisted by Leah. This is a strong image showing Alexandra cornered and in a state close to breakdown. Nonetheless, we should think of Abbie's remark: "You're so easily conned, Alexandra, you can hardly blame others when they do it" (*WF*, 172). This comment is illuminating, since her naiveté borders on the ludicrous, as does the depiction of her husband, the frustrated drama critic who dies of a heart attack when in bed with a friend in a ruse to get rid of a previous annoying lover. In the end he comes across as preposterous rather than evil and Alexandra is finally able to see him as such. The reader realises Alexandra is in the process of healing when she ironically compares him to a bull: "In a field with sixty cows the bull is placid, properly serviced, properly servicing. Sex for all keeps everyone quiet" (*WF*, 179). To add to the satiric penchant of the narrative, the novel is constantly punctuated with flashes of black humour like Abbie's description of Ned's death: "He came and then he went" (*WF*, 177), or Vilna's comment to Abbie that she is looking good: "Extraspecial essence of dying man. Very rare" (*WF*, 184). Similarly, there is very little solemnity in some of the matter-of fact, even literal puns employed in this novel, like when Leah tells Alexandra she is welcome to "step into" Ned's "shoes" and go to the three sessions he had paid in advance. Alexandra answers with sarcasm that "the postman's in his shoes" (*WF*, 144), since she had given the postman dead Ned's shoes on his insistence – his were not so good and Ned was not in need of them anymore. Another feature of detachment from the fiction under consideration is the playful recourse to representative figures of the world of show business like Vanessa Redgrave or Michael Douglas. The allusions to popular icons in a piece of fiction usually create a

sense of reality, but in this context, they open breaches in the narrative foregrounding, instead, its artificiality and its parodic nature.

Returning to the account of Alexandra's setbacks, she is once again taken by surprise on another front when Hamish, Ned's brother, tells her that he is the executor of his will. He also seems to have more information about Ned through his letters than Alexandra herself. He even suggests that, contrary to what Alexandra has believed so far, she is Ned's third wife instead of the second. Furthermore, if he had not got a divorce from Pilar, his first wife, Alexandra would not be legally married, and this turns out to be the grim truth. On top of all this, Ned did not mention her or their son Sascha in the will he had made three years before and there are no legal documents to prove his paternity. He had bequeathed The Cottage and the valuable antiques to Lucy Lint and he had paid for the latter not out of their joint bank account, but out of the one in his name, even though it was Alexandra's money, since she was the one who had earned it. Alexandra's wry remark was that if he were still alive he would have changed the name of Lucy Lint for Abbie Carpenter in no time. "Like musical beds when the music stopped, whoever was in the right one got to unwrap the parcel" (*WF*, 203). As so much unfairness is not easily borne, Alexandra finally opts for a different course of action. Her thoughts stop looping around worst fears, the key phrase that Leah, Ned's psychologist, had given her, and starts to focus on best wishes. When that happens, the sinister pattern of recurrent grotesque circumstances, which appear to be a reproduction of her worst thoughts and which create a labyrinthine structure around her, starts to vanish. From that moment on superstition is set aside and everything seems to go back to normality and to have a rational explanation. Abbie confesses to Alexandra that before Ned died they were just sitting in bed and probably neither of them intended to do anything out of

loyalty to her. She also tells her that he was horrified when he saw Lucy Lint entering the room and that “his ashes were around to prove it” (*WF*, 207). His absurd will, on the other hand, was probably the result of a moment of anger. Since Ned’s death he has appeared to her on several occasions in what she describes as “a dream but not a dream” (*WF*, 205) and he has always turned his back. Significantly, in his last apparition he looks at her and smiles. He has made his peace with her. Nonetheless, Lucy Lint is still waging war and “winning; pushing forward, taking territory, defiling memory, altering history” (*WF*, 208), so Alexandra decides to set things right and take revenge on Lucy Lint adopting what she describes as a “scorched-earth policy” (*WF*, 208), burning what she is leaving behind. The only thing which is in her and Ned’s name is the insurance of the house. She does not know whether Ned has paid the last instalments, but that is immaterial. She chooses the crate of the dining-room chimney to make a fire because it is filled with twigs from birds’ nests and, for good measure, she throws “an extra log on”. Subsequently, she intends to leave the Cottage under the pretext of avoiding meeting Lucy Lint, Hamish and the others who are on their way to take possession of Lucy’s new inherited “abode”. But just then, Alexandra’s plans are helped along by violent weather conditions when a storm breaks up and contributes to set The Cottage ablaze. As in Romantic literature, where nature reflects the moods of the individual, here it answers to Alexandra’s prayers in a sensationalist tour de force.

Alexandra and Abbie, the latter driving her car, eventually come across the other group. All of them witness how a flash of lightning strikes the house and provokes a conflagration. To Alexandra, this constitutes “a proper funeral pyre”, her farewell ceremony to Ned, since she had refused to attend the public one. Thereafter, she is able to go on with her living, to “forgive and forget” as Mr Lightfoot had advised her in the

first place. She decides to go to Hollywood to play opposite Michel Douglas and leaves her son Sascha in the care of her mother and entreats her friend Eric Stenstrom to visit him from time to time. In contrast to what had been going on, there appears to be a new constructive design. In line with it, she advises Abbie to cut the plum tree in the middle of the language school garden because the students keep choking on the bones of the plums. One has to get rid of that which is hindering one's existence. Rationality seems to gain the upper hand at last and Alexandra is finally in control of her existence. It is a story of adopting the best attitude in the face of misfortune, of changing negative mental patterns, of overcoming obstacles, and, thus, of improvement. In this regard, the fact that ten years later Fay Weldon wrote a sort of self-help book, *What Makes Women Happy*, may be seen as a logical development from this kind of novels. However, in spite of the eventual triumph of rationality, there is a strong element of ambiguity in the denouement of the story. To achieve this happy ending, things of an excessive nature necessarily take place. Strong emotions, like the appetite for revenge are let loose. Setting fire to the historical building and the valuable antiques it contained inside to prevent Lucy Lint from taking possession of them seems an exorbitant measure by all standards. The fact that this is accompanied by a real storm makes it immoderately eerie, "divine intervention", as Alexandra defines it. Her leaving her son may be taken to be a drastic measure and the fact that Eric Stenstrom, the man believed by all and sundry to be the father, is to become his new father-figure might prove somewhat ironic. Hence, the expected return to normal after so much turmoil is welcome, though there is no denying that this Gothic experience has left its imprint on Alexandra's character: She has become much more insouciant, as can be inferred by the flippant vein of the last thoughts in the novel: "Ned was dead. And she was off" (WF, 218).

2.20. TROUBLE: MAZE/MUDDLE

Another emblematic tale of connubial bliss turned horrific is *Trouble*. Weldon resorts once more to her particular and satiric neo-Gothic interpretations of so gruesome a subject. Nonetheless, we should add that the Gothic treatment of it is not a novelty. An early and pioneering example is Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* (1797). It is obviously an adequate theme for a literary gender which, according to Prickett, as quoted by Antonio Ballesteros in *Narciso y el Doble en la Literatura Fantástica Victoriana*, has offered writers from the second half of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries "an alternative language for dealing with areas of unassimilable psychological experience" (Ballesteros 1998: 255). Unassimilable psychological experience in the shape of a marital horror ordeal constitutes the rite of passage, to put it somehow, that Annette has to undergo in *Trouble* if she wants to stay in one piece. We are conveyed the events mainly through dialogic scenes, which are the appropriate vehicle for a novel charged with the irony produced by the contrast between what the protagonist is not able to see and what is crystal clear to the rest of the characters. To see the significance of dialogues in the dynamics of the story we need only notice that they are the protagonist's only access to sanity in the warped reality her husband creates around her. Their importance is purposeful and strongly stressed in this fiction, as is proved by the fact that Annette employs aural patterns in the writing of *Luciffette Fallen*, the novel she has just published, which happens to be inspired in the rows that her parents used to have when she was a child and that she would overhear. This makes *Luciffette Fallen* a metafictional correlate of *Trouble* both in technique and –as we can

readily surmise— in subject matter. Annette spends so much time on the phone that she has got used “to understanding [her] own life through [her] ears” (*Trouble*, 184). Dialogues in *Trouble* are conducted by Annette with either her friend Gilda, who accuses Spicer, the former’s husband, of being a sadist, or with Ernie, Annette’s publisher, or even with her parents. Through these conversations we become aware of the magnitude of Spicer’s cruelty, which, nonetheless, seems imperceptible to Annette, the one who suffers it. Everyone around the protagonist can distinctly perceive the plight she is in but her. Talking to her on the phone, her parents try to remind Annette of the fact that she and Spicer are not properly married out of mutual neglect —they went through a religious ceremony which was legally invalidated because it took place shortly before Annette got her divorce papers. We also learn that Spicer unwittingly forgot to put their house in their joint names, a remarkable oversight if we take into account that Annette’s father had given them a loan and this act would constitute a safeguard for it. Moreover, when we remember that Eden-like scene corresponding to the beginning of their relationship in which Spicer promises Annette to put the house in their joint names along with loving her forever, it becomes a glaring negligence and a breach of contract to say the least. Annette turns out to be, economically speaking, at the mercy of Spicer’s whims and fancies.

Consequently, the story in *Trouble* is conveyed by means of dialogic scenes which constitute a superb technique of gradually unveiling the ironic purport of a novel in which on many occasions the statements uttered completely differ from what is meant by them. In this regard, some of the dialogues are riddled with contradictions on the part of Spicer —who, after behaving abominably, may make comments of the sort: “I really missed you, Annette” (*T*, 168) — and revelatory truths from the rest of the characters,

such as pointing to the fact that Spicer “seems to be angry with you rather a lot these days” (*T*, 28) or that “upsetting and hurting you is what turns him on” (*T*, 114). These dialogical scenes are the instruments through which we bear witness to the encroaching web Spicer-Spider spins around Annette aimed at suffocating her. Apparently, out of the blue he starts to turn her life into a gruesome tale of terror. He does his best to drive her crazy. Gilda tries to explain this to her: “He’s nice for a bit just in order to be nasty. He does it on purpose. He reads you. He presses a button. He knows how you’ll react and he does it deliberately” (*T*, 123). To gauge the degree of sadism he displays it should be noted that all this takes place when she is at her weakest, at a time when she is pregnant. Not only does he inflict psychic torture on her –he goes as far as to deny her condition: “For all I know, you’ve invented this baby” (*T*, 125), but his aggressiveness also turns into physical violence. He brutalises her without her consent, he also makes her wear too tight bracelets and convinces her to do the sort of things which are highly inadvisable in a pregnancy, as eating lobster and drinking champagne. However, and this provides an intricate example of black humour, he is the one who considers himself trapped. In an ironic twist, through a complete perversion of facts, he sees himself as “Jonah inside a whale” (*T*, 88) imprisoned by his wife whom he has come to see as a looming threat to his ego. In this really tortuous story he has conveniently let himself be persuaded by Rhea, his psychiatrist, of the monstrous nature of his wife and, thereby, easily becomes a puppet in her hands and those of her husband. They have used all the sorcery at their disposal, in the shape of horoscopes and hypnotic techniques, in order to bewitch and bedevil him to the extent that he seems to become really confused and mystified. However, the degree of horror of this Gothic tale is somehow diminished and deflated if we think how easily Spicer can be manipulated and how unperturbedly he adopts this

new role of torturer —acting cruelly towards his wife seems to be in accordance with his nature—, but, above all, by the preposterous motif which has ultimately triggered this ghastly plot of torture and manipulation: the two psychiatrists want to get hold of the couple's house in Bella Crescent to transform it into a surgery. Gilda puts her finger on it when she comments about the shortage of “nice large houses, too big for just families, just right for clinics” (*Trouble*, 41). Furthermore, if we regard the satire as too harsh and fierce, we should take into account that this novel has its source in an especially traumatic episode in Weldon's life and is transparent in the reflection of her autobiographical impressions and experience of that time. As she explains in *Mantrapped*, her long-time husband, Ron, died of a naturally “unblocked artery” the day they were expecting their divorce to come through, which meant that Weldon became a widow rather than a divorcee. For two years Ron had been attending therapy with a female psychoanalyst who only believed in natural remedies and who considered families the source of all evil.

Annette's remark in the novel referring to the fact that “therapists are after our souls. I wish they'd leave us alone” (*T*, 111) constitutes an understatement in view of the events which have taken place and of all that is still to come. Not only does she risk losing her identity, but also her physical safety is put at stake. In fact, in the end she loses the baby she was expecting. In her bewilderment she has gullibly let herself be driven into what we might describe as a Gothic deathly maze of unreason. The tenets which have sustained her life so far have been deprived of meaning, or even worse, become contradictory and hostile: “Because everything is collapsing...and it's the end of the world” (*T*, 34). Husbands are supposed to be caring and loving and the family home a safe haven, and, in this regard, Annette experienced total bliss at the beginning of their

relationship. However, in a clear illustration of Freud's idea of the uncanny, Spicer, suddenly turned nasty, has unexpectedly started to deny the habits of their life together. Out of the blue, he has become a stranger with new tastes and opinions. Eventually we learn that this is the result of Dr Rhea's successful attempts at re-tuning his mind by means of horoscopes and hypnotism. Dr Rhea, for all her spirituality, cannot write novels, but she can change the direction of people's lives, by creating a new narrative out of them to suit her ludicrously mundane purposes. Indeed, Spicer's vanity constitutes the right field to work upon. Correspondingly, Annette is the one affected by all this malice and the one who suffers the syndrome of claustrophobic confinement produced by the crammed plot and the tight-knit structural framework so well represented by the metaphor of the Gothic maze. This deterministic and ominous atmosphere gradually built up through a suffocating narrative might be illustrated, for example, with a quotation taken from *The Cloning of Joana May*:

When the stray cat miaowing on the doorstep one morning turns out to be the illegitimate grandchild of the Persian owned by your father's favourite patient, there is no need for surprise. All things are interrelated: the cat was lost and found just to make sure all the locks were locking properly, or some loose overlap, perhaps, needed to be sealed. (1989: 97)

In this case, instead of the typically labyrinthine plot, the heroine is enmeshed in a muddle of nonsense, which aptly reflects the absurdity of the whole situation. Against all odds and with the help of a pack of inflated lies and high-flown concepts, Dr Rhea and Spicer have erected a sort of constrictive enclosure from whence no safe escape seems possible.

I will not go into particulars as to how every small detail is connected in *Trouble*. Suffice it to mention that, for instance, Marion, Ernie's girlfriend, who shares therapist with Spicer gives Rhea Annette's novel, *Lucifette Fallen*, as Spicer has derisively titled

it. Subsequently Rhea writes a review on it: “The Archetype of the Matrimonial Row: God and Luciffette” with the subtitle “Lilith in her New Appearance”. Some researcher picks it up and it instantly becomes a success, to the extent that Anette is invited to the Oprah Winfrey show, an invitation, which, incidentally, she has to refuse because it would otherwise provoke Spicer’s envy. Yet, the book, or at least Rhea’s interpretation of it, eventually turns against Anette, since she becomes Luciffette to Spicer’s God, Lilith stifling Adam’s creative energy. Spicer is easily convinced that he is “destined for spiritual greatness” (*T*, 148), whereas his wife ends up by docilely admitting that the book she has written is just an “accidental outcrop on the mountain, not true female creativity: not proper soil for the tree” (*T*, 118) –this metaphor can be easily explained by the fact that when Spicer sodomises her, he is the tree and Anette the cleft in the hill where the tree is rooted. Lastly, after a process of psychic and physical torture, she is allocated the extreme reserved for the monstrous female archetypes in the spectre of gender formation and even this she accepts unhesitatingly: “I am enormous, ... vast like a mountain, like a cleft hill, like Medusa; I am about to flood the world” (*T*, 182).

By the end of *Trouble* Anette sees a photograph which can be interpreted as a *mise en abyme* that is a reflection, although of a rather compressed nature, of what has been going on in the novel. The photograph was set in the war in Yugoslavia and it represents three men holding a young man “alive and well” whom a fourth is “sawing through [the] neck with an ordinary wood saw” (*T*, 225). The only possible reaction on the part of the victim is that of stupefaction. This becomes metaphoric of the torture inflicted on Anette all along the novel. This recognition of the torture to which she has submitted, which imagination can only glimmer but which escapes reason, triggers the effect of the horrific sublime. Nonetheless, as is invariably the case in Weldon’s stories,

metaphors, though the term in this case is dubious, are made prosaic by the use of a very strong physical support, thus creating a kind of parodic echo of the “oniric quality of fantastic literature”, where the thin line separating reality and the fantastic is ambiguous and equivocal— though, just as in Gothic literature a reasonable explanation for ghosts is found, reality ultimately dominates here. When Annette realises that there is a cut in her neck the symbolic similarity between her and the Yugoslavian victim is positively established. However, since the novel with its down-to-earth detailed descriptions consistently provides an explanation for Annette’s cut: she had been thrown into a ditch by an angry lorry driver who had given her a lift when hitchhiking in her escape from Spicer and Rhea, the forceful message intimated through the incorporation of the image of the torture inflicted on the Yugoslavian victim into the story is somehow denied and deflated. There is an interpolation of two narrative lines: one in which horror is depicted as something gruesome and beyond comprehension and another one in which horror is seen as undignified and degrading. The contrast produced by the juxtaposition of what we might describe as grandiloquent and lowly styles is in line with the satiric and corrective purposes of this novel. By banalising and diminishing the magnitude of the nature of the torture in hand to the extent of making it appear merely self-inflicted damage, unfair domestic situations clearly become susceptible of modification, something which can be handled properly. By means of this ironic technique, apparently insurmountable conflicts are reduced to manageable proportions. Similarly, when Annette talks to Gilda about the ditch where she had been flung, and the latter interprets it as “the black pit of the soul”, she corrects her, “a real ditch”. Nonetheless, and here the ambivalence is served, she is also suffering from a breakdown. Thus, she speaks of the “gap” where she has been cast but also of the gap as that “space between the world as it

ought to be, and the world as it is; between what you think love and marriage and babies are going to be and what it turns out to be” (*T*, 218). The co-existence of these two different registers, the one that emphasises horror and the one that diminishes its import, serves different functions. On the one hand, women’s anxieties are articulated, on the other, a call to action is required.

After the psychical and physical torture Annette undergoes, terms like love and marriage acquire sinister overtones; they stand for coercion, sadism and masochism. As for babies, Annette has had a miscarriage caused by the duress she has been under, and because, on account of the antenatal clinic neglect, she had not been given an appointment in a case of extreme urgency. In a tangential way this miscarriage makes her fit in with the archetype of Lilith, “the devourer of children,” or with any of the figures representing the monstrous feminine. Like the other horrific character which gives title to her novel, *Lucifette Fallen*, Annette could be said to have fallen from grace – this expression may sound somehow strange in this context, however the very title of the novel that Annette wrote attests to its validity in *Trouble*. To fall from grace entails the acceptance of a cosmogony based on the division between heaven and hell. This conception, as well as the curse of a gypsy in the first scene: “I’ll go, but the bad luck will stay” (*T*, 1) constitute an unblinking and intentional appropriation of Romantic motifs aimed at stressing the intensity of the feelings involved in some extreme situations. This heightened vision, this abnormally intense perspective conforms to a Gothic interpretation of the world where exaggeration and hyperbole are dominant tools. However, as we know, neo-Gothic patterns are not unconditionally embraced but, rather subjected to parodic transformations, creating a mock-Gothic effect. In keeping with this and, taking into account the second blissful scene in an Eden-like garden, Annette

falls from Eden into Hades or, rather, she materially tumbles into an anticlimactic “gap,” or “ditch”. Nonetheless, what it is interesting here is that, apart from suffering a breakdown, she has been expelled, abjected from paradise and has crossed the borders into the reign of the female non-descript, into an area laid off-limits from the socially acceptable, the place inhabited by the likes of Medusa, Lilith, ex-wives, wronged women, spinsters.... At this point she realizes that she is at one with Spicer’s previous wife: “You start off anti the first wife, don’t you? You think she didn’t understand him; you think she was cold, heartless, stupid, faithless –she must have been. In the end you see she was just another woman, trying to cope” (*T*, 154). And, since this novel seems to involve a more transparent reflection of Weldon’s autobiographical experience than some others, her feelings of remorse or solidarity for Cynthia Perl, the painter who was previously married to Ron and who committed suicide, may be surfacing here.

The degree of dramatism in *Trouble* is in equal measure to that of absurdity, that is, extremely high. As mentioned above, the plot could be described as a Gothic muddle instead of a maze, even if it has the similar effect of placing the heroine in a position of total loss and disorientation, and, accordingly, once more in a maze –understood here as a subterranean area of total alienation. Nonetheless, following the previous thread of thought of maze/muddle, everything in the novel undergoes a similarly mocking treatment. If Annette comes across as a very gullible character, some of the others would be extremely sinister were they not so strongly satirized. Spicer goes to great lengths to drive her pregnant wife crazy –the fact that he ends up being a victim of this conspiracy against his wife is no exonerating factor; the reader has been all along a witness to his skills at torturing his wife, to how he excels at manipulating her. He has no integrity to start with. Thereby, it serves him right if at the end of *Trouble* he is reduced to the status

of a mere poodle to proffer pleasure to the couple of psychiatrists. Marion, Ernie's girlfriend, seems to have the same function. Annette has a photograph in her possession of Dr Rhea, her husband and Spicer involved in a threesome and the latter holds that it is a photograph of the bust of Karl Marx. The only redeeming feature of this picture may be said to be the fact that it is a Polaroid and quickly fading. However, the fact that he can be so easily conned is not the only thing disparaged in this sarcastic portrait; his sexual skills are the object of derision as well. Gilda, fed up with listening to Annette constantly blaming herself for what she believes to be her sexual frigidity, ends up by confessing to sporadic couplings with Spicer who, in her own experience, is only capable of quickies. In common with Rhea, he cannot cope with the fact that his wife can write a novel and he even seems to feel envy for her pregnancy. As for Rhea, she and her husband have been driven out of several "comparatively respectable" associations of psychotherapist and one of them has stopped leasing them the clinic in Hampstead. That is the reason why they are after, and finally get hold of, Annette and Spicer's house, which is located a bit "further down the hill" (*T*, 205), a promising area for business. What is more and, therein lies the irony, that constitutes the preposterous hidden agenda at the heart of this grim tale of torture. The fact that this pair has been struck off from the ranks of decent psychoanalysts does not lessen the criticism to which this profession is subjected in this corrective novel. Another power-mad character who does not escape a farcical treatment and who also joins the "dark powers" in their "conspiracy", or rather, in their absurdity, in the muddle they create, is Olive Green – her name conspicuously stands for envy – the receptionist in the Maternity Clinic. She refuses to give Annette an appointment with the doctor without "a formal letter of request" in spite of the latter's insistence that it is an emergency, arguing that Annette

has missed three previous appointments. Consequently, Annette loses her baby. Taking into account that the prevention of such incidents is precisely the main reason for the existence of ante-natal clinics, the satire is acerbic, as has relentlessly been all through the novel.

The somewhat artificial and forced happy ending in *Trouble* is in accordance with “a desire for proper endings and understandings, proper tyings-up, in real life as well as in fiction” (T, 183) characteristic of Weldon’s novels. Correspondingly, although Annette has been “cheated out” of her property by the Drs Marks, she is happily pregnant, this time by her publisher Ernie Gromback, and order is re-established. It is as if all that Annette has gone through could be easily erased, like the Polaroid photograph quickly fading. The impression that the reader is being offered an ending of a highly escapist tenor, where a shortcut to flee from trouble and grief is readily provided and which entails no real problematization of the heterosexual relationships at the basis of the existing social network, is deceiving and can be attributed to the ideological ambivalence intrinsic to Gothic literature. There is no denying that with the help of the merciless and unrelenting sense of humour which fills this novel we have delved into the untoward, entering a shaky terrain in which the prevalence of heterosexual relationships in the accepted social order has been contested. Similarly, and herein lies the paradox, on account of its ending, this work may be simply taken as a satiric game with the corrective goal of righting excesses and abuses, a mere exercise aimed at exorcising the demons hampering a freer and richer existence. We may be left with the impression that the process leading to the collapse of existing structures set in motion in this novel is abruptly interrupted by an artificial, though comforting, restoration of order. This contradictory indecision and vacillation between the threatening dissolution of all that is

known and accepted which pervades throughout the novel and a final realignment aimed at recovering the existing social equilibrium is symptomatic of the Gothic avoidance of closures. In this regard, Jarlath Killeen says of this genre that it “is particularly afflicted with the inability to make up its ideological or formal mind” (Jarlath Killeen: 2009, 171). Furthermore, when referring to Weldon’s works, this avoidance of closure, this inherent feature of the Gothic genre is strongly reinforced by the highly ironic stance adopted in them.

2.21. *Puffball*: DISSECTING GESTATION

As we have seen, *Trouble* represents a reversal of the subject of *Frankenstein* of a man tampering with creation, which, by the way, also happens to be the theme of *The Cloning of Joanna May*. *Trouble* deals with a man or a group of people trying to thwart the proper course of a gestation and nearly succeeding at it. Similarly, *Puffball*, handling the topic of threatened reproduction, is another instance of the fact that the Gothic subsists and has an active role in Weldon’s work. However, apart from its hyperbolic approach to pregnancy, the existence of what might seem anachronic or misplaced characters – the witch Mabs, her inoffensive mother and her sister– and the power they exert over nature would be difficult to account for were it not for the fact that they persist as parodic remnants of a literature of long-standing tradition. Witches were historically persecuted in Western Europe and America from about 1400 to 1700. Innocent women were accused of pacts with the devil, of demonic skills deriving from holding commerce with the other world. The real stigmatization and sacrifice of women involved the unquestionably bringing to life of an abominable tale of Gothic grain (in

Mulvey-Roberts 2009: 259). However, witches may also be said to be a suitable subject for Gothic literature insofar as they were branded as composite half-beings representing all those excesses and deviations which had to be curbed in order to reach the kind of identity that was sanctioned and to be expected. The treatment given to the subject of witches in *Puffball* is worth of notice. We can find its benign sense of the wise woman or village healer in Mab's mother. Nonetheless, the case of Mabs is more complex, she represents immoderate and unrestrained forces of nature let loose and this is in accordance with her longing to be in a constant state of pregnancy, and, thus, somehow in a condition of bodily uncontrollability in which physical urges prevail. The presence of deliberately mocking remodelling of witches contributes to give a comic scope and change the mood of what might otherwise be a harrowing tale of domesticity and discordance between the sexes but, above all, of intrigue and conflicts between women – we should always keep in mind the comments that accompanied the reception of Weldon's first novels cataloguing her as a feminist writer and which she transcribes for us in *Mantrapped*: "She writes about women in relationship to one another, not to men. This is a shocking divergence from tradition" (2004: 161). Indeed, *Puffball* is about a woman, Liffey, who, the moment she is with child, becomes a focal point of attack. She is suddenly assailed by all and sundry and, thus, the fact that pregnancy is not the blissful innocuous state that it seems is underlined all along the novel. Nearly at the beginning of the story there is a sort of Faustian exchange between Liffey and her husband Richard. She wants to live in the country; he wants to have a baby. Therefore, eventually, he agrees to live in the country and she to have a baby, which, in the face of what is to come, nearly entails selling her "soul", her subjectivity, and her identity. In fact, the doctor at the pre-natal clinic is described by the narrator as thinking that he

“wished he could keep his respect for pregnant women. They seemed to him to belong so completely to the animal kingdom that it was almost strange to hear them talk” (*Puffball*, 169). Furthermore, the constant comments of these same women in the waiting-room are of the nature of: “I look like a cabbage: I look like a cow” (*Puffball*, 186). It is also mentioned that the moment they become pregnant they part with their common sense and independence. In this regard, as the novel progresses and Liffey becomes heavily pregnant, she is informed that she has lost her personal fortune and realises that she is economically and sexually dependent on her husband. It is at this, her weakest moment, when all kinds of misfortunes start to befall her.

Pregnancy itself is seen as a menace, and as a deadly one at that. The fact that it involves lethal risks is shown in *Trouble* when Annette loses her baby and consequently remains seriously ill at the hospital for a short time. As for *Puffball*, we bear witness to a pregnancy that entails an uninterrupted succession of hazards. To start with, Liffey, the protagonist, has a placenta praevia, which is strange in a first pregnancy. Likewise, her blood pressure is constantly high. On the other hand, the baby is in danger of being suffocated by the knot the umbilical cord creates around it –we learn this through the chapters which explain to us what goes inside Liffey just as if they were reference documents. On top of this, on the drive to the hospital, some white curtains, which are the only available item to be placed beneath her in order to avoid dirtying the upholstery of the car, acquire “a funny bright red damp” colour because of a nasty haemorrhage. And, just in case we may think this is not frightening enough, she nearly chokes giving birth on account of the remains of a puffball –a kind of fungus– stuck in her throat due to the fact that the digestive processes stop during labour. Paradoxically, only the professionalism of an unskilled young nurse who obediently keeps pressing her neck

saves the day. If we still do not get the picture of the dangers attached to pregnancy, of its sinister nature, suffice it to transcribe Liffey's thoughts the moment she becomes aware that she is pregnant and knows next to nothing about the subject: "it is hard to believe that the cool, smooth, finished reflection of young skin covers up such a bloody, pulpy, incoherent, surging mass of pulsing organs within" (*Puffball*, 128).

An uncanny division between inside/outside is the first dichotomy in a novel filled with them. If the inner condition of a pregnant woman may be delicate, precarious and accompanied by the odd nasty surprise, that is, all in all, "a process fraught with danger," she likewise may be more prone to accident, more exposed and vulnerable to evil and reckless exterior influence than the rest of humankind, as *Trouble* and *Puffball* amply show. In this regard, it is no wonder that Liffey promptly sees her destiny as a reflection of that of puffballs. There is a constant identification in the novel between pregnant Liffey and this fungus characterised by a "smooth round swelling" (*Puffball*, 19) which the people in the country tend to kick and disparage. In fact, at one moment, when Tucker, Liffey's neighbour and the main representative of country folk in the novel, kicks one, she has "a pain in the middle". However, we are here presented with the extraordinary and the eerie which is to be forthwith contradicted by means of a natural explanation: "It was a mid-cycle pain" (*Puffball*, 21) which proves the ludic character of this parodic game which revels in the equivocal and ambiguous and which impresses the novel with a stamp of fakery, thus denying the reader a feeling of unalloyed terror or horror. By the end of Liffey's pregnancy and at Liffey's husband's insistence, Mabs, Tucker's wife, accedes to serve a puffball in her roast as if it were Yorkshire pudding. To that aim, she cuts the puffball in an unnecessarily violent way, filling Liffey with apprehension and reminding her of the Caesarean she is to undergo in

brief. Liffey rightly construes Mab's act as a ceremony performed by a witch. In fact, malevolent Mabs, jealous of Liffey's pregnancy and wanting to prevent the birth of a baby she thinks has been fathered by her husband, "confidently expected Liffey to die under the surgeon's knife" (*Puffball*, 233).

Mrs Tree, Mab's mother, "was a herbalist, in the old tradition" and "on moonlit nights, even now, she would switch off the television and go gathering herbs" (*Puffball*, 25). Mrs Tree's main occupation consists in causing alterations on people, her "medicines served in overdose, not just to restore a normal body chemistry, but to incite to love and hate, violence and passivity, to bring about increased sexual activity and impotence" (*Puffball*, 25). Her daughter uses her wisdom, her mayflower wine and potions to create mischief in her neighbours' home. She is partly to blame for the increased sexual urge that drives Richard to conduct affairs with, among others, Bella – Liffey's best friend –, Miss Martin –his secretary – and Vanessa. Nonetheless, it should be noted that, as happened to Spicer in *Trouble*, Richard can be induced to adopt certain behaviour because it accords with his inclinations, in this case, towards sexual promiscuity. In this regard, Audrey, Mab's oldest daughter, explains: "You can't change people. But you can make them more themselves" (*Puffball*, 96). However, what lies behind Richard's transformation is his anger towards Liffey's rash and somewhat one-sided decision to move to the country without even checking if he could commute to work, which as it turns out, he cannot. There is no proper train service during winter and the distance is too long. Moreover, she rents their apartment to a couple of friends, Mory and Helen, who refuse to move out once Richard and Liffey realise the implausibility of their living in the country. All these circumstances, whether natural or magic, whet Richards appetite for sexual misdemeanours: "a trapdoor had opened up, which hitherto

had divided his conscious, kindly careful self from the tumult, anger and confusion below, and the slit and sludge now surged up to overwhelm him” (*Puffball*, 48).

The Gothic genre manifests a significant absorption of the Romantic spirit and its ideas, which means that any reproduction of the Gothic gender may involve a playful reshuffle of motifs and topics of a Romantic drift. In this regard, I think it would be interesting to analyse *Puffball* along these parameters. Hence, even if the consequences of moving to the country are deplorable, the decision, in spite of apparently being a reckless and hasty one, cannot be considered irrelevant. In fact, emphasis to prove the opposite is made at the beginning of the novel: “The getting of the cottage, not the wanting – that was the trap. It was a snare baited by Liffey’s submerged desires and unrealised passions, triggered by nostalgia for lost happiness, and set off by fear of a changing future” (*Puffball*, 7). The existence of these “submerged desires and unrealised passions” is important and not to be overlooked. They entail that division of the mind which, according to Karl Miller, has been linked to an attitude of openness to the world since the Romantic period (1987: 311). They may be said to provoke that movement outwards which Andrew Gibson, in a very different context, defines as “excedance” (1999: 37), the attempt on the part of the self to escape the limits of an experience considered as narrow and restricted, to escape that “self-sameness and self-insistence” which bases the traditional conception of subjectivity in the prescriptive expulsion or abjection of all that is stigmatized as shameful or undesirable. It also represents the typical motif of the flight so dear to the Romantic conception. However, there is something hubristic in this search for perfectibility, in this attempt to surpass one’s own borders, and, accordingly, in this literature, as often as not, the fall comes after the flight.

Liffey’s decision to move to the country is not merely the whim of a naive young

woman. It shows what we could describe as her ethical openness to the event, her unconscious determination to flee from what she inadvertently has come to consider as an inauthentic experience. In fact, this change is a blessing in disguise; it leads her to self-discovery, which is achieved mainly through her experience of gestation. Likewise, when, as the novel proceeds, Liffey is accosted by hardships, she becomes aware that, as in the case of many a young married woman, her life is entirely focused on her husband and she has so far done without the company of true female friends, which in Weldon's book portends trouble and misery: "You can do without partners, husbands, lovers, children, jobs and money, so long as you have good friends" (*What Makes Women Happy*, 81). When Karl Miller in his literary essay *Doubles*, speaks of the flight, he also speaks of the "orphan" as the cherished child of Romantic literature, cheerless, lonely, forsaken by society, but gloriously independent and inclined to perpetrate flights. The orphan, not tied by any family bonds, has to be free and is, thereby, susceptible to these escapes, to these flights from the restrictions any constrictive society imposes on the individual. And in *Puffball*, far-fetched as this may apparently seem, Liffey conforms to the prototype of the orphan – Ruth in *Lives and Loves of a She-Devil* is another clear example of the orphan, since she has been disowned by her family on account of her ugliness. Liffey's mother was left pregnant by an actor who ran away from England in order to avoid a paternity suit. At this stage, her mother considers she has done her duty by Liffey. She has always wanted to be entirely dedicated to her teaching-career and, consequently, she makes a kind of short farewell visit to her pregnant daughter. After that, both are aware that the estrangement between them will finally be for good.

Karl Miller also explains in *Doubles* that the motif of the flight, which has to do with subjects in process or formation is invariably accompanied by the theme of the

double, alter ego or *doppelgänger*. If we follow this line of thought, it is no wonder that Liffey's resolution to find a new life in the country brings about all sorts of evil, mainly in the shape of Mabs, who, being a witch, becomes a sort of looming evil shadow to her and, who, all things considered, and as I will try to show by-and-by, may be said to constitute the evil *alter ego* she has to defeat in order to survive: "Mabs would have her down and take her and chew her up and suck her through, and when she had extracted every possible kind of nourishment, would spit her out, carelessly" (*Puffball*, 43). To prove this further, it must be added that the figure of the double was originally created in an attempt to grapple with the existence of evil and, as a result, as Karl Miller explains, "doubles are usually hostile or fatal to the first self" (1987: 47). But she is not the only woman who contributes to weave an insidious web around her. Richard's lovers do their best to turn him against her. In the war of the sexes, Bella, apparently Liffey's best friend, is on Richard's side and against her: "I will say on your behalf, Richard, that Liffey is very manipulative, and has an emotional life of twelve, and rather spoilt twelve at that" (*Puffball*, 56-57). As for Miss Martin, his secretary, she proceeds in a more subtle way: "Richard would begin to see Liffey as Miss Martin saw her –as someone damaging to his professional, emotional, financial and physical well-being" (*Puffball*, 154). This is a clear instance in Weldon of women contributing to create that "spew of nastiness and corruption" which constitute the rites of passage that the protagonists have to overcome in order to reach maturity and fulfilment. Therefore, all these women are accessories to Liffey's "fall" from the status of a proper wife to a woman who receives visits from the social worker –the doctor worries about Liffey's welfare and, mistrusting her family and home arrangements, sends someone to check on her safety: "Liffey's Lee-Fox, whom everyone had envied, now the object of compassion and concern!"

(*Puffball*, 157).

Antonio Ballesteros considers the Gothic gender as a “línea narrativa que toma como fundamento las relaciones duales que se establecen entre los personajes, las estructuras argumentales e incluso los elementos situacionales (como el paisaje, el tiempo, etc.)” (1998: 171). This is clearly and superbly done in *Puffball*. The country is presented as opposed to the city, pregnancy against non-pregnancy. Even the main characters are described following a structure of oppositions. We are told of the male protagonists that. “Tucker was mire and swamp; Richard a clean, clear grassy bank of repose” (*Puffball*, 93), as for the female ones: “Mabs was a sweep of forested hill, of underground rivers, and hidden caves, and dark graves and secret powers. Liffey was a willow-tree, all above ground” (*Puffball*, 104). Perhaps it is the sheer contrast between them that makes Liffey the complex focus of Mabs’ hate and attraction: “Liffey trusted the world and Mabs despised her for it” (*Puffball*, 42). She stretches her net to supervise all her movements, becoming a sort of encroaching shadow, a double to her. Through their neighbours, she knows every step Liffey takes. Moreover, Liffey’s mail is sent to Mabs’ house –the postman does not bother to go as far as Liffey’s home– and she steams her letters to read their contents. She even sends her husband Tucker to take physical possession of Liffey the better to control her –later on, Liffey was under the impression that “she and Mabs were linked through Tucker, in the mind, in a more compelling and complex way than ever she and Tucker had been in the flesh” (*Puffball*, 149). Nonetheless, Mabs’ plan backfires on her. Mabs’ strongest longing is to be with child, she is at her best when expecting. It is the only time when she is a loving restful mother to her five children. The opposite happens to Liffey, what suits her best is a pre-pregnancy gamine appearance. As Mabs has come to represent physical pregnancy

in this novel, she, somehow, considers Liffey, so different from her, a usurper of her role, a supplanter and is deadly set on destroying her. Besides, the fact that Tucker might be the father is the reason why when Liffey becomes pregnant Mabs thinks that her foetus belongs to her by rights. However, we are better informed than Mabs. We have learnt early on that the baby is Richard's through the omniscient narrator.

A kind of lethal combat is established and the forces of nature are summoned to rally around both women. As in Romantic literature, the landscape is employed to portray the frame of mind of the characters. Hence, Glastonbury Tor, the most emblematic element in the scenery of the novel constantly reflects Mabs' inner states. Nature is responsive to her: her grim moods conjure up storms and whip up thunder and lightning. However, with the improvement of the weather, Mabs' powers begin to dwindle. Glastonbury Tor is filled with tourists and Mabs feels "its powers divided between too many purposeless people" (*Puffball*, 187). Besides, it gradually dawns on Liffey that she has to defend herself and her baby, which has of late started to talk to her in her womb. Consequently, the balance of power begins to fluctuate and it so happens that:

Liffey, now, had powers of her own: that Mabs could no longer have Nature all her own way: that forces worked for Liffey too, and not just Mabs. Winter winds were on Mabs' side, and frost, and lightning and storms. Liffey loved sun, and breeze, and warmth; and they loved her. And spring was coming. (*Puffball*, 142)

Notwithstanding all this, Mabs does not give up on her effort to destroy Liffey and her baby, thus fulfilling perfectly well the role of the "double" as harbinger of death just in the way traditional lore interpreted it. She creates a wax image of her and drives pins through it. However, we learn that spells produce no effect whatsoever on nice people and that "if the spellbinder herself or himself was angry, then the spell would

turn back like a boomerang” (*Puffball*, 74) – in this case a third party would be likely to receive the curse. This is the reason why, in a novel where everything comes in pairs, Audrey, Mabs’ eldest daughter, has stomach pains, and why Debbie, the daughter “reminding Mabs for all the world of Liffey” (*Puffball*, 214) is the second serious emergency at the hospital on the day in which Liffey is giving birth. Moreover, the chances of survival for both of them, Liffey and Debbie, happen to be equally scarce.

When, against all odds, most dangers seem to have been overcome, there is a dramatic episode in which Mabs, painstakingly followed by Liffey, who is in no condition to do so, visits the baby in the special care unit and finally, to her satisfaction, sees the resemblance it bears to its father Richard. Richard, on the other hand, had cynically disappeared earlier on account of Mabs’ evildoing –she had hinted that the baby must be Tucker’s– leaving Liffey with birth contractions and in mortal danger. Some months later he returns to Liffey, regardless of who the father is: “I am sorry. I don’t care whose baby it is” (*Puffball*, 272), thus satisfying Liffey’s wish of achieving “what her mother had not –an ordinary marriage, an ordinary family, and ordinary happiness” (*Puffball*, 205).

In *Letters to Alice*, Weldon speaks of the endings of books as “a kind of spiritual reassessment or moral reconciliation” (1991: 83), and of course this is what happens when *Puffball* finishes. Yet, the closure of Weldon’s novels may strike the reader as an artificial denouement and a victory of conservatism over the subversion and irreverence previously displayed. In this, Alan Wilde has attributed the “forced happy endings” to an “attachment to an ethic of means and middles” (Carmen Martín. 1999: 44), to refute which I would resort to what Kristeva roughly maintains that in the end there must be a “re-alignment to the symbolic”, that “the state of revolution, like the semiotic itself,

cannot endure for ever” (Mills 1989: 207). I don’t think, as Alan Wilde seems to do, that Weldon is at heart conventionally-minded and that the endings in her novels are there to prove it. I would rather consider that sticking to a revolutionary pose would be an impoverishing view and would in the end lead to death and dissolution, which are against the grain of her, after all, optimistic and constructive, though never complacent, novels. And, interestingly enough, this hesitation between the revolutionary and the conservative is a feature of the Gothic genre, as Jerrold E. Hogle distinctly explains in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. In many cases there appears to be a constant display of opposite poles iconoclastically placed alongside only to be eventually subsumed in what might seem predictably conservative endings. However, this impression may be somewhat misleading since the anticlimactic conclusion of these novels does not stop them from: “leaving both extremes sharply before us and far less resolved than the conventional endings in most of these works claim them to be (Hogle 2008:13)

In this vein, by the end of the novel Liffey’s line of action is to “oppose bad with good” (*Puffball*, 242). However, the limits between good and evil are not as clear-cut as it might seem. Moreover, some readers might be under the impression that the novel is too lax as a moral guidance, that Mabs, representing evil forces throughout the book: neglecting her children, trying to take advantage of Richard and Liffey, nearly killing the latter and her baby along with her own daughter, Debbie, does not get the harsh punishment she deserves. In regard to her daughter, she feels blameless, she was never in doubt that she would not die –driving a pin through a wax image is not enough to kill anyone and, besides, there had been no bad omens heralding death. As for the rest of her untoward behaviour, it is erased and forgiven the moment she welcomes the newly-born

baby with rapturous glee. And, for all her previous mischief, she becomes pregnant by virtue of this benign ecstatic reaction:

Tucker's sperm survived the hazardous journey up Mab's fallopian tubes to rupture the walls of a recently dropped ovum –fallen rather ahead of time by virtue of the emotions of tenderness and remorse, mixed, which had flooded Mabs when she marvelled over Baby Lee-Fox, and laughed at his looks. (*Puffball*, 265)

Mabs, her powers diminished at last, remains finally “deflated.” However, were it not for her presence we would be right to say that the implied readers of this novel would be women whose only aim in life would be gathering a happy family around them and whose transition to adulthood would solely be based on the criterion of going through pregnancies. Her existence must be described *de rigueur* in order to somewhat swerve the plot from the subject of heterosexual relationships. She is the main axis through which Liffey reaches maturity. As she stands for physical motherhood, her dire need for pregnancy makes her the indispensable counterpart to Liffey, since the latter's rites of passage are mainly constituted by her process of gestation. Mabs represents the shadow, the dark, physiological side Liffey has to assimilate in order to become a full and complex human-being. Moreover, and this should be strongly stressed, she is the means through which Liffey is forced to acquire that rich and harsh moral fibre which characterises Weldon's heroines. As we know, none of them is allowed to remain a victim of men and wallow in pity. Weldon would perhaps help us explain the conclusion of this book: “happy ending through moral development.” (*Letters to Alice*, 83)

2.22. THE DOUBLE CHARACTER OF THE FRAMEWORK OF WELDON'S NOVELS

As we have seen, the dualistic epistemology that characterised the Romantic

Movement produced a literature ruled by the play of opposites, the play of “relaciones duales” or doubles which Gothic literature absorbed. The latter is, likewise, a literature focused on the subject, namely on a subject in process and in constant change which has to cross boundaries and go through obstacles to reach fulfilment and a rich and varied personality. This subject, which is constantly-in-the-make, clashes blatantly with the concept of the Cartesian ego, that is, of a unified identity based on the predominance of reason over body, that has traditionally shaped the concept of subjectivity in Western society. The standard idea of accepted identity is the result of a prolonged effort to restrain and curb all the irrational, emotional, physical and instinctual aspects constitutive of human beings. It involves a concept of subjectivity where all that stands for rationality, maleness and the inclusion in the white race is given a dominant position and is, consequently, accorded complete supremacy over all that does not fit that description and which has come to be defined as otherness. This “otherness” has to be expelled, abjected and kept at bay in the name of cultural order and social safety.

However, Gothic literature revels in otherness, in all those suppressed instincts, which, estranged and subsumed, keep cropping up as the uncanny and abnormal face of what is accepted and in order, and, invitingly, confront the characters. We should add that it is a literature that registers the strain experienced by individuals who have to meet unnatural requirements in their relationship and interaction with others. It is no wonder that this literature reached its peak during the Victorian era, a time when an enormous effort must have gone into hiding its alterity, its adverse side and all that which does not become a society bent on sustaining an extremely strict and pervasively prudish morality. Nonetheless, what this society tried to hide and repress looms menacingly, if also liberatingly, in its literature in the shape of the motif of the double as an evident

expression of a complex and divided self. This is the reason why the connection between this motif and that of the flight must be emphasised. As we have already seen, there are many graphic examples in classics of this period like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, where the monstrous double is an exterior threat created by the protagonist, or Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, where the menace and division is shown as internal, or Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. We might also mention another *alter-ego* Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* which, although not so apparent like the ones mentioned, is seen by Gilbert and Gubar as Jane's angry self. Moreover, as Karl Miller analyses in *Doubles*, the "dynamic metaphor of the second self" is a dominant feature in a considerable amount of novels written by nineteenth century authors like Poe, Dickens, Conrad, Henry James or Edith Wharton. Fascinatingly enough, this fantasy of the second-self which fills the pages of nineteenth century literature was to find expression in the studies of mental processes of the time with the discovery of the unconscious mind which eventually led to the foundation of psychoanalysis. In this regard, Neil Cornwell quotes Julia Briggs in his study of *The Literary Fantastic* when referring to "the advent of Freud, whose psycho therapy aimed at reducing the night side to manageable proportions, and breaking up the potentially destructive doubleness of Victorian man" (Cornwell 1990: 146)

We could say that the figure of the double enriches and helps to clear up the existence of, for instance, Mabs in *Puffball*. On the one hand, the insidious and evil presence of a mock witch is given another scope, since it signals the incorporation of stock features of a genre to which Weldon owes a great deal and of which her novels are neo-adaptations. In this regard, the anachronism of a witch in a contemporary setting is obvious and of a highly parodic nature. It is reminiscent of those doubles of ancient lore,

which consisted mostly in anomalous creatures of indeterminate classification like werewolves, half-human, half-animal, or witches, who were thought to be in communion with dark forces and the devil —they contained within their beings those monstrous aspects that should have been expelled. On the other hand, Mabs, with her longing for pregnancies represents an attitude of acceptance towards what might be described as female biologism, a part of her that the Liffey of boyish appearance refuses to embrace and that she has to assimilate by the end of the novel. Prompted by spite towards a woman so unlike her as Liffey, Mabs contributes to place her in a highly distressful situation. Since the confrontation and rivalry of women with their female peers constitutes a motive of stress and struggle for the protagonists in Weldon's novels, emerging unscathed out of so much strife and conflict is a decisive factor in their development.

Given the important role women play in the formation of other women's personalities in the universe presented by Weldon, the play of doubles and split subjects must be taken into consideration. Through women's dealings with other women, through disputes with some of them or the support of others, an effort at incorporation is effected. We could illustrate this with the help of some short stories. In "The Bottom Line and the Sharp End", which belongs to the collection *Polaris and Other Stories*, we are witness to an incident that takes place between Helen, a hairdresser, owner of a prosperous salon and Avril, a nightclub singer object of her admiration twenty years before when she had just finished her apprenticeship, but for whose shabby appearance she feels a certain pity at present. It is late and Helen has to work overtime because of her. Both women seem to belong to different worlds and words like love appear to have a dissimilar meaning for them, as Helen speculates while Avril is elaborating on how her

last boyfriend left her and ran away with her money after she had told him she loved him. Helen can mention that to her husband, father of her grown-up children, as many times as she wants without stirring up all sorts of trouble. Hence, whereas Helen appears to live in a perpetual comfort zone, Avril's life consists of a non-stop ineffectual succession of risk-taking episodes. That is probably the reason why Avril's vulgar presence invariably clashes with the atmosphere of discreet elegance of a now up-market salon. However, Avril and Helen have a stronger bond than Helen cares to admit. Helen has been somehow responsible for the different hair styles that have marked Avril's career: "the Godiva look, the Doris Day look, then the Twiggy look —the frizz-out, the pile-up and the freak-out". On this occasion, after the bleach has not had the desired effect, and Avril insists on being blonde again, Helen's wishes with all her heart that the second bleach succeeds in spite of all the unnecessary risks involved. Notwithstanding Helen's efforts and, as it could have been expected, Avril is bald after running the hazard of a second peroxide application. Avril blames herself for it and says that Helen must be happy after so many years of hating her for being such an intrusive presence in her salon. Unexpectedly, Helen does not feel hate, on the contrary, she has compassionately and against all odds bleached the hair of a woman who was at the end of her tether and now, as if having gone through a kind of Gothic experience accompanying another woman, she stands "on the other side of the shock and horror, agreeably purged, sensuous" (*PAOS*, 121). Through Avril, Helen has faced the risks and dangers missing in her life. In a turn-up for the books, Avril, now bald, but with an experienced look, has immeasurably advanced from performing in a venue in Soho to one in Mayfair where Helen "bravely" takes her husband to listen to her amid an attentive audience.

The second story I am going to mention belongs to the collection of *Wicked Women* and is of a more obvious Gothic stamp: "Through a Dustbin, Darkly". The adverb darkly is mentioned again in the next story referring to the way the ghost of the protagonist's grandmother speaks: darkly as befits "a messenger from the other side" (*Wicked Women*, 194). But darkly refers here to a not very clear and, hence, to a restricted perception, since the vision afforded through a dustbin must be quite obscure and of a dubious nature. However, it is the reduced perspective to which Philly, married to Basil, is finally confined, just as had happened to Serena, her husband's previous wife, who died soon after a period spent living in a dustbin outside Basil's house, watching how he was being unfaithful to her. Philly's long time of slaving over a house belonging to Basil, for which no amount of cleaning or money spent from her inheritance are enough to make it a fit home for human habitation, is responded with Basil's infidelity while he spends a lot of time away in Scotland on a commission to paint a mural on a town hall, leaving her alone and pregnant. The task of revamping Basil's house, which had seemed a challenging and exciting activity initially, becomes a hopeless and futile task despite Philly's sacrifice and all the inordinate efforts that go into the maintenance of the dwelling. Similarly, what started as a promising relationship with an interesting painter has reduced Philly's life to the narrow existence led by women dependant on abusive relationships. She is figuratively and materially circumscribed to seeing things from "an old tin" dustbin, not even a more aseptic plastic one, the moment in which a weird and uncanny phenomenon of identity assumption takes place: "What Serena saw, Philly saw, and always would. What Serena heard, *clang, clang*, so would Philly, for ever. As for the first wife, so for her successors" (*Wicked Women*, 187). This assimilation on the part of Philly of her predecessor's

personality and of the grievances she has endured entails a joining of forces which gives her the moral strength to take action. Consequently, she sets fire to the inhospitable house, thus, putting an end to an intolerable relationship with a sadistic and unfaithful husband and a failed painter on top.

In the third story about the interdependence of two women which I see appropriate to mention here we can see a clear motif of the double: a couple of twins. In “Moon over Minneapolis”, the brief narrative which gives its title to one of Weldon’s collections of short fiction, the idea of the double in the shape of twins is brilliantly represented as Minneapolis, a characteristic twin city. The subject of this short story, like that of several others, is a revelatory visit to a psychoanalyst in the course of which a character, generally a woman, is finally able to confront her fears. She does so after invariably discovering that she is in denial of unpleasant facts about her life —though, on occasions, the protagonists of some of these tales stubbornly refuse to see that which is obvious to the analyst and the reader, as happens, for instance, in “A Gentle Tonic Effect” collected in this same book. Rosamund visits Miss Jacobs telling her that she feels dead because she considers she has inadvisably renounced to a very suitable marriage. She blames her sister for it. Having met “a millionaire from the Midwest” with whom she had fallen in love, she had thought that, being a widow, by marrying him she could at last escape from the burdensome bond which tied her to her disturbing half, that is, her twin. This new marriage would have allowed her to acquire a new and appropriate identity free from the oppressive existence of her sibling, in a remote city where no one knew her. She goes on to explain what Miss Jacobs already knows, that even though, both she and her sister originate from a single fertilized egg and, consequently, share the same DNA, Rosamund is the happy and gifted one, and, as inferred from her account,

more energetic than her sister. Having been born first, though originally being “lying further back”, she was even given the best name, whereas her sister had to settle for the ridiculous alternative of Minnie. After Rosamund explains how she has always been the lucky one in contrast to her less fortunate twin, she proceeds to tell how the contemplation of Minneapolis illuminated by a half-moon made her desist from the wedding scheduled for the following day. If the moon had been full and fanciful that very night, a moon which could have been rightly halved, it would have been different. However, she saw a half-moon entailing a veritably unfair distribution, not enough prosperity and well-being to go around. In an attempt to grasp the workings of the twin city of Minneapolis, she starts to fathom the nature of the relationship with her sister: “St Paul has the problems: race riots, poverty, squalor. Minneapolis makes sure of that — just heaves them all across the water. If there’s a block where the addicts hang out, it bulldozes it flat and builds a shopping mall or a parking lot” (*MOM*, 162). So, here she is attending once again a therapy she had abruptly interrupted in the past and back with her family helping her sister take care of their parents —their mother has had a stroke and their father has cancer. Minnie’s son, born with a dislocated hip, and daughter, who has always been ugly, also need her: “Andrew has personality problems and Lois is just hopeless” (*MOM*, 160). On the contrary, her own smart and beautiful children are about to start college and coping well with life because she used the insurance money after her husband’s death in a car accident to pay for private schools, whereas Horace, his socialist brother-in-law had insisted on public education for his progeny. It is only when analyzing all this for Miss Jacobs that Rosamund realises she has chosen the only possible moral option. Once she willingly accepts her duties, her sister stops being a harrowing presence in her life. In the words of Rosamund at the end of a session which

is masterfully made to correspond to a short tale of self-development: “I came in dead, I go out living” (*MOM*, 163).

This unavoidable interaction with others, this assimilation of external influences leads to the constant experimentation and persistent becoming involved in the title of one of her most representative novels: *Praxis*. Playing at doubling and multiplying the subject, thus making it richer and more complex, is a common enjoyable practice employed in Weldon’s novels which impresses them with what could be described as a mock-Gothic structure. A mock- Gothic structure would be in line with what Karl Miller says when referring to the literature of duality: it “runs to comedy and to chicanery, to a fascination with tricks and hoaxes, and to a principled or accidental subversion of the author” and he specifies the kind of author as the one “who is deemed to create and control plot and character, to be separate from his characters, to be himself something of a character, and to hold, rather than administer or orchestrate, the opinions that go with a given work” (Miller 1987: 99).

These features could be broadly applied to Weldon’s novels. Accordingly, the obvious openness of their structure based, as it is, on doubling and multiplying the subject, is carried even further in some of her works, to the extent that, for instance, *Mantrapped* or *She May not Leave* display an intentional game of self-referentiality, in which biographical elements of Weldon’s life are placed alongside those of a fictive character in the imaginary worlds she creates. In addition, the narrator in *Chalcot Crescent* is Frances, Weldon’s fictional sister who, having more sexual wiles than her, steals Fay’s boyfriend and husband: “Poor Fay, I pattered after her like a curse, always the envious younger sibling, taking what was hers whenever I could” (2009, 23). And, to complicate things even further, Frances, sharing many features and biographical data

with Weldon, constitutes one of her literary portraits, i.e. a reflection of the authoress. Through the explicit exposure of the contrast between these two spheres —the fictive, and the real one—, the artificiality of art, its parodic nature is emphasized. Interestingly enough, this idea of a literary creation as a distinct exercise of self-reflection has to do with the literary origins of the double, which Antonio Ballesteros in his essay *Narciso y el Doble en la Literatura Fantástica Victoriana* has meticulously traced to the myth of Narcissus. Postmodern taste has carried it even further and modern novels are mirrors of un-ending self-reflection in accordance with the constant deferral which characterises the incapacity to reach ultimate and definite meanings. From all this, we can infer that the motif of the replica or *alter ego*, symptomatic of a dualistic literature adapted to a Postmodern spirit in which ambivalence becomes all-pervasive, is completely in tune and thoroughly embedded in the framework of Weldon's work where irony and parody distinctly dominate. We should bear in mind the dualistic nature of these literary techniques: "both echo in order to make difference rather than similarity" (Hutcheon 2000. 64). However, whereas irony works intratextually, parody achieves its aims intertextually.

2.23. NARRATORS/DOUBLES

Apart from some obvious instances of histrionic doubles among the characters in Weldon's novels, like Mabs in *Puffball*, Ruth in *The Lives and Loves of a She-Devil* or the way Madeleine intrudes in Margot's body and reflection in the mirror, "this dynamic metaphor of the second self" is also at work at the level of narrators. For a start, in her first two novels an effect of duplicity is created by means of them. In *Down Among the*

Women Jocelyn speaks all along in the third person, even when she refers to herself: “So says Jocelyn” ([1972]1991: 206), and, furthermore, she does not disclose her identity until the end of the book. Something similar happens in *Female Friends*, Chloe also writes about her previous life in the third person in an attempt to distance herself from her younger self, the self who “curbs her tongue and her needs” ([1975]1993: 137) for the sake of her marriage, and, moreover, the self who has all but undergone complete erasure. The division between a victimised focalizer and a wiser and more mature version, who adopts the persona of the narrator and who is beyond her husband’s indoctrination, produces a peculiarly ironic and, thus, critical effect all along: “If I love him, Chloe tells herself, I’ll let him do what he wants, and a jealous wife is an abomination; and listening to herself, believes herself. Not for nothing is her mother’s daughter” (*FF*, 172) — Chloe’s mother is represented as being a prototype of contented victim in contrast with Helen who left her daughter in the care of others, generally takes advantage of men and is all the better for it. The comic climax is produced when the long-awaited convergence of both narrative perspectives is reached: “Chloe finds she is laughing, not hysterically, or miserably, but really quite lightly and merrily; and worse, not with Oliver, but at him, and in this she is, at last, in tune with the rest of the universe” (*FF*, 200), just as Oliver’s sisters had laughed at his ridiculous film. Therefore, the vision of the detached witness pertaining to a retrospective perspective and that of the sufferer who has undergone abominable psychological torture overlap in the healing act of laughing of the “negative sublime”. The visualization of the ungraspable abyss between things as they are and as they should be is in this case prompted by the recognition of a stupidity that escapes reason and knows no bounds. The focalizer, the active character, is finally able to see Oliver reduced to his proper size, to apprehend the

depth of absurdity entailed in her submission to a husband she has allowed to become cruel and callous. On the other hand, this narrative has meant a cathartical exercise on the part of the narrator aimed at putting to rest and exorcising the ghosts of what had been her own unassimilable behaviour until that moment.

There are some other novels too which are patterned on the interaction between heroine and narrator in what may be described as a game of doubles or mirrors. In these novels the narrators stand as a kind of fictive metaphors for the figurative malaise which afflicts the heroine and, as we have seen, hardly any metaphor in Weldon lacks literary factual reality –thus creating an ambiguous effect which is the result of a combination between realism and fantasy for the sake of achieving full parodic impact. However, coming back to these narrators who seem to reflect the ailments of the heroines, they are fully-rounded characters and take part in the action and on the same terms as the others, although they seem more affected by their milieu than the rest, to the extent of succumbing to it. In this sense, they bear a vague resemblance to those mad isolated women who appear randomly in novels like *Female Friends* or *Remember Me*. Their very participation in the story means that the account they offer the reader is not about an “objectification,” that might bring about a “failure of relation to the other” (Andrew Gibson 1999: 87), thereby contravening a fundamental premise in Levinas’ ethics. In a manner of speaking, their sin is the opposite: being too sensitive, too much involved in their circumstances has driven them into a state of frustration and physical or psychical decay –they all suffer from psychosomatic illnesses; they are blind, disabled or officially declared mad. We could say that they constitute the heroines’ sensitive *alter egos*, their uncanny extensions. Their susceptibility to the evils that confront the heroines makes them vulnerable where the latter, more practical than them, come out unscathed. For

example, in *The Heart of the Country*, Sonia, an officially declared insane woman, plays the role of conscience to Natalie, a pretty deserted wife. In *The President's Child* the narrator's blindness is a physical reflection of that which ails the heroine, incapable, as she is, of realising that her four-year-long husband is a politically appointed secret agent who has been spying on her and her son from a very close range. As for Hattie, the disabled narrator in *Growing Rich*, she reflects and stands for the inaction of the forsaken place which Carmen inhabits and which hampers her attempts to excel. As such, these narrators, by being extreme and uncanny extensions of their heroines, may be said to constitute their parodic grim shadows or alter egos. They are there as reminders of how the protagonists could end up were they not the lucky, independent heroines they eventually turn out to be. They have acquired the skills and toughness to sort out the obstacles in their way appropriately.

2.24. *The Heart of the Country*: PUBLIC CONSCIENCE

The Heart of the Country begins with what looks rather like an ending: Harry Harries, Natalie's husband, abandons her wife and leaves her and her children "well and truly in the shit, if you'll excuse me" (1987: 1), as well as others, since his departure also means the closure of a factory and throwing out sixteen people with wages owing. Even if Natalie has nothing to do with his decision to elope with Marion Hopfood, Miss Eddon Gurney 1978, to "the Costa del Criminal" running away from fraud charges, she still feels guilty. Before this event she was having an affair with Arthur, the antique dealer and one of the two robber barons of Eddon Gurney. This means that although the new situation of being abandoned "floundering in the excreta" (*Heart of the Country*, 1),

as Sonia, the mad narrator so extremely puts it, is forced upon her, it is a change she had unconsciously sought. In this regard, this abrupt interruption in Natalie's humdrum existence, which somehow brings about the fulfilment of her unacknowledged wishes, resembles once again the cliché so dear to Romantic imagination of the "orphan flight", described by Karl Miller in *Doubles*. The second word, flight, involves here fleeing from a fixed and inauthentic life characterised by psychological confinement. In fact, this flight is seen as a blessing in disguise as Sonia, the narrator, remarks: "And listen, Harry Harris not coming home that evening was at least something *happening*, wasn't it!" (*HC*, 4). It has to do with the opening to the event, with embracing and welcoming the unexpected, in short with Levinas' ethical tenet of "flight from being" (Andrew Gibson 1999: 44), in this case from the narrowness of an existence close to sleepwalking. And when all is said and done, it means an escape from a wasted "half life, as half Harry" (*HC*, 105). As for the word orphan, Natalie, in spite of having children, does not have parents or a close family to resort to when "the worst happens". On the one hand, she has proudly neglected aunts and female kin. On the other hand, her father "had died of bone cancer: nothing to do, the authorities swore, with the fact that he was on the maintenance side of the airforce business, and his speciality the nuclear missile-carrying capacity of conventional aircraft" (*HC*, 20). Noticeably, this is not an isolated instance of impunity towards the breach of safety rules at work in a novel, which, above all, constitutes a corrosive satire against Thatcherite England, "that worn out, sold out, clapped out country" (*HC*, 174). The father of another character, Bernard, who lives with Flora, Natalie's cleaning assistant, in the rubbish tip in Eddon Gurney, also got lung cancer working at a linoleum firm and he was fired straightaway before he could put two and two together and make the connection between his illness and working in an office

placed under the factory chimney.

From the very moment she is left to cope by herself and struggle to provide for her two children, who, by the by, according to Sonia, are “not everyone’s cup of tea” (*HC*, 1), a number of unfortunate incidents start to articulate a tangled web around her in the shape of a labyrinthine structure which works as a trap. As we have seen, this web corresponds to, and is in tune with Weldon’s stock-in-trade suffocating and tight-knit plots. Natalie starts to be cheated by all and sundry. The insidious social network of Eddon Gurney, which is provided here as a sample of a country where corruption runs rife, sees to that and is ultimately responsible for Natalie’s misfortunes. The first institution Natalie turns to after being abandoned by her husband is Coombe Barrow School office, where she meets Sally Bates, who was previously a scientist, though not any longer because she and her husband were forced to give up their research jobs on account of governmental lack of funding. He is now depressed and out of work and keeps torturing and pestering her. Sally is, thereby, extremely unhappy, and, as Sonia rightly says, should definitely refrain from interfering in anybody’s business. Ill-advisedly and through the agency of Sally, Natalie takes her children out of school, in spite of the fact that the regular course of action would have been to contact one of the existing charities, which, “properly approached” would have been willing to pay their fees because, after all, “the rich look after their own” (*HC*, 64). On the other hand, neither the bank manager, since it would go against his interests, nor, for some abstruse reason of his own, the lawyer –perhaps he is a friend of the bank manager or of Angus and Arthur, the robber barons of Eddon Gurney– tells her that she is legally entitled to keep her house and that she could start proceedings to put a stop to the sale of her “nice new bungalow” by virtue of the fact that it was her only place of residence. Against all

fairness, Arthur profits from Natalie's naivety and helplessness in the face of adversity by cheaply buying Dunbarton, Natalie's house, with Angus consent, for sixty thousand pounds. The former wants to move his wife Jane away from the flat they share above the shop in order to save her from suffering –she keeps unsuccessfully searching for traces of his sexual infidelities, in the shape of hairs and the like in the back room of his shop, where she rightly surmises the encounters take place. However, this new arrangement does not suit the couple in the end, and Arthur goes on to resell it for a hundred and twenty pounds two months later. To top all this, Angus, who is in charge of auctioning Natalie's property, starts by giving away most things for a trifle out of spite because she refuses to go out with him.

This places Natalie at the mercy of the NHSS, which is enough to drive a woman crazy, and, in fact, this is what happens to Sonia, the narrator. Her story runs somehow parallel to that of Natalie. She was left by her husband on the grounds of her infidelity. He was artfully awaiting the occasion to catch her *in flagrante* and ditch her, notwithstanding the fact that he was also being unfaithful to her. Thus, both women find themselves in similarly desperate positions. Depending on the NHSS for social benefits involves falling into a state of abjection, entering the second Gothic maze of the novel, not the one created by the plot, but the one represented by the asocial, the underworld, the one inhabited by “the rejects of the system, the rejects of marriage, the unsupported mothers who live off the state” (*HC*, 44). Finding one's way around the NHSS institutions is a full-time occupation for these women requiring a great effort on their part to learn the ropes of its bizarre and absurd workings. Natalie is first taken aback when an interfering clerk, Mrs Tuckard, a friend of Jean's, Angus' wife, reproaches her for having been unfaithful to her husband: “You can't mess up your life wilfully and

then expect the state to step in and pick up the pieces” (*HC*, 113) –the narrator is at pains to point out that Mrs Tucker’s prim attitude may be attributed to the fact that she was never offered the chance to be unfaithful. We are shown incompetent prissy female officers prying into the private lives of these women living with the children in council houses and reduced to “arguing with the State as to whether or not this fat creep with the beard was a full-time or part-time lover” (*HC*,135). When Natalie leaves the hostel assigned to her and her children in the middle of the night –Sonia explains that it is the kind of place created in order to deter you from returning to it– she goes to live with the latter in the house provided to her by the State. Sonia gives her indications as to how to get around the different departments. She tells her the little tricks, for instance, that Tania Rostavitz is the only efficient welfare officer in Gurney, but that to get phone access to her you have to pretend to be her sister Anna –this much Sonia has learnt, that she has a sister called Anna– otherwise, you cannot contact her. Anyway, in spite of all this, you may not succeed, as it is an enterprise of a very hazardous nature and these workers are always on holidays or on sick leave. This satiric description of the DHSS culminates with the picturesque addition of the peace convoy, whose members, an ever increasing number of people who cannot afford a fixed abode, usually wait in front of the DHSS offices. The convoy is understood to be premonitory of what is to come: a milieu in which “the travelling dispossessed roam the countryside, living off what they can” (*HC*, 116).

The trenchant satire of this novel is an index of its social concerns. The anxieties produced by an unjust state of affairs, with a definite leaning towards female issues, is a predominant feature in *The Heart of the Country* nearly overriding all others, as opposed to other novels by Weldon. The picture of British society under Thatcherite rule is as

grim as it can get. Sixty per cent of divorced men who are supposed to pay maintenance to their families refuse to do so. Twenty three per cent of children are fatherless and slumming in council houses. One child in thirty is physically handicapped and funds for research are practically non-existent. And amid this sleazy environment of poverty-stricken beings, some dishonest robber-barons keep enriching themselves, and profiting from the miseries of their fellow-citizens to the extent that by the end of the novel the female main characters organise a protest float for carnival where one of the symbols is an enlarged postal draft which goes to show that: "Landlords live by the DHSS here in the heart of the country" (*HC*, 190) while taking advantage of helpless women, as shown in the case of Natalie. In spite of professing to be their friends, they do not hesitate to cheat her out of home and possessions. Furthermore, at the end of the novel they escape from a jail sentence by the skin of their teeth. They close Avon Farmers Trading State, a murky enterprise of theirs consisting in a warehouse where illegal agricultural chemicals were sold contravening EEC regulations and risking public health, just in time to avoid prison.

Amid this background and despite all sorts of difficulties which keep cropping up, Natalie tries working at the quarry accepting a pittance for payment. Yet, since she does not earn enough to live on, she ends up yielding in to Angus' insistent proposals of setting her up in an apartment. This makes Sonia reach the conclusion that a woman in this grim milieu is left only two options: "She could live off the State or live off men" (*HC*, 174). Consequently, when Natalie, Sonia and some other women, most of them dependant on the DHSS, are employed to build and take part in a carnival float aimed at combating the unpopularity of estate agents, developers, ..., and the theme happens to be nice small houses with pretty housewives waving feather-dusters, the irony is

conspicuous. The blatant contrast between the blissful scene of the fifties which is to be recreated in the float and the world of unemployment and deserted wives these women inhabit becomes frightfully sinister. Moreover, to make matters worse, the float is to convey the images of “a kindly estate agent”, Arthur, and “a noble auctioneer”, Angus. However when Jane, Arthur’s wife, appears one day weeping on account of her husband’s infidelities, and Natalie advises her that the best thing to do is not to care, because, after all, men cannot be stopped, the course of events changes radically. It occurs to Sonia that: “while women adapt, and adapt and adapt, men will continue to get away with everything” (*HC*, 186). This is the call to arms these women need to take action and reverse the purport of the float in order to expose the grim reality they are immersed in. Thereby, the intended enhancing portraits of the estate agent and the auctioneer are turned into glaring caricatures in keeping with “the ancient spirit of carnival, when the images of the hated were paraded through the streets, and hung from gibbets, or rolled down the hills in burning tar barrels” (*HC*, 187) and the music chosen to go with it is Peter Seger’s Little Boxes: “Little boxes, made of ticky-tacky”. Not contented with this, Sonia and Ros decide to burn the float to further prove their point. This ends up in the conflagration which accidentally puts an end to Flora’s life: “the virgin sacrifice, so the world could cure itself of evil and renew itself” (*HC*, 194). When the fire started all the women leapt from the float. Flora was the only exception; she remained stunned amid the flames because she had just received from the hands of Arthur a cheque for two thousand pounds. Arthur had performed a moral act for once; he had taken for himself only the agreed ten per cent from the quantity obtained from the sale of a flower painting which Flora had found in the rubbish tip where she lived with Bernard in a caravan. This unintentional death produced on account of Flora’s youthful

capacity for wonder towards good deeds in an altogether corrupt world is interpreted as good omen by Sonia. In her view, it presages better times and renewal and, although Sonia regrets this death deeply, in the long run it will cure her of the overwhelming hate that had taken hold of her.

Consequently, we should not be misled by the apparent one-sidedness of the incendiary episode, the “visual fix” above related. Emphasis is made in the novel on the fortuitous character of the decision to “stop colluding” with an unjust and unreasonable state of affairs and transform the float: “If Jane hadn’t come weeping and wailing to the barn at Avon Farmers, if Natalie hadn’t been so complacent, perhaps what was to happen wouldn’t have happened” (*HC*, 186). We are not talking here of a uniform biased vision of reality. On the contrary, this is one of the countless examples illuminating the purposeful randomness and haphazardness of the actions in novels which are as often as not structured following a sequence of “*What ifs*”, as has previously been shown. This undecidability or contingency of the plot reflecting the playful character of Weldon’s novels, is in line with the need to reject the concept of self as undivided, by doubling or multiplying the protagonist, and, hence, to flee and be in flight from the conception of a single main character. This indeterminacy accounts for the constant play between narrator and main character; they are inextricably linked throughout the novel, at least in Sonia’s eyes: “Of course Sonia loved Natalie. Of course she was in love with her. Wouldn’t you be?” (*HC*, 127). They share similar experiences and, for a time, Sonia’s house. However, Natalie’s attitude to life is more active and practical than Sonia’s. In fact, Sonia’s vision appears too partial. A narrator who is forced by her psychiatrist to refer to herself in the third person as “an exercise in ego reduction” (*HC*, 17) clearly needs counterbalancing. She ends up in a loony bin seeing a

“charnel house inside [her] head, the spitting devils and the piles of dead human flesh” (HC, 88). Besides, once she is finally declared sane, she refuses her psychiatrist’s proposal of marriage on the grounds that she has to change the world. This typically Gothic susceptibility to victimisation and propensity to succumb to one’s surroundings has to be overcome. However, we must not underestimate the fact that the social concerns which overflow this novel are hers. She has the public conscience that Natalie lacks.

From the textual evidence offered, we can surmise that if Sonia needs her counterpart, so does Natalie in this novel. Taking into account the fact that she epitomizes Weldon’s stock-in-trade heroine, her attitude should not be underestimated. She embraces the frivolity, the lack of indoctrination and the appetite for life that Sonia so openly rejects. Once Natalie’s children choose to go and live with their father to a villa fitted out with a swimming pool on the Spanish coast, she opts to replace Flora, the pretty victim of carnival and, previous to that, her inefficient cleaning woman. She then goes to live in the caravan set in the rubbish-tip with Bernard with whom she has of late struck up a close friendship. This flimsy makeshift residence might represent all that stands in opposition to the fixity of indoctrination and fascism. It might illustrate the ethical Levinasian “flight from being” I referred to at the beginning of this brief analysis of *The Heart of The Country*, and which requires “the absolute destruction of everything you have ever known, loved, cared for...” (Andrew Gibson 1999: 44). If she started by being a victim: “one of those little dolls weighed at the bottom, the only point to whose existence is that you try to knock them over” (HC, 124), in the course of the novel she acquires the strength of spirit which avoids her being bogged down by feelings, eventually learning to be undeterred by obstacles. In fact, in her desperation she goes as

far as to work in a quarry –Emphysema land– following the advice of Peter that “The Devil helps those who help themselves” (*HC*, 147). In short, she “prove[s] too tough for predators” (*HC*, 46). She conforms to the idea of virtue of the narrator of *The President’s Child*: “Virtue lies in looking upwards, toiling upward, and sometimes joyously leaping from one precarious crag of fact and feeling to the next” (1982: 6). This way, she approaches life with cheerfulness and a positive attitude which contributes to an “inclusive integrity,” that is to say, to a wider field of knowledge and experience. Karl Miller refers to the American psychologists Murphy Gardner (*Personality* 1947) when he says that “blitheness knows more than solemnity” (Karl Miller 1987: 338). Natalie exemplifies this; she represents the perfect candidate in Weldon’s novels to surpass the encroaching and constrictive entrapments of a Gothic experience, to resist the Gothic temptation to remain a victim. However the very existence of Sonia in this novel, the very fact that she appears alongside Natalie representing social conscience, may constitute a proof of hesitation, of a certain tension, and an unresolved conflict in Weldon. For once, she seems overwhelmed by the political excruciating atmosphere she conjures up and at a loss when confronted with the harrowing social depiction she offers: It “takes a mad woman in a loonybin to actually count” (*HC*, 150) the enormous amount of fatherless and handicapped children neglected by an extremely ruthless society.

2.25. *The President’s Child*: THE INORDINATE PROPORTION OF THE PUBLIC

As *In the Heart of the Country*, in *The President’s Child* private concerns acquire public and political dimensions. Similarly, just as the psychosomatic and somehow

deliberate blindness of Maia, the narrator in this novel, echoes the wilful ignorance of its protagonist, Isabel, the fake marriage of the latter reflects badly on international politics. In keeping with this unsettling increase of scale which takes place at all the levels of *The President's Child*, domestic horror acquires inordinate dimensions, to the extent that by the end of the novel Isabel's life is under threat on account of being the mother of the son of the prospective president of the United States, Dandy Ivel. Distinctions seem to blur and the frontiers between the private and the political are vaguely-traced in a novel in which fiction and reality intermingle. In this regard, the comparison between Isabel and a real life woman –Sukarno's mistress who became powerful on account of having carried the president's child in her womb and, therefore had to die with her six-year-old son in a car accident– is made explicit in this work, hence opening its perspectives and simultaneously causing a breach in its ontological existence as a fictive entity. "Perhaps the stuff of thriller fantasy is real: perhaps the whole way of life of the cosily domestic is by permission, not by right?" (*PCH*, 134-35) thinks Isabel in a state of panic, fearing that fiction and reality are closer than what we are inclined to believe. As mentioned above, concepts are not definite or clear-cut and what might seem to strictly belong to the field of fiction becomes real, as in the case of Sukarno's mistress and, vice versa, since Isabel looks like her fictive counterpart. Similarly, the fragile equilibrium of the "cosily domestic" is an enticing deadly trap. Maia loses her sight when crossing the road without turning to look, thus running into a car after a quarrel with her unfaithful husband, Laurence. The transformation of domesticity into a sequel of uncanny events seems to have no end, if Isabel is under threat on account of her son by Dandy Ivel, Maia gave birth to an anomalous stillborn baby which lacked reproductive organs. As for Homer, the American whom Isabel met when she was running away from Dandy

Ivel's henchmen and with whom she later married is no less than an American undercover spy who has been in charge of watching his wife and child for some six years. Paradoxically, their apparently exemplary marriage had been a cause for admiration among the inhabitants of Wincaster Road. Nonetheless, if Isabel is a clear case of obdurate self-deception and she doggedly refuses to listen to her inner needs: "Passion, response, understanding were penned up behind the wall, heaving and sighing to be let out" (*PCH*, 63), Maia deliberately wants to remain blind. Hers is a psychosomatic illness beyond the doctor's comprehension, as he tells her: "I am sure you could see if you wanted to" (*PCH*, 17). She trades her physical integrity for domestic peace: "I have caught Laurence's butterfly nature on the pin of my helplessness" (*PCH*, 47). Now that she is blind, her husband is too busy attending to all her needs to carry on with his customary course of inveterate unfaithfulness. Besides, he is the one responsible for her condition and feels remorseful on this account. That is the reason why she happily opts for "flailing about in the dark" instead of looking life in the face: "I do not feel equal to the responsibility of being whole and perfect" (*PCH*, 152). This bears obvious resemblances to the case of Jennifer, Isabel and Maia's neighbour. Her existence has been reduced to an uninterrupted pattern of pregnancies, she "has frightened herself into this kind of perpetual motherhood" (*PCH*, 69). She might be said to be a comic counterpart of the main female characters and, likewise, paralysed by fear. As a rational young woman with a degree in anthropology, she had decided to work in a nightclub in order to investigate "the sexual nature of man" at a basic level. What she found out there, an overwhelmingly evil behaviour which defied all rationality, scared her for good.

It takes an earthquake commotion for Isabel to be snatched off her trance-like

existence. She begins to be alarmed when her husband Homer starts to accuse their son Jason of being aggressive. This is seen by Isabel as a betrayal, as she thinks he is turning against the boy. Out of the blue, his behaviour becomes strange; he even seems to resent her job. She also learns through Jason's teacher, Mrs Pelotti, that on the days when he is supposed to take the boy to school, since they share the household chores in equal measures, the child arrives invariably late. On the other hand, the similarity between Jason and Dandy Ivel becomes conspicuous on Jason's fifth birthday when he starts pacing up and down impatiently, "head bent forward, hands clasped behind his back". Dandy Ivel, appearing at that moment on the TV screen, is doing exactly the same to the extent that the mother of a friend of Jason's remarks: "For all the world like Jason" (*PCH*, 33). These series of events prompt the characteristic Gothic process of estrangement. Her life with Homer, which has so far offered her protection and safety, if nothing else, suddenly acquires uncanny overtones and turns into a minefield of hostility and danger, and so does the house they both occupy, which in Isabel's precarious state of mind audibly "laughs. You thought it was yours, your friend. You thought you knew me, but see, you don't. One day I may fall and crush you to death" (*PCH*, 30).

When Homer eventually leaves them, she is afraid of losing the sheltered status; the safety of the sound social identity marriage confers: "How could she ever live without Homer, who structured her life and surrounded her personality, and had made her lie-about, sleep-around personality into something so sure, so certain?" (*PCH*, 29). She is, likewise, reminded of the time when she left Australia for England in her ambition to become a successful journalist. On her arrival, she had followed the indications of a rich man she had slept with and who had paid for her First-Class fare, but whose wife was waiting for him at the airport, and shared bed and luxurious

lodgings with an industrialist friend of his for a while, although he never hid the fact that he was after another kind of girls, those who would make an advantageous match. At this stage of life, Isabel even looks back on those days with a longing for a simpler existence. However, the novel clearly contradicts her impressions. In fact, Pete Sikorski and Joe Murphy, two hired assassins belonging to the staff of the dubious Ivel-for-President-Campaign-Committee and left to act at their discretion, decide to kill Vera, a young woman who is privy to something no one should ever know. She has witnessed the momentary lack of virility of the prospective president of the United States while he went on about the lost love of a red-haired Australian. Vera somehow resembles what Isabel once was, that is one of those “wandering girls without wedding rings or property cast out by their families, whose friends are too vague or too high to ask questions” (*PCH*, 124) and who constantly disappear. That same fate could have awaited Isabel. However, unlike Vera, “she made it out of the slime” (*PCH*, 126). As a young journalist, she artfully replaced an old colleague, Gerry Grimble, with whom she sometimes shared bed, in the Concorde’s maiden flight, where she happened to be sitting next to Dandridge Ivel. On that occasion, Joe Murphy and Pete Sikorski had proved to be incapable of standing “between him and women and drink” (*PCH*, 85) and Isabel and Dandy Ivel got sentimentally involved. After a period spent with Dandy Ivel, Isabel is made to feel inadequate, an unsuitable partner for such a brilliant politician by virtue of Joe and Pete’s efforts. She eventually takes a flight back to England, precipitately escaping the threats of the two hired murderers, and meets Homer on the plane.

Even if run-away Isabel does not meet the standards required to become a First Lady, she is suddenly powerful on account of her pregnancy. By the end of the novel she finally decides to impart this piece of valuable information to Homer, which makes Maia

fear for her safety: “She told him on a Sunday night. Most domestic murders happen over the weekend” (*PCH*, 132-33). Nonetheless, although her life is under threat, she does not die at the hands of Homer. He is just another pawn in this complex fabric into which she has been led by her own audacity and surplus energy. Retrospectively, Isabel realises that her colleague Grimble had let himself be cheated out of his Concorde maiden flight by her, his momentary bed-companion. She had taken advantage of his cold and snatched his air-fare in order to grab the opportunity for an interview with Dandy Ivel, as adjoining plane seats had been booked for that purpose. That he had been aware of her intentions all along and had not reacted accordingly is a sign that he considered her ambition “pitiful” (*PCH*, 80). This episode is illuminating insofar as it offers us a glimpse of Isabel’s youthful ambitions. She had left Australia at twenty-two feeling no attachment towards any kin or relative. It was probably useless to stay with a not-too-loving mother, and, as for her father, he had gone to the Vietnam War and remained there with a Malaysian girl for good. Like some of Weldon’s heroines, she somehow conforms to the figure of the orphan so dear to the Romantic spirit and absorbed by Gothic literature. According to Karl Miller in his book *Doubles*: “The romantic orphan has often had to face the consequences of his pride and cheek, chutzpah and hubris: but he has often been entitled to a touch of magic, to lucky breaks and a charmed life. Eager and ambitious from the first, unfazed by his disasters” (1987: 422). In regard to Isabel’s “chutzpah,” as we have seen, she shows as much audacity and temerity in her journalistic career as in her sexual behaviour as a young woman, presenting some similarities with Jennifer’s bold and inquisitive academic research into the nature of male sexuality.

The typical maze-like structure of Weldon’s plots, riddled with hindrances and

obstacles at every turn to make the passage of the heroines really complicated, becomes here an actual conspiracy, in correspondence to the nature of thrillers. The thriller may be classified as a subgenre of the Gothic and, similarly, with its intricate patterns and search for spine-tickling sensations puts into question the standard concept of Western subjectivity. The conspiracy-plot starts to unfold when Homer accuses Jason of aggressiveness and advises Isabel to visit a psychiatrist. Isabel feels that if her son is “in turmoil,” she will have to delve deep into her relationship with Homer. She ends up disclosing the identity of her son’s father to the psychiatrist. The latter, who, just like Homer, is on the payroll of the Ivel-for-President-Campaign-Comitte, raises the alarm by reporting to unscrupulous Pete and Joe that Isabel is breaking down and that there is a very likely chance that she may start revealing to all and sundry who had really fathered her son. Furthermore, an issue of the women’s magazine *Cosmopolitan* shows a photograph of Jason together with Isabel and Homer in an article on media couples while on the next page a feature on Dandy Ivel appears, thereby bringing out the resemblance between father and son for the entire world to see. To make matters worse, Grimble is vindictively spreading the rumour that Isabel and Dandy Ivel were sentimentally involved in the past and that Jason is their son. Consequently, in lieu of the traditional physical confinement of Gothic literature, Isabel is trapped here somewhat differently; she is cornered and at bay, subsumed in an insidious and encroaching net of connections and links: “we move in separate but interconnecting tracks, like circuits in Jason’s model railway. We never really get away with anything” (*PCH*, 77). And, as mentioned above, this time the suffocating tight-knit plot is mostly constituted by a conspiracy, in this case set up by the political apparatus established around the pompous-sounding Ivel-for President-Campaign-Committee. By the end of the novel,

Isabel is required to die. She is supposed to leave the building of the IFPC team of psychologists and cross the street looking at the wrong direction at the instance of Homer and her fake psychologist under the threat that otherwise the life of her child would be in danger.

This novel may be interpreted as a satiric portrait of women's witless acceptance of even the most incoherent masculine behaviour. As we will see, Weldon clearly explores the baleful consequence that women's involvement with men may have –they do not always emerge from it unscathed– only to prove the absurdity of it all. Maia regains her husband the moment she becomes blind and enters a sphere of experience where not even her husband can follow her, an area where “fear, confusion and alienation” rule, “a site of darkness horror and desire” (Botting 1996: 81) as the maze is understood in Gothic literature. Being impaired, she becomes a sort of sensor “to the wildness, the uncontrollability, of man's animal nature” (*PCH*, 81), and keeps hearing the “*cris de joie*” echoing through the whole extension of Wincaster Road. Likewise, and, as mentioned above, Jennifer, in her folly, is frightened into perpetual pregnancy after her failed attempt at studying “the sexual nature of man” (*PCH*, 69). As for Isabel, she also enters the maze in the two meanings given here. On the one hand, even though she has a very practical spirit, which makes her a good guide to Maia in the first stages of the latter's blindness and appear to be impervious to “the intangible, the horrific and the confusing” (*PCH*, 10), she eventually becomes vulnerable. In this regard we are told that “she did not at the time understand fear; although later she was brought to it” (*PCH*, 10). On the other hand, as we have just seen, she is the victim of a conspiracy; she is placed in the middle of a labyrinthine-like plot. The dreadful fate that awaits her is the direct result of her sentimental liaison with Dandy Ivel: “Once with Dandy, always with

Dandy” (*PCH*, 199), she reflects grimly and this inescapable trap retrospectively confers their affair ominous overtones by virtue of the powers that this man represents and which are at stake if he does not marry a suitably rich American woman. However, his oversexed nature poses a threat to the political status-quo. That is why the campaign henchmen, Pete and Joe, following Dr Alcott’s indications, intend to combat his promiscuous nature with the same means State Penitentiaries treat sexual offenders, that is, with a mixture of Halperidol and Lithium, disregarding the significant detail that Dandy Ivel suffers from hypertension. Ironically, Dandy Ivel’s dabbling with “the wildness”, the fact that he represents, “the uncontrollability, of man’s animal nature” and his subsequent demise is the factor that saves the day. The unexpected death of her Prince Charming forestalls a similar destiny for Isabel and implicitly invalidates Jennifer’s postulate about the evil character of man’s sexual nature replacing it for one which assumes its absurd ineffability.

2.26. THE DEVIL AND THE NEED FOR FUN

Romantic motifs clearly appear in *Growing Rich* where the theme of Goethe’s *Faust* is appropriated and mockingly refashioned in what may seem a too unobtrusive and free way. This is a tale of three unsatisfied young female friends who want to escape the mediocrity of their hometown, the imaginary Fenedge in The Fens, East Anglia with only three paths to follow at their disposal if they want to steer away from what has been so far their dullsville existence: “You can work your way out, you can sleep your way out,” or, last but not least, “You can sell your soul to the Devil” (*Growing Rich*, 8). The apparition in the novel of a present-day personification of the Devil, Driver, whose

hooves have been occasionally glimpsed, and who has been seen conspicuously materializing amid “a flash of light and a puff of smoke” (*GR*, 152) marks the aesthetics of this work which is an adaptation of an ITV serial for which Weldon wrote the script. The fact that this novel is apparently intended as a moral fable, but that this is done so blatantly that it seems to contradict its high-minded purposes, is indicative of its parodic construction and of the nature of the Gothic genre. The sobriety of a subject of ethical choice and the concern of Carmen, the protagonist for her integrity and her inquisitiveness about the concept of soul are subsumed by and clash against a taste for the garish and sensational. Just as the atmosphere of avowed serenity of Landsfield Crescent, the street where the three female protagonists reside, is tampered “with a dollop of ambulance and body bags thrown in, not to mention clairvoyant phenomena, infidelity, loss of virginity, eruptions of Dark Forces, white-spot in the fish tank, and so on” (*GR*, 41). This penchant for the kitsch is further enhanced by the unflinching insertion of such an anachronic and strident element as a flesh-and-blood Devil in a story of three contemporary teenagers.

The novel begins with a description of the desolation and stagnation which characterises small towns like Fenedge and the dire need to escape them in order to overcome depression and paralysis. This introduction might even be a reflection of the confused and vague state of mind of Hattie, the three girls’ neighbour, who having nothing better to do with her time on account of being severely disabled, has been closely observing their movements since they were born sixteen years ago. She does not appear in the series which preceded the novel, wherein Laura, one of Carmen’s friends, is the raconteur. Hattie fulfils both a functional and thematic role. She is so obviously contrived to act in the fashion of the classical narrator of Gothic stories that we are even

informed of the readings which conform her style. Mentions are made to the books on nature which are delivered to the Handicapped Center as well as to Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Her two stays in Chicago for medical purposes coincide with time of inaction in the novel, whereas her returns are a cue for novelties: "before you could say Jack Robinson or 'Thank God Hattie's back in town', events began to erupt, to pile one on top of the other" (GR, 101). On occasions she impersonates a frenzied narrator and introduces the fantastic element: "When you think you can see through your neighbours' walls what is fact and what is fiction is hard to distinguish" (GR, 7). She also sees herself as the Fairy Godmother, who, among other things, in her huge discontent "set Driver and Bernard Bellamy down the tree-lined road to encounter the girls as they walked" (GR, 8). However, in spite of the fact that in this parodic simulation of a Gothic story there is a standpoint ruled by ambiguity and lack of discrimination between what is real and what is fantastic, her connection to the girls is explained away in very clear terms: Due to a housing policy which was being implemented when the girls were about to be born, the families of three heavily pregnant women and Hattie, on account of her disability, were given priority in the allocation of the flats in the building they now inhabit.

Since the physical paralysis she suffers is metonymic of the prevalent dejection and desolation characteristic of this imaginary forsaken town of recent creation which is universally considered to be "the back of beyond", Hattie and everything that goes with her are an interesting and apt addition to the novel. Thematically, she constitutes a kind of *alter-ego* of the protagonist and represents an extreme case of the ailment that affects the three girls, but most of all Carmen, namely, that of paralysis. Hence, Hattie's disabled presence somehow contributes to attest to the typical proclivity that Gothic

characters display towards becoming and remaining victims. Karl Miller refers to this feature as “one of the principal compulsions of romance” (1987: 379) –as we know, by romance it is meant that kind of literature in which the fantastic element plays an important part. All along the novel Hattie and Carmen seem to be denied access to a full and happy existence. Whereas the mediocrity of Fenedge and the conditions attached to it constitute the encroaching limits that are in the way of Carmen’s fulfilment and satisfaction, Hattie is hindered by her own physical disability. Because of her immobility, she is reduced to becoming an involuntary and trustworthy counsellor to even the most unexpected people in Fenedge, since everyone there seems to resort to her in order to share their troubles and tribulations. It is generally assumed that she has no better occupation and that is why she is believed to know everything that goes on in the little town. In this regard, the unwanted and dubious dignity this genderless condition confers her may be said to parallel that acquired by Carmen by virtue of being a virgin throughout the novel, “the only one of her age in East Anglia” (*GR*, 97) in defiance of her name and in spite of the fact that many people unhesitatingly declare her “spoiled goods” (*GR*, 167). Perhaps Carmen’s questionable reputation is due to her characteristic restlessness, which the narrator attributes to her permanent maidenhood, and which could be said to be tantamount to Hattie’s constant tingling of the toes. This bodily inertia, this nothing ever happening apprehension they somehow have in common develops into a mood of dissatisfaction, unease and despair that they both share and, as a result of which, Hattie considers herself responsible for having conjured up the apparition of Sir Bernard Bellamy and Driver, his factotum, in the girls life, “just to liven things up” (*GR*, 8). Furthermore, Carmen and Hattie’s destinies seem inextricably linked one way or another. When Carmen’s fortunes finally change and she marries Sir

Bellamy, the middle-aged tycoon who always makes the headlines of the yellow press: “their unhappy, romantic hero!” (*GR*, 189), Hattie completely recovers the use of her limbs:

I don’t know what happened. Perhaps the paralysis was indeed hysterical; perhaps the Chicago neural graft had finally done its work; perhaps some disc in my backbone, which had been causing the trouble, was released: perhaps the benefit which flowed from Carmen’s assent to her own female nature flowed into me as well. (*GR*, 237)

Her existence serves, among other things, to highlight the ludicrous theories of the unprofessional local doctor who believes that diseases are people’s just deserts for their errors: “Dr Grafton was convinced I had earned my disability by having undergone an abortion in my youth” (*GR*, 198) —it should be added that this amounts to a glaring case of lack of Hippocratic ethics which is in complete accordance with the tenor of general laxity characteristic of Fenedge—. Hattie is often accompanied by Alice, her carer, who, at eighty three has, after a stretch of three years, finally managed to pass her driving-licence, and causes havoc and traffic chaos all around her, although her well-intentioned main purpose is merely to transport Hattie from her house at the Crescent to the center for the handicapped in Fenedge’s pedestrian shopping zone, the two vantage points from whence she observes the lives of the girls. Alice is strikingly old and her mother even more so —an insignificant newspaper reference to the death of the oldest woman in the country is briefly mentioned towards the end of the novel. The peculiar pair constituted by Hattie and Alice, “the cripple and the crone” (*GR*, 204) as the former calls herself and her friend in reference to her own disability and the extreme old age of the latter, constitute a somewhat hyperbolic, even though comic, presence in the novel which contributes to endow it with whimsical Gothic shades. In the same Gothic vein, the bizarre Sealord Mansion, a two century old construction fashioned following the

vagaries of an Admiral who had it built in honour of his child mistress and which is now a haven for botanists and ornithologists –the rarest species of plants and birds can be found there– is an extravagant remnant of the past which Sir Bernard Bellamy, a self-made knighted entrepreneur who humbly started his career by selling chicken patties, is set on transforming into a hotel, Bellamy House, to the distress of all nature lovers and environmentalist. Once “unspooked,” its door will no longer open “of its own accord on Halloween night to let out the year’s batch of vampires, which would then fly howling and cackling over the fens and the forests and the marshes, bringing the next year’s crop of trouble” (*GR*, 50). Intertextual allusions must also be mentioned, for instance, when it becomes a hotel, Bellamy house happens to be run by Mrs Haverill, who is seen by the girls as a “reincarnation” “of Daphne du Mauriers’s Mrs Danvers in the novel *Rebecca*” (*GR*, 56).

Carmen, Laura and Annie have known each other since birth, they live at the Crescent, “a short, curved road on the outskirts of Fenedge, central to a housing development which really never happened” (*GR*, 6) in accordance with the general atmosphere of inactivity and despondency, of nothing ever happening that pervades the place. *Growing Rich* begins at the time when Carmen, Laura and Annie are supposed to be studying hard to pass their A-level exams. However, their family circumstances do not seem to offer them a very favourable atmosphere for their studies. They are rather a source of conflict and strife to them. Smart Carmen, to everyone’s amazement, belongs to a family of slob. Her father Andy Wedmore, though an amiable builder, has a reputation for making bodge jobs. He and, above all, his son Stephen are always gloating over the naked women who appear on page three in *The Sun*. This drives Carmen mad and on one occasion she responds to what she considers an outrageous habit by

audaciously uncovering her breasts in front of her father and brother at breakfast, thus causing upset. As for his wife Raelene, she is a slovenly housewife who is in the habit of preparing greasy food and not being very scrupulous about hygienic conditions. In fact, on the days which preceded her A-levels exams, Carmen had to look after the rest of the family, as they were suffering from food poisoning on account of having ingested some chicken pies which she had refused to eat because they were past their sell-by date and had been placed in a freezer which Andy had unplugged in order to use his battery charger. Understandably, Carmen rebels against the unmitigated sloppiness of her next of kin and the general impression is that she seems to have been “switched at birth” (*GR*, 14). After all, she is the odd one out in this household. Besides, she is too bright for her own good in this milieu; she always ends up by irritating her parents and brother with her witty remarks and her high and mighty attitude. Thereby, it is no wonder that in one of their constant rows her mother accuses her of being “the Devil’s own daughter” (*GR*, 17). Things do not seem better at Laura’s household. Her father deserts his daughter and his wife Audrey without feeling any qualms –his only concern being that he leaves his fish Kubrick behind– in order to live with a schoolmate of Laura’s who is apparently pregnant by him and who is always bad news, to the extent that the girls rightly call her Poison Poppy. On the other hand, after years of complaining about stomach pains in vain –Dr Grafton, the local practitioner considers all illnesses as a just punishment inflicted by God– Audrey is finally diagnosed stomach cancer. Amid so many mishaps, and in spite of Woody’s zits, she finally yields to the insistent urgings of the Technology student, losing her virginity to him and becoming pregnant the day before her exams. As for Annie’s family, her father Alan is an ambulance driver who sometimes leaves black bags filled with corpses in the garage and her mother Mavis is a clairvoyant of whom

Count Capinski, a prisoner in a dungeon in fourteenth century Cracow, has of late decided to take hold and make the vehicle for his occasional and unexpected apparitions. Annie is finally upset when Count Capinski tries to chat her up.

In line with the parodic vein of a novel where absurdities abound, we cannot speak about proper heroines or paragons of virtue; we might rather refer to its anti-heroines. Thus, apart from the fact that their families constitute a hindrance to their studies, they do not seem to be the model students one could expect –they do not even take the trouble to read Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* when they are supposed to, they just watch the video, and, besides, they copy essays from Antoinette Ridley, who further on becomes a nurse and is in charge of the ward where Annie is to be treated for anorexia. Therefore, the girls fail their exams and become a disappointment to their teacher, Mrs Baker, who, opts for retirement on their account. She had wished for her students all kinds of prerogatives and to dissuade them from marriage, from a destiny of “unpaid work in return for your keep, attended by daily humiliations” (*GR*, 33). However, the moment they fail their A-levels the range of choice drastically narrows. Actually, this dawns on them when they come across Maureen, a woman doing market research who pinpoints to them that statistically they fall into the worst section of her graph: “late school leavers with O levels but without training, and currently unemployed” (*GR*, 44) likely to be pregnant and husbandless within a year and with no chance of growing rich at all.

On the occasions the girls’ dissatisfaction reaches its peak Driver invariably appears in the company of Sir Bernard, since, as Driver himself explains: “It’s discontent brings Driver to your side, quick as anything” (*GR*, 148), promising them luck if Carmen complies to his wishes. However Carmen’s determination is unwavering.

He seems to be there to test her integrity. First he wants her out of the way because Sir Bellamy is infatuated with her and she is not what Driver has in mind for him. Hence, in order to send Carmen away, he transforms her into a beauty so that she is offered the job as an airline stewardess in the Employment Exchange, which she stubbornly refuses. Notwithstanding, as the novel progresses and Sir Bellamy makes clear that he wants Carmen, that she is his foremost wish and request to the devil, Carmen stubbornly refuses on the grounds that this would entail rendering her soul to the devil and a soul is, after all, “a word, a concept which sums up a person’s individuality” (*GR*, 138). The moments in which Carmen seems somehow to yield to the Devil’s intentions everyone’s luck starts to improve. Noticeably, her friend Annie meets a rich sheep farmer from New Zealand, Tim Mclean, and goes there to get married. New Zealand means in this novel “the Garden of Eden, still operating,” even more, flight and escape: “If you want to get out of here, wherever here is, it’s the obvious place to go. As far as you can get” (*GR*, 98). However, when the devil cannot be cheated any longer things start to go really wrong for Carmen and her friends. To mention but a few misfortunes, Annie comes back from New Zealand unmarried, completely worn out after so much toiling in the farm and suffering from anorexia because she has been trying to get slim so that the family’s antique narrow dress, a heirloom that all the McLean brides who could get into it have proudly worn to their weddings, might fit her. Laura keeps getting pregnant, she has had three girls so far, and Woodie does not earn enough money to support them. To add to this, he is having an affair with their neighbour Angela. As for Carmen, she drudges her days away at Peckhams Poultry –in Fenedge either you work there or at Bellamy Hotel, those are the only options. Meanwhile Ronnie Cartwright, her everlasting unrequited love, is going out with Poison Poppy, who has left Annie’s father in order to get

involved with him, not without blaming the former for having seduced her at too early an age. Apart from her liaison with Ronnie Cartwright, she is secretly involved with a married man, Shanty Cotton, Carmen's boss. As a consequence, she is given a position of responsibility in the firm and makes life impossible for Carmen and the rest of the staff. That's why Count Capinsky starts implying through Mavis's mouth that "everyone's luck was bad because Carmen was unnatural and wouldn't sleep with Sir Bernard" (*GR*, 184). Carmen, somehow, at least in the TV serial, starts to think that it would not be so preposterous if she fell in love with Sir Bernard. He is not such an unattractive character, after all, indeed, not any worse than insensitive Ronnie Cartwright, and probably much worthier of Carmen's affections than him.

Count Capinsky, sometimes taking hold of Mavis, may be interpreted as an extremely hilarious treatment of the eventuality of multiple personality, since the theme of split personality is an outstanding characteristic of Gothic literature. This division, this character disintegration is the result of the difficulty to cope with oppressive exterior demands, and even to adapt to different systems of values. It is no wonder that, according to Karl Miller Gothic literature has shaped itself to fulfil the requirements pertaining to "a high incidence of mental stress in the populations which have supplied its readership" (Miller 1987: 376). Hence, if split personality is a subject which appears in abundance in the kind of literature recreated in this novel, Mavis/Count Capinski, despite its extreme peculiarity, is not the only instance of this phenomenon in *Growing Rich*. The girls are constantly in conflict between what they are and what they want to become, they long to grow rich and, as they are told, the chances of that are zero. Above all, the discrepancy between the place where they would like to live and the boring town where they actually reside is complete. In fact, as already indicated, mentions to New

Zealand “keep[s] cropping up” in the novel. New Zealand acquires the sense of “paradise”, that which is out of reach, “It’s the far ends of the earth” (*GR*, 98). In particular, Carmen is the best example of dissatisfaction in *Growing Rich*, she represents a divided character from the start, so, in this regard, she constitutes a clear instance of duality. To begin with, she does not fit in her family, her mother calls her a “little cuckoo in the nest” (*GR*, 211) and she seems to transcend her sphere. Similarly to some other characters in Weldon, she could be considered to represent the prototype of the “orphan” and, as we have mentioned before, according to Karl Miller, the dissatisfaction of the orphan is inextricably linked with a need for flight and escape. Naturally, this Romantic urge to flee goes hand in hand with the concept of the divided-self. The idea of the “hidden self” so dear to the Romantic imagination paved the way and was concurrent with the thesis of the existence of subconscious which those earliest psychiatrists of the second half of the nineteenth century developed.

Carmen clearly shows two sides. On the one hand, the sensuous smart girl of suggestive name who wears her expensive satin red dress to her dates with Driver and Sir Bellamy and who is wrongly considered the “bad girl” of the place. On the other hand, she is originally the girl bogged down by her family milieu – as mentioned above, she belongs to a family of slobs. Later on in the novel she is hampered into a state of prolonged virginity by her moral decision not to give in to Driver’s requests and the paralysis of the narrator becomes a mere reflection of her situation. Her dualism is, thereupon, increased by the dilemma presented to her by Driver, whether to bed Sir Bernard and thereby sell her soul or not and, thus, keep her integrity. However, the latter option does not seem a possible choice, since it would bring about misery to her and her friends and families. When she finally acquiesces to Sir Bernard wishes he is afraid she,

dressed in white as she is, might identify herself with the fairies in the Romantic old paintings on his walls: “faeries, with gossamer wings, dancing in the wind, regardless of the apparent danger of being battered to death against rocky crags” (*GR*, 222). However, as can be inferred from reading the novel, no risk of moral breach is incurred here: In the first place, Carmen and Sir Bernard come to the conclusion that they are in love and opt for postponing the consummation of their union until the day of their wedding. Secondly, and most importantly, perhaps the concept of feminine virtue is somewhat overvalued and, accordingly, Carmen’s decision should be stripped and deprived of strong moral charge, thereby divesting it of judgement and blame. After the fashion of traditional and, in this case, parodied heroines, she has exceeded everyone else by holding on to her moral poise thus long. Sticking to this stiff and rigid position might mean to unnecessarily carry things too far. She has been shown to excel the rest of her pairs, even though this might not be as advisable as it seems. Among other things, it eventually becomes exhausting. In fact, when she finally makes up her mind to date Sir Bellamy she is relieved to realise how truly immaterial the decision is. Her family do not even notice that she is leaving: “She had lost her visibility: perhaps it went with her singularity, and now she was to be like everyone else” (*GR*, 214). After all, bedding Sir Bernard is not such a big deal. The happiness of all those dear to her depend on what she does and she may need a little more flexibility. Clinging to the idea of Ronnie Cartwright, who, suffice it to say, is silly enough to have fallen for and being going out with Poison Poppy, is probably not the best course of action or inaction.

At this point, in order to understand the u-turn effected in Carmen’s behaviour, it would be illuminating to mention Hattie’s case, which, when all is said and done, runs parallel to hers. As we have seen, Dr Grafton, the general practitioner of the area,

considers her disability as the punishment for having made the wrong choice in a quandary: when pregnant she went ahead with a termination which accidentally went wrong –although, as she explains herself it was rather a question of chance. Consequently, she had to undergo an emergency surgery where the physician who was handling the knife happened to be bit by a wasp “mid-stroke” and, as a result, her neural fibre was severed. In addition, irony of ironies, taking into account the renown and hard-earned popularity of the doctor involved in this unfortunate accident, she is asked to keep quiet about this mishap, as they intend to make a film about him. Hence, understandably, she acknowledges that she is “preoccupied with concepts of ‘lucky’ and ‘unlucky’, and the ethical links that join them. ‘Lucky’ to be alive, ‘unlucky’ to be paralysed; ‘deserving it’, as Dr Grafton would say. But deserving what? The luck or the unluck? Forget it” (*GR*, 205). Furthermore, once Hattie has recovered the use of her legs once again, she recognises her paralysis might have been a hysterical and self-inflicted one. Therefore, her sense of guilt could have been responsible for driving her into what has been seen all along as a punitive and deterring condition. Once she is released from her physical and, above all, psychological immobility she can lead a free and fulfilling life, just like Carmen.

The presence of Sir Bellamy and Driver in the novel is the pretext for a burlesque refashioning of a myth of Romantic stamp, that of Faust. “If you see Driver as Mephistopheles and Bernard as Faust you’re getting somewhere near it” (*GR*, 4). In this regard, this reinterpretation of the myth is glaringly banalised and purposeful reduced in scope. Sir Bernard Bellamy is not so much the intellectual overreacher as a man weary of money-making, whose talents would simply go to waste and be underutilized without Driver’s intervention. His “shrivelling soul” so coveted by Driver is compared to “as

mad a waste as letting a 5 pound peach from Harrods wither forgotten on the shelf” (*GR*, 4). However, in spite of his withering soul the treatment given to this character seems rather benign. He is reminiscent of Goethe’s Faust who “was engaged in earthworks: moving mountains and so forth. Employing an army of workers: irrigating dust bowls, making the desert bloom: putting right what God had neglected to do” (*GR*, 209). In fact, he represents the progress so sought after in Fenedge. When he converts Sealord Mansion into Bellamy Hotel new jobs are created for the inhabitants of the small town – Annie meets her suitor from New Zealand while she is working there– notwithstanding the irreparable damage done to the environment and the fact that the stigma of an abode created for unhallowed purposes still lingers in its restaurant, where the guests “felt scratchy and difficult through their meal, and often had indigestion afterwards. The point being that it was in this room that the First Sealord had held his disagreeable orgies” (*GR*, 123). Something similar happens with the Eastern Scheme, a strategy devised by Bellamy Scientific Enterprises for the sake of averting the worst of two evils, that is, to prevent the inexorable flooding of the Eastern Seabord by raising the land levels and taking advantage of this to create a series of yacht marinas. As it is ironically pointed out: “so what if the black and white oysters catchers would never again stream sedately by, to be overtaken by the swifter bar-tailed godwit and the grey plover; soon all would be forgotten and the yachts of the rich sail sedately by, also a beautiful sight” (*GR*, 192). Once more a dilemma, this time a public and far-reaching one, is presented in the novel. For this large scale venture Sir Bellamy assumes messianic powers and starts to rave about reshaping nature and doing God’s job. The homeless and unemployed hail him as a saviour. However, the landscape is filled again with destructive tractors alongside earth movers and this time, despite their great disparity of interests, the campaigners of

Save Our Past join the environmentalists in their protests, since a Bronze Age settlement with its graveyard as well as Roman remains have been unearthed only to be smashed and wrecked by the bulldozers again. With the implementation of this scheme Sir Bellamy stands for that sameness and predictability so beloved to the devil and so abhorred by Carmen all along the novel: “All agreed that the site had been hard-cored, that is to say spread with aggregate and rolled to provide a flat, dark grey, dead surface, empty of all animal and plant life,” which all in all constitutes no less than a “useful and universal flatness” (*GR*, 241). However, it is not so clear that Sir Bellamy has taken sides with the devil. Carmen implores him to put a stop to his dementia and reduces the magnitude of the project to its proper size: “What are you doing really? Spoiling a few acres, unsettling a few birds” (*GR*, 245). Besides something good seems to have come out of it; Mavis, the clairvoyant swore to have seen the spirits of the buried in the ancient site “streaming off towards the west, white, like liquid gossamer, released, leaving the place which had held them captive for so long” (*GR*, 244). Consequently, the insistence on practical concerns in this novel is remarkable and in glaring contrast to what is to be expected from a remodelling of the myth of Faust, thus offering us “a consideration of the material universe which challenges and undermines the purity of idealism” (Moers 1977: 98). I have appropriated here words by Professor Kiely, as quoted by Ellen Moers, referring to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, aware that the analogy may sound highly improbable. However, one of the most conspicuous features of *Growing Rich* is that idealism is never devoid of its mundane side, a significant amount of practical spirit accompanies it.

As a parodic contrivance, this novel is presented in terms of a moral fable: “And perhaps Fenedge is in some way pivotal to the great cosmic conflicts of good and evil”

(*GR*, 35). However, Carmen eventually goes beyond the apparently correct moral stance that she adopts at the beginning. At first, she refuses to be lured by the gifts of beauty and by the rich and famous husbands that Driver offers her, she is adamant about keeping her integrity intact. Before proceeding any further, it would be useful to distinguish between ethics and morality. Though ethics is dependant on and tied to morality in the sense that it has to be governed by the necessary norms and follow the prerequisite commitments commonly agreed for the sake of the establishment of a fair and just society, and herein morality lies, it is, nonetheless, a much more general and open term which goes hand in hand with imagination and creativity. When what is usually accepted loses its validity, the capacity to see things in a different light is urgently required. Gibson uses Harpham's expression when he says that ethics works as a kind of constant "auto-deconstruction" in regard to morality. After all, and here Gibson follows Cornell, "ethics is the excess that cannot be known positively within any given system of morality, the aporia that limits any attempt to collapse the good into positive knowledge" (Gibson 1999: 16). Correspondingly, morality is not to be identified with stagnation. On failing their A-levels, Carmen and her friends, like most girls in her situation, are completely stuck and with no prospects or options ahead of them. When Carmen finally decides to date Sir Bellamy she is merely following her luck, which is not by definition ethically wrong, although, in this case, it could appear a-moral. Nonetheless, the fact that she falls in love with him goes to show that, contrary to the opinion traditionally held among women, ethics and luck may not per force clash.

Even if some of the character portraitures we get in this novel are mostly sarcastic and not very flattering: that of Alice with her extreme old age and excessive clumsiness –her mother is said to have been scared into living for so long on account of

her daughter's skills at making a nuisance of herself–, or that of Carmen's boss, Shanty Cotton with his infidelity to his nice wife..., the only figure who is depicted as totally unpleasant and morally objectionable is Poison Poppy. To start with, she has no female friends, since, according to the girls, she purely and simply spells bad news. When involved with Laura's father she wants to turn her and her family out of the house they are living in. When promoted at Peckhams Poultry she sacks a cleaning woman for revealing that she is going out with Shanty Cotton. In the TV series Ronny Cartwright finds out about her affair and leaves her. Nothing of the kind happens in the novel, where, there being no punishment for her, she is left alone. As for the rest of the characters, the protagonists are seen to require the presence of the "Prince of Darkness" or "Prince of Luck" by their side in order to prosper. When they regret his presence Driver blames them: "for wishing [him] here in the first place; for wanting to get out of Fenedge instead of being content. It's discontent brings Driver to your side, quick as anything!" (*GR*, 148). However, this is not considered evil. On the contrary, discontent is welcome as leading to regeneration and enhancement. In this respect, some commerce with Driver is considered in order if what is required is to "liven things up" and to prevail over paralysis and stagnation. This way, the hindrances that are in the way of a satisfactory psychological and physical development of personality may be avoided. For instance, Driver's influence on the characters may be considered an asset, the changes effected on Sir Bernard amount to considerable improvement. When they meet at last for the first date Carmen thinks he might be a star in an old film: "The old Sir Bernard, pre-Driver, would have had to make do with one of the bumptious minor baddies clustering round the Mafia boss" (*GR*, 221). As for Carmen, we have explained how beneficial her acceptance of some of his conditions turns out to be for her and her friends and families.

Notwithstanding, Carmen and Sir Bellamy do not entirely bend to Driver's demands, they do not rush to have sex as he has expected and, accordingly, following Faust's myth, the tears of a virgin avert Sir Bellamy's death, in a replica of Faust's being saved by Marguerite. The end result of this assortment of eclectic elements is an ethically sound tale in spite of its seemingly dubious morals. Furthermore, the Gothic and Romantic motifs mimicked in this sham moral fable create a kitsch aesthetics mainly aimed at "entertainment", thus tallying with Zweig's idea of the original purpose of Gothic literature (Miller 1987: 350).

2.27. THEGOTHIC AS A CONSUMERIST PHENOMENON

In her essay *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions* Susanne Becker mentions in passing "Fay Weldon's comic-ironic bestsellers" (1999: 4). The categorisation of her novels as bestsellers makes us think of that kind of fiction which is there to entertain and sell easily, with all its connotations of a mercenary nature. On the other hand, there is no denying that it would not go utterly against the grain of Weldon's narrative to employ Clive Bloom's description of pulp: "it is the embodiment of capitalism aestheticized, consumerized and *internalised*" (1996: 14). The fact that he considers pulp "the child of capitalism" does not mean that it is completely governed by the market. On the contrary it entails a constant renegotiation and adaptation to the tastes of the public. Thus, if it is oppressive it is also liberating. Clive Bloom also speaks of the disappearance of high-brow culture as such, since technology has brought culture closer to all and sundry and has, to a certain extent, devalued the concept of creation in favour of that of consumption. Likewise, he elucidates about what we might describe as the extinction of

the “enlightened individual” to whom the classic novel is addressed (Bloom 1996: 227). However, although the subject of pulp fiction has been raised at this stage, it is definitely not because of the lack of literary value in Weldon’s literature. Even if she chooses to avail herself of the genres of pulp for her own purposes, its treatment makes a great difference. In this regard, we are going to highlight an incident in *Remember Me*, a very small part of the past history of two of the main characters, in order to show how Weldon deals with her subject-matter and the depths reached in what could otherwise be an optimistic and unpretentious account. Comparing this episode with those popular pulp nurse and doctors themes renders illuminating results. Margot is a nurse and Philip a doctor. After becoming pregnant as a result of a chance encounter with Philip in the supply room on Christmas Eve when both had had too much to drink, Margot decides to have an abortion in answer to Philip’s parents’ pleas, as, otherwise, they claim, she would ruin his career. The sober and grim treatment of this strand of narrative differs greatly from the tales of nurses and doctors so characteristic of pulp fiction. Nonetheless, going through with an unwanted abortion is not the only devastating experience brought about on account of their casual encounter. There are other baleful consequences: a baby is nearly strangled in its umbilical cord too because they are so absorbed that they cannot hear the alarm. As Margot remembers wryly: “Life in those days had seemed all lessons” (*Remember Me*, 153). Eventually, she has to disgracefully give up her profession for unbecoming behaviour, whereas Philip is considered to have acted as any sexually-active young man would have done. That this event offers itself for comparison with those pulp gothics in which women are in search of husbands may be substantiated by Margot’s mother distaste for her daughter’s job: “in her heart she had always wanted Margot to be a secretary, for then, if she played her cards right, she could marry some

rich businessman or stockbroker who could afford to keep his mother-in-law in comfort” (*RM*, 155). Besides, if very often the endings of her novels may have a soothing effect and work like pulp, nothing in her fiction makes it predictable to the reader, as is the case of more popular readings. She could simply be said to be completely in tune with a literary model, the Gothic that has left its imprint on her literature. This genre that, from its inception has rejected “high art” in favour of a more popular version of it, has traditionally flirted with the market to such an extent that we can speak of a Gothic boom resultant from the selling of an enormous cipher of pulp and commercial paperbacks. The period of the Gothic boom happens to overlap with that of the radical feminist movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, thus signalling women’s increased social discontent.

The influence of the Gothic on Weldon’s literary production is two-fold. On the one hand, her novels reproduce many features of the Gothic, that is, they maintain links of filiation with works of literary value classified as belonging to this genre. On the other hand, perhaps because of her professional origins in advertising, her adaptation to the market tastes looks outstanding and that is something she revels in. In this regard, Weldon’s literary production, insofar as she is primarily known as a writer of best-sellers, resembles the Gothic in its commercial aspects and as a market phenomenon. Besides, at this point, we should bear in mind that the initial aim of this literature was the pursuit of entertainment. In *Auto Da Fay* Weldon professedly boasts of a purposeful lack of discrimination between low culture and high culture which sometimes results in a taste for the kitsch in her novels. As she unambiguously declares : “I like blockbusters out of Hollywood, thrillers, gold taps, country music, Chinese takeaways, kidney dressing-tables and coca-cola.” She is aware that “people wince” (2002, 141). In

reference to this loud and flashy aesthetic taste connected to the conception of literature as spectacle, two images of *Growing Rich* come to mind. In one of them Carmen, the protagonist is sitting in a sports coupe with Driver, a personification of the devil, and behind them are incomprehensibly sitting the three suitors Driver is offering Carmen: royalty —“Red carpets wherever you go?”, a diplomat— “And the gift of tongues for you thrown in,” and a star, Rollo Hopper —“You could be a star” (1992: 164). In the other image, Driver enters a place and, since it is raining outside, he is soaking, when he shakes, sparks fall, instead of raindrops, and make small black holes on the floor. The garishness portrayed in these two scenes is in accordance with a literature which is not alien to excessive and flamboyant ornamentation. Being one of its constitutive elements the use and abuse of “anachronism and counterfeit” (in Mulvey-Roberts 2009: xxi), the Gothic genre is patently in breach of the postulate of the purity of art.

The extravagant ending in a novel like *The Shrapnel Academy* denotes a fondness for theatricality symptomatic of a histrionic conception of experience in which life is approached through a spectacle-oriented attitude. Even if there is nothing else to relate this novel to the Gothic genre, the inclination towards a gaudy and fanciful aesthetics employed in its melodramatic denouement and which overrides any other criteria shows a great affinity to it. Among other factors, we should bear in mind that, in the words of Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, “the Gothic novel emerges at about the same time as opera, melodrama and the circus, since all evoke a highly emotional response to the modern world which includes laughter as well as fear” (in Mulvey- Roberts 2009: 109). The conflagration that puts an end to three hundred and thirty one people and which erases the Shrapnel Academy from the face of the earth is of a hybrid nature, it partakes more of the sensational and absurd, even somewhat bordering on slapstick

comedy, than of the tragic. It may seem an abrupt end and an anticlimax to what might be taken as an anti-militarist manifesto based on the irony of a narrator who as good as mentions cooking recipes and massacres in the same breath and whose praises produce on the readers the opposite effect to that intended. As we can infer from the quotation below, the tribute to Gustavus Adolphus for leading us into the Age of Gunpowder is of a dubious nature, to say the least:

The casualty rate remained high, at 30 per cent for those he defeated and 20 per cent of his own victorious troops blown up, slashed, or trampled by the hooves of artillery of both sides, but it was with Gustavus Adolphus that the Age of Gunpowder really got under way. (*Shrapnel Academy*, 70)

All the excursus devoted to extol military geniuses have the same result, they invariably backfire, which is, after all, what happens at a narrative level: an ostensibly meaningful tale of third world versus civilisation combined with a travesty against war is bathetically put to an end on account of some misunderstandings and misjudgements. The blast at the conclusion of the *Shrapnel Academy* is explicitly compared to the explosion of nearly nuclear proportions that took place in 1813 in Fort York, Canada, during the American invasion: “Both sides sat down together and wept. This was not what they had meant at all” (*SA*, 194). *The Shrapnel Academy* is set in a country house, a teaching institution devoted to military studies named after Henry Shrapnel, the inventor of the exploding cannonball. About thirteen people gather for the weekend in this mansion where even the rooms have names of “famous battles, kings or generals” for the eve-of Waterloo dinner –the next day they are to attend the lecture on Wellington that General Makeshift’s is to deliver on the anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo–. The conflict that arises in this bellicose atmosphere –an excessively loquacious and intrusive narrator provides the reader with all manner of details regarding military history and

brilliant tacticians— is the result of a chain of misunderstandings and it significantly originates between the haves and have-nots, between those who are on opposite sides of “the green baize door”, the guests invited to dinner and the immigrants from Downstairs. The basement of the mansion house or “the warrens below”, so described because they accommodate several hundred souls “of every race except Caucasian” (*SA*, 38), an ever increasing number since “babies were born, spouses shipped in, partners acquired, runaways sheltered” (*SA*, 54), are the servants headquarters. Joan Lumb, a colonel’s widow in charge of the Academy is only aware of the existence of some thirty people as members of the staff. Acorn, the undisputed leader and “uncrowned king of the downstairs domain” (*SA*, 53), is accustomed to sending some of the money allocated for the kitchen to a revolutionary organisation established in Lebanon where he was militarily trained. Likewise, he is believed to keep some amounts of cash for himself. Consequently the rest of this great host of servants has to make do with very little indeed in order to survive. This is the perfect milieu of discontent for Acorn’s inflammatory and psychotic speeches triggered by the death from childbirth of Miriam, a young woman from Sri Lanka. Inverness, a refugee ear surgeon from Pakistan does not have the means to perform a Caesarean and Acorn refuses to send her to a hospital and run the risk of a police investigation and subsequent deportation of all and sundry. He blames her death on the privileged from Upstairs. Acorn’s violent tendencies are put to the test during dinner when Joan Lumb’s sister-in-law is afraid of what may be happening to her dog, Harry, in the servant’s quarters as: “You know what these people are like. Some of them actually eat dog!” (*SA*, 112). This is the cue Acorn needs to have Harry killed and for his meat to be cooked and included in the night sandwiches which accompany the cocoa. While Acorn goes unwisely upstairs in order to serve the sandwiches —he cannot resist

the temptation to see the enemy eat dog meat, Inverness and others successfully try to convince the rest of the under-privileged cohorts of the wrongness of Acorn's course of action which will inevitably lead to conflict and destruction. Acorn's integrity of character comes under question when it becomes apparent to everyone that having raped Miriam, he is the only one responsible for her death. Hence, he is awaited on his return and finally reduced and straight-jacketed. He is forced to intake the neuroleptic drugs they proffer him and his mouth is dubbed with the scum taken from the stockpot in which Harry—the dog—has been boiled so that the next day Joan Lumb may clearly see his dubious mental condition and take the necessary measures. However, in an atmosphere where everything is seen in terms of warfare the conflict is already served. In the scuffle to reduce Acorn they unwittingly sever the telephone wires which connect Upstairs to Downstairs. On the other hand, those Upstairs try to ineffectually open the door the wrong way, thereby thinking they have been purposefully locked in and that no contact can be established with Downstairs. The feeling of helplessness is increased by the power cuts and the snow storm which is starting to isolate them from the rest of the world. Besides, the stockpot with Harry's remains has been left burning in the basement during part of the night and the stench of charring bones which comes through the dining-room chimney is already unbearable. Murray, an old hand who sometimes works for the CIA, others for the M15, but who, in spite of his outstanding bravery and prowess has a weak stomach, starts retching and confirms what is now evident to all: they have eaten dog meat. Amid an authentic military story of annihilation recreated by the narrator—she offers the reader an account of the Retreat of the Grand Army and disastrous defeat of Napoleon troops in the inclement Russian winter—we witness the offensive proceedings adopted by those from Upstairs. One of their first measures is to

throw the reporter Mews down the laundry chute because, having been invited under the misapprehension that she worked for *The Times* when in fact she works for *The Woman's Times*, she constitutes a subversive presence there. Ivor, the Colonel's driver also goes to her rescue down the laundry chute. After all, neither of them fits in there, since both are working class and outsiders. When the novel is coming to an end the narrator alludes to another historic military catastrophe: the explosion of gigantic proportions of Fort York, of which it is said that "it was no war, it was disaster. It was not planned, it was an accident" (SA, 194). This encapsulates what is going to happen in *The Shrapnel Academy*. The offensive from Upstairs includes the launching of some grenades which Baff has in his possession. However, he is a salesman, not a technician, and the blast from the grenades ignites the rest of the miniaturised and very sophisticated weaponry carried in a knife box which he has neglectfully left open. The resulting explosion is so enormous that it melts the snow "across one-mile diameter". Only Mews and Ivor survive because they have landed in a section of the house which remained intact, "a later Victorian addition". However it would be difficult to refer here to a tale of retribution. The indiscriminate death of some three hundred people may be regarded as an arbitrary ending by all standards. It may be said to be of the same nature as the accidental and unintended explosion of Fort York. It is a farcical and shocking closure to an incendiary plot focused on racial social and gender issues. It entails deferring the adoption of a dominant logic, whatever that may be, and the incorporation of a genre which prioritizes the adoption of convoluted and extravagance aimed at impressing its public over a commitment to accepted truths. Hence this melodramatic and sensationalist ending endows the novel with its ambivalent spirit and makes it challenging and provocative.

Susanne Becker in her introduction to *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions* mentions that “in its both sensational and provocative form, the gothic functions like pulp” (1999: 1) and that it thrives in an era of “globalised entertainment culture”, which gloats on scandal and lurid details and any kind of stimulus. In this line would also be the ending of *Life Force*, which is about the burning of a loft, exchanging couples and a woman who is saved at the last minute from being electrocuted in a bath when her long-disappeared husband finally comes to her rescue. Another factor which contributes to render misleading resonances of pulp to her fiction is her constant appeal to mass culture, attracting the readers to a common market ground, thus entering a game of seduction with them, as when, for instance in *Leader of the Band*, the narrator tries to appear “somewhat pure and disdainful”, in short “princess Grace-ish” ([1988] 1991, 9). This inviting effect is encouraged further by Weldon’s narrators who very often address the narratee in an explicit and obvious way, as if winking at the reader. Novels like *The Hearts and Lives of Men* or *The Shrapnel Academy* could provide innumerable examples. There are more tactful instances in other novels, like *Leader of the Band*, where the contact with the narratee is established less often and in a more subtle way, as when Sandra talking about the mad in says that they “can propagate very well *thank you*” ([1988] 1991, 36-37).

2.28. THE UNCANNY MEANING OBJECTS MAY ACQUIRE

When all is said and done, Weldon seems to relish playing by the rules erected by a consumerist society. In fact she has no qualms in turning her readers into consumers, not just consumers of literature but also of any market product that sells. The

best example of the case in point can be found in her novel *The Bulgari Connection*, the writing of which was commissioned to her by the Bulgari firm on condition that she mentioned their jewels at least twelve times and there is no doubt that she excelled at this task. Moreover, I would go as far as to say that the rest of her fiction also displays remnants of her publicizing skills, of her long-standing habit of luring people into buying things. Objects are identified by their trademarks and this enriches the narrative with unsuspected nuances and meanings. For instance, the reader can surmise that the novel the protagonist of *The Stepmother's Diary* is writing is of a certain quality on account of the fact that it is kept in a bag belonging to a Waitrose supermarket, representing a more selective taste than would indicate, let us say, one from Tesco, a cheaper and more popular chain of supermarkets. The obscene photograph of a threesome in *Trouble* has but one redeeming quality, to wit, that it is a Polaroid and quickly fading. Similarly, in *The Bulgari Connection* Doris Dubois wants a portrait of her wearing a classic Bulgari necklace belonging to Lady Juliet Random in order to become as likable as its owner. When the portrait begins to disintegrate the comment of Lady Juliet is that her necklace should not keep such disagreeable company.

Objects speak volumes, but, they do not always make beautiful stories. In *Chalcot Crescent* published in 2009 and her last novel so far—there are risks involved in this assertion, as there always seems to be another novel following suit— we are rendered an anticipatory portrait of England in the aftermath of the Economic Disaster of 2008 and the Crunch lasting from 2009 to 2011 after which comes the Recovery of 2012 only to be followed by the Bite, characterised by a *dirigiste* government which is oppressively in control of all the individuals' movements in a society in which consumerism has ceased to exist. The narrator in *Chalcot Crescent* mentions in passing

that, for instance, she had already seen trouble ahead in 2005 when buying at a garage “a bargain from China, only 99p —what looked like a six-inch long cigarette lighter with a little compass set into the handle” (*CHC*, 208). She and the boy at the petrol station tried to speculate about the real utility of the hybrid gadget without coming to any sound conclusion, but, as the boy pointed out to her: they make it and you buy it. An economy where the transaction of futile contraptions is a common practice bespeaks disaster and is symptomatic of a shaking global equilibrium. The economic debacles which can be predicted on account of this kind of circumstances elicits the grim picture of the future rendered to us in this novel, which, let us hope, may turn up to be more cautionary than prophetic.

However, more in line with what we might describe as vintage Weldon, the way some items are highlighted and filled with meaning by later events often becomes uncanny. Yet, this defamiliarisation of what otherwise constitute basic components of a humdrum existence rather partakes of the Gothic. Let us remember the magimix with the slightest trace of a carrot stuck in it left behind by a previous wife bespeaking a tale of psychological torture in *Leader of the Band* because a terribly scrupulous housewife like her would never have left the Magimix in such condition unless she had to run for her life. What is more, it is remarkable the abundance of familiar and everyday objects which fill up, we could almost say cram, her novels and which also contribute to the characteristic tightly-knit effect of the plots. It is even more important the fact that some of these objects acquire such relevance in her stories that the latter can sometimes be read in terms of those items. For example in “A knife for Cutting Mangoes” the knife in the title of the short story is an indication of the level of refinement of Chloe, its owner, since only a very demanding housewife would dream of having knives for so specific a

use. Chloe is the former inhabitant of the house where the narrator now resides as the new partner of Chloe's ex-husband. Jane, the narrator cannot help but admire Chloe's sophistication and taste in sheets in spite of herself and in spite of the fact that Chloe's style differs greatly from her more practical approach to life. It is also amazing the way in which the pretty alarm-clock left behind by Chloe happens to frighten Jane with its clanging noise two years later, as if it had momentarily become a ghostly presence. Jane even thinks that it might be a warning from Chloe. At the beginning of the story Jane shows feelings of complete indifference towards Chloe. However, sentiments of guilt and sympathy towards her stealthily creep in when Jane realises that she is in the same position as Chloe once was. The man she snatched from Chloe may be also leaving her for another woman any moment now and Jane will only leave nylon sheets behind.

In "The Medium is the Message", belonging to the collection of short stories gathered under the title of *Nothing to Wear and Nowhere to Hide*, eighteenth-century Meissen cups, the value of which is to be measured in thousands rather than hundreds of pounds, start to hurl themselves to Oriole, the protagonist. When this account begins the fourth cup has just been thrown. This poltergeist activity started exactly one year ago, on her thirtieth birthday. Oriole is masochistically stifled in an abusive household: She supports her boyfriend Hugh, his brother Clive and pays inordinate fees to a lawyer in order to help Sarla, a refugee from Muslim Bosnia employed in the house, obtain British citizenship —although, taking into account that Clive and Sarla are going out together, the more sensible and expedient procedure would be for them to get married. The two brothers lead a life of comfort working as craftsmen making old instrument, lutes, in the case of Hugh and Flemish virginals in that of Clive. They reside in style and at leisure in an Elizabethan house which was offered to Oriole when she unwillingly accepted the

post of International Sales Director for Dree pill, the morning-after contraceptive. Considering that she would prefer to have children rather than work, the fact that she is employed for a contraceptive firm sounds twisted and ironic. But, still more perverse is the way the brothers insist on setting too little value on Oriole's sacrifice and the money she earns and which is behind their easy lifestyles and do things like, for instance, let her go alone to her grandmother's funeral. In this same line of abusive behaviour, they admire Sarla's intellectual progress no end, though she is inefficient and has neglected the housework for the sake of her studies. Likewise, the fact that she does not deign to help Oriole pick up the pieces of the last broken Meissen cup is of no concern to them. Hearing, as Oriole has, the ghost of her grandmother sigh has had no effect on her so far, but the breakage of the cups has a different impact on her: "If the ghost of my dear grandmother comes to me slapping round my ears, sacrificing everything she ever held dear, those bloody cups, why then I need her around" (*NTWNTH*, 31). These very valuable antiques had been carried by her Jewish grandmother when she escaped over the mountains, pregnant and on foot, from Nazi persecution. And, although Hugh, a lover of relics, paradoxically, dismisses Oriole's grandmother's taste as too *Mittle-European*, Oriole distinctly understands the message the ghost is sending. The blatant unfairness of her position in that household finally dawns on her. When the brothers call their father, a Diocesan Bishop of the Church of England so that he may send someone to exorcise the ghost, Oriole finally takes her leave intending to embrace the Jewish doctrine and meet a nice Jewish boy and have children by him. From now on, the others will only receive news from her through her lawyers.

The attempt to decipher the designs and characteristic of the owners by means of examining the objects that belonged to them was a practice used by Walpole at the very

beginning of the Gothic tradition. In Strawberry Hill, his “little Gothic castle”, he kept a magnificent collection of valuable antiques which he employed as instruments to penetrate the past in his scholarly research as well as in his literary recreations. A similar argument lies at the heart of the story mentioned above: objects convey messages from their deceased proprietors. However, they may also be the best representatives for their wronged possessors, as can be clearly seen in “Santa Claus’s New Clothes”, one of the short narratives published in *Wicked Women*. Dr Hetty Grainger, a therapist, is a supplanter of Audrey in the heart and home of Philip Andrew and she seems to be doing fine. The only scruples her husband has in connection with her are those pertaining to the bed: he is sharing the same bed with her as he had with his wife Audrey for twenty six years. At such a delicate time as Christmas Eve, Hetty is masterfully in command of the situation, presiding over the family dinner and raising Audrey’s favourite glass of wine to the rest of the company —the goblet with a strand of blue in the stem purchased by Audrey at a car boot sale had actually turned out to be Venetian glass to the buyers’ glee. Everything appears to be going smoothly on this festive occasion, but just so. The first misgivings on the part of Philip start when he cannot help comparing the two women’s cooking skills: “Philip noticed that the skin of the turkey was pale, dry and stretched, not brown, wrinkled and juicy as it would have been had Audrey cooked it” (*WW*, 266). But the task of revealing the real nature of Hetty’s position in that household as that of the true usurper she really is, in spite of her embellishing words, befalls Martin, the youngest son, who openly lays her mother’s claim to the objects that had belonged to her until recently: “You have no business sitting there. That’s my mother’s chair” or “those are her plates you’re handing around. You didn’t even heat them”. And, regarding all Hetty’s speeches of family-togetherness, she is a psychologist, after all,

Martin's reaction is: "You talk so much everything's gone cold" (*WW*, 271). As he explained to her mother later on in the phone: "I told her what she was. I saw her off. You can rely on me" (*WW*, 272).

As can be inferred from what has been discussed above, emphasis is both laid on the mercantile value of objects as well as of the meaning they acquire on account of the psychological experience of their owners. Accordingly, this conspicuous commercial or even pulp aspect of Weldon's fiction is not to be dismissed, but rather to be taken into account when dealing with its affinities to the Gothic genre. In this regard, we must bear in mind how Gothic romance became a marketing phenomenon, the Gothic term itself being a selling label, thanks to publishing houses like Mills&Boon in London, Harlequin in Ottawa and Fawcett in New York. In spite of the fact that the peaks of popularity of Gothic or plain romance reading happened to coincide with moments of feminist awareness, it has invariably filled feminist with mixed feelings and they have not been above deriding this kind of female activity. It may be considered that reading this sort of literature does not lead to action; it may even appease its readers' anxieties in spite of being at the same time a reflection of the existence of their unfulfilled desires and cravings. The gap between their aspirations as inculcated by the society they live in and their lustreless existences turns out to be abysmal beyond endurance. Hence it has somehow been agreed that the often greedy consumption of these paperbacks expresses, at the least, the realisation of a lack, of yearnings for something better on the part of their readers and has something of a rebellious and subversive nature. Alison Light says of Gothic romances that "their compulsive reading makes visible an insistent search on the part of readers for more than what is on offer. Consumerist, yes; a hopeless rebellion, yes; but still, in our society, a forbidden pleasure – like cream cakes" (Susanne Becker

1999: 89).

2.29. RUTH: A CROSS BETWEEN FRANKENSTEIN AND GALATHEA

Examining *The Lives and Loves of a She-Devil* sheds some light on the nature of Weldon's fiction. This is an appropriate novel to illustrate how Weldon avails herself of the Gothic in all its aspects. On the one hand, it represents a parody of the popular gothics since it incorporates their motifs insofar as, for instance, Mary Fisher inhabits a romantic Tower on top of the cliffs, but at the same time there are specific references to a Gothic classic, namely *Frankenstein*. It constitutes a complex and intricate reproduction of the formulas of Gothic romances with an inherent satire as to the effects they may have on their female readers, thus transcending the limitations of the popular paperbacks of the genre. First of all, a tone of mock realism pervades the beginning of the book. The husband of the protagonist is an accountant and his strict control over the money spent on the household may acquire sadistic proportions. Every detail is specified in ciphers to the point of exaggeration and we are given a wide range of numerical information, from the distance between the houses of the protagonist and her rival or the supposed value of both of them in the matrimonial stakes to something as ridiculous as the value of the unsubstantial remains of a chicken-filled flan dropped by the protagonist and left by her husband in the form of a "thin film of food," which the latter estimated would be worth some \$2. As for the subject matter, one of the main characters, Mary Fisher, is a successful writer of these popular romances which keep women and, in particular all those belonging to the lowest ranks of society, in thrall. Proof of this is that her novels are eagerly read in "Bradwell Park", the poorest of the areas, which Ruth, the

protagonist, visits and inhabits for a while. Ruth accuses Mary Fisher of lying from the very beginning of the narrative (*Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, 7), providing, in Alison Light's words, the "cream cakes" that the average woman needs to survive. However, on occasions, the escapist experiences which may be obtained in these novels do not give them the required encouragement to go on with their boring existences. On the contrary, they fill them with false hopes which are invariably shattered. That is the reason why some of Ruth's neighbours in Eden Grove "are found hanging and overdosed in the marital bed" (*LLS*, 12). Their expectations, the tenets that sustain them are broken into pieces again and again, as they sadly experiment, for instance, when toiling with the long grass they had neglected "in the belief, dashed weekly and re-born weekly, that mowing the grass is what husbands did" (*LLS*, 19). On the other hand, Mary Fisher epitomizes all the aspirations of these women. She leads a dream-like existence full of romance and luxuries, as if she herself were the end-product of her novels, one of the heroines out of her books. She is also the owner of a High Tower on top of the cliffs. With resonances of the Gothic castle, this High Tower represents her and "it is the outer and visible sign of her achievement" (*LLS*, 71). By contrast, Ruth lives in Eden Grove, a suburban area full of thousands of similar houses populated by approximately the same number of upstart middle-class residents who, as the name of the place suggests, yearn for a better life. All those disillusioned housewives avid for the fairy tale existence they were brought up to believe in and which they have been crassly denied find their equivalent in the cosy houses built in a suburban area which had been "planned as paradise" (*LLS*, 10). Let us not dismiss this equation of women and their houses as a mere coincidence. The identification of women houses with themselves or their bodies as an important feature in Gothic literature follows a natural chain of deduction. Houses

have for ever played a considerable part in women's lives; they have constituted their traditional arena and means of subsistence. Besides, women have taken pride in the care of their homes as their ultimate responsibility. Therefore, it is no wonder that houses acquire such a great role in Gothic literature. Accordingly, they undergo a magnifying process and hence they are subjected to the typical Gothic treatment of estrangement based, as we have already mentioned, upon what Freud describes in his essay on the uncanny, as the "omnipotence of thoughts", that overwhelming precedence of psychical reality over materiality triggered by extremely stressful situations. Interestingly enough, as mentioned before, the German term for the uncanny is "das unheimliche". That which was homely and familiar, suddenly becomes monstrous and hostile. The home is transformed from a female refuge and sanctuary into a prison, from a safe-haven into the threatening dominions of a being previously loved but now turned sinister.

Similarly as to how men have always stood for the symbolic, for everything connected with spirit and society, women are left to stand for nature and the semiotic, i.e., a previous stage to socialization, and thereby they come to represent matter. To make up for this materiality, to fight against this sort of stigma, women have become, to put it somehow, bulwarks of what the norm is, that is, of what is considered *proper* in a patriarchal society. Their efforts have been aimed at bridging the gap between the sphere assigned to them, that is, that of nature or the semiotic and enter the symbolic order or the social. Yet, no matter how hard they try, they never seem to be able to free themselves from their association with matter, earth, flesh, bodily fluids and, therefore, from the charge of uncleanness. As Cixous and Clement have commented "Since woman must care for bodily needs and instil the cultural values of cleanliness and propriety, she is deeply involved in what is *propre*, yet she is always somehow suspect,

never quite *propre* herself” (Susanne Becker 1999: 62). Mary Fisher, in her high tower, seems to have transcended the ordinary run of woman, to have made the wildest dream of any suburban housewife come true. To a certain extent, Ruth cannot help but admire her, she has achieved what is beyond other women’s reach. Free from the common lot she has become “her own creation” (*LLS*, 117). Her physical appearance is in harmony with and enhances her fairy tale existence. Whereas Mary Fisher is a stereotypical beauty, with features described in terms of “bubbly laugh,” “pale hand,” “little fingers” or “pale tongue” (*LLSD*, 45), with Ruth we get a portrait of hyperbolical ugliness. We are told that she is a freak, a giantess and that “she has four moles on her chin and from three of them hairs grow” (*LLSD*, 11). Ruth’s obsession with Mary Fisher knows no bounds. Not only does she claim retaliation for Mary Fisher’s appropriation of her husband, but also all her endeavours are aimed at emulating and resembling her in every possible way. This could be said to constitute an example of what Susanne Becker calls “the mirror-plot of female desire” (1999: 226) so typical of Gothic literature. The plot of *Lives and Loves of a She-Devil* does not turn just around the many ventures Ruth undertakes to recover her husband, but, rather, it is diverted from the heterosexual theme by Ruth’s fixation on Mary Fisher. She is driven by this motif in all her actions and they are indeed extreme. However Susanne Becker mentions that the “sexual” woman is doomed in Gothic literature. In fact some of the most typical classic cases are Bertha Mason and Rebecca. The former becomes mad and is enclosed in an attic in her husband’s castle and the latter has to pay with her death for “being financially and emotionally independent” (Susanne Becker 1999: 88). Accordingly, Mary Fisher’s destiny is to suffer punishment in the hands of Ruth, who seeks to wreak revenge because her husband has left her for her beautiful counterpart and because she thinks she

exerts an evil influence on women:

She set herself up in a high building on the edge of a high cliff and sent a new light beaming out into the darkness. The light was treacherous; it spoke of clear water and faith life when in fact there were rocks and dark and storms out there, and a mariner should not be lulled but must be warned. (*LLSD*, 192)

All Ruth's efforts to keep her position as a perfect housewife have been to no avail. When the dinner to which her father and mother-in-law have been invited and which she has taken great pains to prepare turns out to be a flop, her husband calls her a she devil. She is a failure in what matters most in gender terms, both in her unbecoming physical appearance and in the fulfilment of the duties which are required of her as a woman. When her husband yells at her: "You are a third-rate person. You are a bad mother, a worse wife and a dreadful cook. In fact I don't think you are a woman at all. I think that what you are is a she devil!" (*LLSD*, 47), she is suddenly deprived of the little identity she had left. Since all she had clung to is described as monstrous, Ruth has nothing to lose; she sinks into *abjection*, becomes an outcast and is flung beyond all that is *propre*. This state of affairs is best exemplified in the first step she takes to adapt to the new situation: she seeks sexual encounter with another pariah in her area, Carver. He is the caretaker at the sports oval and he is over sixty. The ladies in Eden Grove want him replaced because they accuse him of being a flasher and of leering at them. When inquired by Carver why she was giving such a step, Ruth explains that she is breaking the first rule, that of "discrimination" (*LLSD*, 59). She thus falls on the side of the border of all that is unchecked, uncontrollable and negative and, paradoxically, she revels in this suppression or demolition of boundaries between the symbolic structure and the a-social one, the semiotic, between what is proper and what is not, which in Gothic terms is hyperbolically seen as the monstrous. At one moment she says that "pain and pleasure

were one, and that to do what one willed was the whole of the law” (*LLSD*, 163), as if there was the need to return to a pre-oedipal, pre-social stage dominated by drives and not by what is coded as proper in an oppressive and encroaching society. To a certain extent, a being in *abjection* is an uninhibited being in a liminal state that undergoes a constant process of formation and recreation, reinventing itself over and over again. This condition stands for everything that opposes a clear-cut identity and an integrated subjectivity, and, although apparently a negative position, in the case of women it constitutes an asset, the only possible starting point for ethical renewal. It refuses and goes against the grain of a totalitarian concept of a feminine unified identity based on the constraints and strictures that have traditionally contributed to gender formation. Thus, when Ruth is cast in the ambiguous, though socially abhorrent role of a she-devil, she becomes what Kristeva would call a “subject on trial” (Susanne Becker 1999: 46). It is interesting to mention the name of the identities she successively adopts, even if it is a repetition of previous chapters: Vesta Rosa, Polly Patch, Georgiana Tilling, Molly Wishant, Millie Mason and Marlene Hunter. This blatant instance of a subject-in-process overflowing the concept of a unique personality might be considered excessive even by Gothic standards. As, according to Susanne Becker, these subjects-in-the-making constitute the classical stock-in-trade model of protagonists in this kind of novels and she quotes Kristeva when referring to the “transgression of the unity proper to the *transcendental ego*” (1999: 46). Obviously, the unity deconstructed here is that of the subject based on the Western conception of identity and articulated on the illusory division of spirit and matter.

Perhaps we should point out the fact that the origins of popular Gothic romance coincide not only with the origins of feminism, but also, and more surprisingly, with

those of pornography. Indeed, women reading those Gothic romances share the same pleasure as their heroines feel being the objects of desire of men and, thus, the illusion of exerting power over them. Traditional psychoanalysis holds that children acquire their identity in the symbolic stage according to the meaning their anatomy is given in a patriarchal society. Bodies become vehicles to express cultural assumptions. Men and women are defined in reference to power, to the dominant signifier, the phallus, as having it, in the former case, or being it in the case of women, that is, respectively, as subjects in their own right or as objects. Historically, women are given meaning through their bodies. Good looks and beauty have provided them with a shortcut to success, since they constitute the speediest access to attain something of such an elusive character as the pinnacle of femininity but which is on everybody's mind. Avid readers of Gothic romances want to make up for what they feel to be their insignificant roles in life and resort to this kind of literature where they look for identification with their fanciful heroines. Whereas Mary Fisher represents the personification of all these women's aspirations, being beautiful and rich in the highest degree and the woman any men would fight for, Ruth holds the opposite side of the spectre. As mentioned previously, she is an extreme case of what is considered obnoxious in women, the only things that give her a certain status or identity, such as her marriage and a suburban house –we are not given very flattering portraits of her unlovable children– have been taken away from her by her rival, Mary Fisher, who, therefore, becomes the focus of her wrath from that moment onwards. If we judge according to fairy tale patterns, Ruth's future is everything but promising, she doesn't have a chance, since all the doors have been closed for her beforehand. As her father in law says; "She is not an ugly duckling. Ugly ducklings turn into swans" (*LLSD*, 33). Ruth, like the most desperate of Mary Fisher's

readers, is hungry for all those things which she can only grasp in her wildest dreams and wants to bridge the impossible gap between ideal femininity and the opposite end which she occupies and which stands for all that is considered monstrous and appalling according to the overruling criteria of gender formation. "I want revenge. /I want power. /I want money. /I want to be loved and not love in return." (*LLSD*, 51) are Ruth's words in the face of her desperate situation. Strikingly, those are the same feelings experimented by those who seek comfort in the Gothic popular romances.

Eventually, she sets out to go through the domestic trials which, according to Kay Mussell, are connected with "the three traditional and interrelated roles of female socialisation: wife, mother, and homemaker" (Susanne Becker 1999: 85) and to which any heroine of the popular gothics has to submit if a happy ending is to be reached. However, the mood in *Lives and Loves of a She-Devil* seems to be somewhat darker than in that kind of literature. In Ruth's scheme of things all kind of jobs are envisaged, even the most marginal ones: "Employment can generally be found looking after other people's children, caring for the insane, or guarding imprisoned criminals, cleaning public lavatories, laying out the dead or making beds in cheap hotels" (1983: 120). Thus, these domestic tests take place on a greater scale. She proves that she can reach professional success by taking advantage of those skills traditionally attributed to women to an extent which surpasses by far the private sphere to which they are linked. With the foundation of the agency Vesta Rose she becomes an important entrepreneur while, at the same time, fulfilling the requirements of many a jobless woman who is in dire need of work or childcare. Apart from this, Ruth herself enters several houses representing different social strata, which become an object of scrutiny in the novel, in order to offer her services and domestic help, but all her energies are focused on getting

even with Mary Fisher. Her ascension in society is only matched by the latter's downfall, which Ruth herself brings about. Cunningly, she encumbers her with a series of responsibilities and family ties in the shape of Ruth's children and Mary's own mother which render her incapable of writing the kind of novels she used to publish and of leading life in the style she was accustomed to. As Ruth finds out: "These days champagne gives Mary Fisher acid indigestion because she can no longer savour each sip, but has to gulp it down before meeting the next domestic emergency" (*LLSD*, 105). She is also emotionally dependant on Bobbo whom she cannot even marry because the whereabouts of his lawful wife are unknown. Ruth had experimented similar feelings in the past: "Sexual thralldom is as tragic a condition in life as it is in literature" (*LLSD*, 106). Fallen from the vantage point of her tower, Mary Fisher is finally reduced to the position of one of her readers. As Ruth's vengeance starts to produce results, the novel registers "the vicarious reading experiences of hatred and revenge" (Susanne Becker 1999: 190) of those who favour the pulp gothics. But this revenge also represents a very Gothic turn. In a game of foils and doubles, an exchange of identity has taken place. However, now that Ruth's professional success is outstanding and has outsmarted her rival and even contrived her ruin, there is something left to do, a test she has not passed yet. Becoming an "impossible male fantasy made flesh" (*LLSD*, 239) will pave her way to the popularity, the sexual triumph required to be powerful in heterosexual relations, as shown in Mary Fisher's Gothic romances.

From the beginning of the story Ruth is determined to change her appearance: "I look at my face in the bathroom mirror. I want to see something different", she muses (*LLSD*, 50). The dissatisfaction of women when seeing their reflection in the looking glass expresses the abyss between their real image and the one they are under pressure to

achieve on account of the existing totalitarian norms of femininity. As Susanne Becker explains: “That the looking-glass shows a different image from that desired by the woman in front of it has become an important metaphor in feminist art for the discrepancy between woman (as produced by the male gaze) and women” (1999: 165), that is the unbridgeable gap that separates women as corporeal real beings and woman as male fantasy, as an abstract disembodied idea of women. In fact, for this very reason one of the feminists in the commune where Ruth resides for a while breaks the mirror where she is contemplating the body she is soon to rid herself of.

Ruth’s apparently innocuous decision to change her appearance acquires disturbing undertones when we learn how harmful and painful the surgical operations to which she willingly submits are. She compares them with the transformation that Andersen’s little mermaid undergoes when she changes her tail for legs: “and after that every step she took was like stepping on knives” (*LLSD*, 159). This physical transformation contributes to the Gothic tone of the novel. Beauty obtained at the cost of pain, made horrendous on this account. It causes that typical Gothic effect of, in the words of Angela Carter, “provoking unease” (Susanne Becker 1999: 152). The feeling of unease is ominously increased when we consider that Ruth goes through all this torture seeking to obtain a complete likeness to Mary Fisher. The portrait of her inordinate obsession accompanies her during the ordeal: “They had a blow-up of Mary Fisher’s photograph, one of those provided by Ruth, projected on the wall of the operating theatre where they worked” (*LLSD*, 231). As mentioned above, Ruth’s hatred for her rival is intertwined with a strong element of admiration which makes Ruth’s longings to emulate her rival partake of a complex and irreverent case of what has been termed as a “mirror plot of female desire” typical of Gothic novels. The reasons for

Ruth's hate have been stated above, but, following the Gothic pattern, there is another contributory factor to Mary Fisher's ruin. When Susanne Becker speaks about the character of Rebecca in Daphne du Maurier's novel, she says that she is still the most prominent example of how hero and plot show her as inappropriate because she is financially and emotionally independent" (1999: 87). Similarly, we knew some sort of punishment awaited Mary Fisher. But this is not what *The Lives and Loves of a She-Devil* is about. After all, when the book is about to come to an end, we have gone full circle. Mary Fisher could feature as a heroine-to-be of any Gothic romance, bogged down by an encroaching family life, but, notwithstanding this, she dies as a victim. Ruth has swapped roles with Mary Fisher to its last consequences. For all those complexities and ambiguities, there is a heroine still standing on the edge of a high cliff, an independent and autonomous woman who can have any man at her command if she so wishes like any she-devil worth the name. The noticeable difference is that she has desisted from writing Mary Fisher's kind of novels in spite of having proved to be as good at it as her. She refuses to send alluring equivocal messages from the commanding position of her tower, because, among other things, her experience has proved to exceed a conception of life based on the values generally held by restrictive discourses of femininity which, notwithstanding their other virtues, still conform the ideology of the popular gothics.

There are obvious elements of intertextuality which connect this story with the classic Gothic of Mary Shelley. She is referred to as "Frankenstein's monster" on several occasions. In the same vein, all the elements break loose, natural disasters are produced the day following or the eve of the major operations either in the form of an earthquake or of an electrical storm full of forebodings reminiscent of the Romantic

novel. However, in Weldon's novel this account of Frankenstein seems to overlap with the original myth from which it derives that of Pygmalion. After all, we are dealing here with the creation of a beautiful woman and even one of her surgeons recognises: "I am her Pygmalion" (*LLSD*, 238). Nonetheless, the result is still monstrous, just like Frankenstein's experiment. The subject of beauty is by now imbued in the Gothic and has lost its original innocence; deep layers of dark meaning have been added to it. We have become defamiliarised with the traditional concept of beauty through all this process. What would seem beautiful in other circumstances now appears grotesque to us, just like the concept of a mermaid with legs. If initially Ruth was a freak because of her physical appearance, now she could still be said to remain a freak because of her monstrous psyche or because of the dodgy methods she has chosen to achieve her Frankenstein-like transformation. In fact the wife of one of the doctors, Mrs Black, protests to her husband: "You and your friends aren't doctors. You are reductionists" (*LLSD*, 239), alluding not only to the horrid cutting down of her size but also to the fact there has been a reduction from the rich concept of women to that of the standard woman resulting from the impositive and totalitarian discourses that rule the norms of femininity. That is why Ruth can now pass the mirror test, being "woman" because she is no woman at all, as is clear to Mrs Black, since Ruth's body has become aberrant in her eyes.

Following Foucault, bodies are disciplined according to a "anatomy-or biopolitics or regime" based on an "epistemologico-juridical formation" which is said to represent the knowledge, the discourse acquired by a given society and which is reabsorbed once more by that society so that this very "apparatus of knowledge" may govern it. Weldon has made Ruth transcend the accepted limits of the "anatomico-

metaphysical register” of the “political technology of the body” according to which the standard female body is manipulated, trained, shaped and maintained, only to make it monstrous. Referring to Foucault, Andrew Gibson speaks of “a realm of physical monstrosity to which belongs the inadmissibility, even the horror or disaster of the aberrant body. This zone is the bodily equivalent – even the bodily representation – of epistemic illegitimacy” (Gibson 1996: 262). Paradoxically Ruth’s body in the shape of Mary Fisher occupies this area of *inadmissibility*; beauty is placed on the level of abhorrence. In this novel Weldon has managed to unexpectedly assign grotesque and monstrous values to standard beauty, which constitutes one of those quintessential Gothic twists and unforeseen developments. Although Ruth is given the happy ending all the heroines in popular romance deserve, there is a very bitter ring to it. For instance, the re-encounter with her husband is nothing remotely resembling a blissful event. On the contrary, the only pleasure she obtains from it is that of torturing him, of causing him pain. We cannot ignore the fact that the way everything turns out is somewhat unnerving in spite of the ambiguity of the closure –as seen above– which is always welcome. There are no risks of any moral impositions involved and this always goes hand in hand with a measure of liberation. However, the explanation for this disquieting ending may just lie in the fact that *The Loves and Lives of a She-devil* constitutes a more explicit exercise of Gothic parody than the rest of her novels, since, apart from its references to a Gothic classic, motifs and the aesthetics of popular gothics are conspicuously absorbed in order to be transcended. It also owes a lot to this genre characterised, as it is, by its taste for ambivalence and its twisted and labyrinthine structures. This is probably the most suitable vehicle to deal with subjects as intricate as those relating to the “bio-politics” governing the construction of femininity.

2.30. *Leader of the Band*: AN ETHICAL EMBRACING OF CHANCE

The ethical tenor in *Leader of the Band* is less ambiguous, more crystal-clear than that of *The Lives and Loves of a She-Devil*. Sandra, the protagonist, lacks the fixity of purpose that lies behind every action that Ruth undertakes as well as her obsession with a single body which renders the ending so disturbing. That Sandra can also be categorised as one of those subjects-in-process or composition so beloved of Gothic literature is illustrated at the level of theme by what we might describe as the picaresque leanings of the novel: She runs away with a band musician following the steps of her grandmother who had preceded her in a similar course of action –“Off with the raggle taggle gypsies” (*Leader of the Band*, 106)– after what is described in the novel as a “Lawrencian encounter with a gypsy behind the bushes”, though she had opted to stay behind and comfortably at home. In contrast, Sandra, under the sway of her lover, is willing to “drift with the current” (*LB*, 91) and, charmed by Jack’s physical attributes, as she is, does not hesitate to follow after the “carrot”. Once she has made his acquaintance, also behind the bushes, as telepathically and tacitly agreed by both, at a Royal Astronomical Society “do” where Jack was playing with his band, she accepts to set off on a journey to a folk festival in France and starts a process of self-discovery. She says that she is “in flight from [her] own life, [her] own past, and the revenge of [her] friends” (*LB*, 1). The revenge has to do with the fact that she has been writing short stories based on their lives and which are included as appendices at the end of the book. As for *Leader of the Band*, she describes it as her first autobiographical novel.

From the first, she admires mad Jack because, as a jazz musician, he willingly

joins the unclassified. Emulating him and without further ado, she throws caution to the winds and leaves behind a successful professional life. As a discoverer of the planet Athena, she was eventually bound to be honoured with the title of Astronomer Royal. Incidentally, Sandra is also a celebrity, Starlady Sandra, because of a very popular programme on science and astronomy, *Sandra's Sky*, of which she was the anchoress and for which she was ultimately responsible. There is a close connection between Sandra and the planet she discovered, Athena, which seems a metonymic extension of herself: "All she did was whirl about in her own rather unexpected orbit; a simple thing, a lump of stone, incapable of reproduction, helpless in the grip of her own qualities, which kept her suspended there between heaven and hell" (*LB*, 144-5). The fact is that she refuses to have progeny. As far as she is concerned, she wants the line of her father's descendants to end there: "As for Starlady Sandra, I mean to help the evolutionary process along by failing to reproduce" (*LB*, 85). The reason, we learn, is that she was, as many others, the result of genetic experiments orchestrated by her father, an SS officer sentenced to death at the Nuremberg trials. On the other hand, if we take into account Sandra's background, it is a relief for her to refer to his lover as Mad Jack because of his music, because of the "pearly animation of the spirit" (*LB*, 94) it brings about, in contrast with the true madness of her mother and brother. Yet, in spite of her escape, her past is after her, still haunts her in the form of harpies and furies brandishing their "stick". She is afflicted with the effects of several supernatural and untoward events like the hearing of "thirty non-existent rings" (*LB*, 106), which she interprets as marking the age in which reproduction becomes trickier for women or the "pattering of little feet" (*LB*, 50), of the spirits of her dead children or abortions. Likewise, the ghost of her brother Robin, driven to suicide on account of mental illness, also appears to her with his

familiar knitted cap demanding that she visits his grave as she did every August: “but what about my grave?” (*LB*, 33). Consequently, she gets in contact with her angry friends begging them to do it in her place. That is the only reason why they can trace her whereabouts. Her mental condition also raises concerns among them. In fact, when she runs away, she falls into a state of abjection, as described in Kristeva’s terms. In this context, it implies the throwing off of all the attributes Sandra has acquired and by which she has been socially classified, thus reverting once more to her humble beginnings. She finally embraces all that she had been ejecting in the process of identity formation: “And there I was jumping for the cliff, mouth rounded in a cavernous O, like the mad Munch woman, clutching at stars” (*LB*, 98). She willingly discards all the trappings of her status to go on a tour to France with a music band, the Citronella Jumpers. Out of the blue she yields to what she had been avoiding all along: unclassedness, unclassification. When she put the new-discovered planet in the astronomical maps, she also found an outstanding position for herself in society, which would make up for her low, or to say the least, unfortunate birth. Noticeably, Sandra’s study of the skies places her above the common run of woman, all spirituality: “I was flesh and spirit: I would not let the flesh win” (*LB*, 52). As Elisabeth Grosz says in her essay on Kristeva “The Body of Signification”: “The ability to take up a symbolic position as a social and speaking subject entail[s] the disavowal of its modes of corporeality, especially those representing what is considered unacceptable, unclean or anti-social” (in Fletcher 1990: 86). She also goes on to say that this disavowal gives identities thus created an unstable character, since those excluded and repressed elements are always there hovering at the borders and threatening identity with annihilation. Thereby, when Sandra renounces to all those uncertain values to which she

had devoted her existence with the very insouciance she so much admires in her lover, following him all the way, both heeding and acknowledging her corporeality and instincts, she consciously becomes unidentifiable, a sort of pariah, a tramp out of the margins of society, and, therefore, out of the symbolic order. It is as if she chose regression, a come-back to the maternal chora, to the tones and rhythms of the semiotic stage, to a world ruled by physical drives and nonreferential meaning: “Oh, pitter-pat, pitter-pat, returning to the pre-natal state!” (*LB*, 33). Furthermore, for Kristeva, abjection is closely related to maternity. It is of paramount importance for a child to abject the maternal body in the process of identity formation. We all have to “throw off” those disturbing features that keep us in an undefinable condition, in the “in-between” and “ambiguous” status which describes the moment of our births, the relatively brief instant in which we are expelled from the maternal womb: in and out, dead and alive. Consequently, in a patriarchal culture the threat of the dependence on the maternal body is one of the first tests to overcome in the acquisition of the autonomous subjectivity required of everyone. Thus, Sandra’s state of abjection reaches its climax when, as a fallen star, she is with child and renounces to all the principles she had held so far: “My place was somewhere else: my business pulling the stars down to earth, not motherhood” (*LB*, 52). She goes through complete disintegration and dissolution of identity as she had experienced it up to that moment and is reminded of a paper which records the pattern of her heart beats in one of her attacks of tachycardia, when the heart reverts to its foetal speed, and compares the design made up by the strokes with an arrangement of a group of words: “‘Pipetting up palpitating placenta `for example, and all those s’s – Starlady Sandra, Sandra Sorenson” (*LB*, 131). In this light, her criticism of other women embarked on the same trip sounds absurd: “And off she goes, ... and polish

the struts of her boyfriend's drums, or pick the dandruff flake by flake from his pillow, or clean between his toes, or whatever of the many services she provided in return for his love" (*LB*, 19). Sandra is as vulnerable and purposeless as the rest of them and her attitude to her lover is so submissive that she feels "truly colonised" (*LB*, 27). For a while, the dominant impulse in her is just skin-deep sensibility, she is governed by her physicality and her erotic response to Jack and is totally dependent on his moods and whims which has its physical manifestation in her need to masturbate when he decides to leave her behind in their paltry accommodation, the Hôtel de Ville, for a whole day. As the day proceeds she comes close to a state of break-down. Gibson talking on Levina's concept of sensibility speaks of the disappearance of the subject and the acquisition of a new subjectivity: "As sensibility, subjectivity has only the fragile, ambivalent status of a being that never returns to itself. 'No one is at home.' The ego is always held hostage" (1999:165). And this is the process of change to which Sandra, no longer the Starlady, willingly submits and which is to lead to her eventual pregnancy and her coming to terms with it, renouncing to all her prerogatives to spirituality.

This novel could be described as a paean to contingency and randomness over a discourse based on set values. According to Gibson, Postmodern aesthetics stresses the value of randomness, underlines the contingency of the event, the need to isolate and highlight it like in poetry, instead of merely neutralizing it in a diachronic succession. In the same vein, Postmodern ethics, as inspired by Levinas, proposes openness to alterity, responsiveness to all that comes from outside. Likewise, it enhances the event, and defends the need to let oneself be transformed by it. Sandra could exemplify this ethical stance of acceptance of what is frail and contingent. However, to understand her free attitude we should resort to her recent history, which accounts for the turn of events that

takes place in the novel. Behind the decision to set off on this trip there is a story of domestic horror and psychological harassment. The way she had imperceptibly discovered her husband's envy for her professional success, his gradual change towards her, how what he had considered to be "a major contribution to the world or to celestial affairs" had become in his eyes "a little program" (*LB*, 87) or how he had used her popularity in dinners organised with a view to getting promoted to the bench, instead of being just a solicitor. In retrospect, she even suspects that her running away was convenient to him at a moment in which the ratings of her program were falling. Her husband had constantly reminded her of her lack of a "proper family", and, leaving contention behind, this is the cue she takes to embrace the unclassdnes Jack is offering her now. What guides her is not wisdom, but what Badiou calls *vérité*, that is, "a kind of hole made in knowledge. It does not destroy a previous knowledge, but rather traverses and fractures both the latter and the subject as he or she is known to himself or herself" (Gibson 1999: 148). And whereas she lets herself be carried away by her encounter with Jack, by what comes her way, by the event, and allows her well-to-do, if humdrum, existence to be disrupted, her erstwhile husband, as a solicitor, a judge-to-be excels at exactly the opposite: "He's trained to make consecutive sense out of random happenings, and get people put away for years as a result" (*LB*, 39).

Similarly, at the level of structure the main story is not closed in itself, it overflows into three short stories placed at the end of the book. These have been fictively written by Sandra, who, as we know, has literary inclinations, resulting in this autobiographical novel. The creation of the second story takes place on this very trip. It must be mentioned that we have been previously informed of the existence of these appendices during the development of the plot. Sandra realises that at least one of them

has been published in a magazine when she contacts her friend Alison on the phone and she accuses Sandra of using her as “raw material” (*LB*, 39) for her story. Sandra tries to recreate Alison and her partner’s reaction to it. He metafictionally comments on the character of the mother whom Alison resorts to whenever she is in trouble and who as often as not tries to sort everything out with an assuaging cup of tea. Her invariable reaction triggers her daughter’s anger; Alison accuses her mother of being always the same, of never suffering alterations. However as we are introduced to Alison’s concerns because of twin pregnancies which increase the risk of having babies with Down’s syndrome, she acquaints her daughter with her history of two similar pregnancies out of the blue. The first one had luckily ended in a miscarriage, as the father was not Alison’s, and Alison had been born of the second, as well as an aborted “mongol” baby. This story touches on some of the mayor themes of the novel, which is not only about fertilization or procreation and chance but, above all, about decision-taking. Just after Alison makes up her mind to keep her two twins against all odds, she has a miscarriage amid a deluge of blood which gives its title to the story: “A Libation of Blood”. A libation offered to the gods of chance so that the next pregnancy may contain a single baby. In this regard the reference to the novel *Sophie’s choice* is in harmony with the rest of the *Leader of the Band*, as is the mention of a Drama Series produced by Jude, *Life Choice*, where women have to make decisions like having children, leaving partners and so on and so forth. Along these lines lies the final decision of Sandra to carry on with her pregnancy and bring her baby up by herself. It is what she describes as “this infinitesimal spark of moral decision required of me” (*LB*, 155). She puts herself in her “wretched” rival’s place, that is Jack’s wife, a mother of a hyperactive asthmatic child, and is able to gauge that “bloody” woman’s feelings, to understand that hers is a “tale of martyrdom and

misery, of masochism and monstrous male manners” (*LB*, 150), and that going along with Jack’s impulsiveness and uncompromising attitude at this stage not only would be reckless but it would also contribute to turn him into a cruel person, irresponsible towards others.

This is in blatant clash with the theme of the second short story which could be summarised by a sentence contained in the main story: “such friends women have!” (*LB*, 150). Maureen, who has always felt a mixture of admiration and envy for her popular friend Audrey, robs the latter of husband and family as soon as she has the chance. She even appropriates Maureen’s pat exclamation: “Come on, everyone!”, which is the title of the story and brings us back to the main plot where Jennifer, who inspired this account, keeps repeating it. Just as in *Leader of the Band* Sandra is not endowed with a fixed identity, her subjectivity is the result of what we could term, for the sake of simplification, as a constant process of border crossing, so do all the elements of the novel, which are transferred from the main story into the short stories, from past to present. All thematic strands are doubled and trebled or accounted for in several ways, contributing to give a “whirling, buzzing, roaring, dancing, maelstrom” effect, similar to the pattern of the cosmos created “by the cumulative chance events of endless aeons” (*LB*, 116).

An intradiegetic narrator, Jude, one of the characters of the main plot, is employed for the third short story. Jude, apart from being Sandra’s friend, is the producer of her programme and, disappointingly, the unexpected sudden new partner of her husband. In the novel, as soon as they find out that she is in France, they drive there to get a good divorce settlement. The title of the story is: “GUP-or Falling in Love in Helsinki.” G.U.P. stands for the Great Universal Paradox and she gives a very

Weldonian example of it: an Obstetric Ward where nature can be seen at work contradicting women's wishes:

There you'll find a woman who wants a baby but it was stillborn, and another who's just had a living baby she doesn't want, and someone in for a sterilisation and another with a threatened miscarriage, and another resting up before sextuplets, having taken too much fertility drug – and all will be weeping. (*LB*, 186)

The story takes place before all the events recounted in *Leader of the Band* and is about coming to terms with oneself, falling out of love with a married man who unfairly has her at his beck and call and falling in love with life. It is a paradox because when the novel ends Jude is again involved in a relationship where she is bound to undergo psychical torture verging on physical violence, as did Sandra and her other predecessor. In fact, Sandra had to escape for dear life. Likewise, she surmises that “houseproud” Sylvia had to resort to running as well on account of the “the lump of mouldy carrot in the Magimix” (*LB*, 100) left behind. Interestingly enough, the story is set in Finland, of which it is said that “now it has its own identity, its own pride: it looks not to its previous masters, Sweden and Russia, but to itself” (*LB*, 195). This sentence could be easily applied to Sandra by the end of *Leader of the Band* as long as Sweden and Russia are deleted and “it”, “its” and “itself” are replaced with “she”, “her” and “herself”. Similarly, Sandra has managed to dissipate all those ghosts encroaching upon her existence. She even desists from those perpetual feelings of hatred towards her father and is able to see him in a different light, nearly justifying his experiments: “An attempt to re-create the universe must always be worth while” (*LB*, 111). She has learnt to deal with the past, unlike Eugenie, who was her neighbour when she was a child, and could not cope with “The Curse of the Haunted Church” (*LB*, 114), since she lacked the practical skills for it. Instead of confronting its ghosts and her own emotional and

financial mishaps, she let herself be overwhelmed by them. It is interesting to note the Gothic-like metonymic connection between Eugenie and her haunted house. Accordingly when Eugenie not only sold the church but also accepted two hundred pounds less than the established price she could be said to have given up on herself. The shrewd architect who purchased it put an end to the ghosts at once by means of, among other things, the installation of spotlights and central heating. And the discount of two hundred pounds is mentioned here because it is full of significance; If Eugenie had received these two hundred pounds, she could have bought a car and would not have been run over by one in a pedestrian crossing.

The proliferation of narrative trivialities is as astonishing as the way every insignificant detail becomes meaningful, as when Sandra worries about her attacks of tachycardia: “Starlady Sandra Sorenson, S.S.S. An extra S, an extra bundle of nemones. What terrifies me is the way it all ties up” (*LB*, 133). However, there seems to be a need to counterbalance this narrative density in Weldon’s literature. This is done, for example, with Sandra’s flippant comment about her baby conducive to produce the effect of bathos and subsequent kitsch touch at the end of the novel. In sheer contradiction to her so far lofty and dignified concerns, there is considerable banality in her playful remark: “He, she or it. The ‘it’ is what I worry about, of course. Who doesn’t, these days?” (*LB*, 155).

2.31. SLIDING MULTIPLICITIES: A PICARESQUE NARRATIVE

If *Leader of the Band*, with its itinerant protagonists is somehow reminiscent of the picaresque genre, *The Life and Loves of a She-devil* and *Darcy’s Utopia* clearly show

resonances of this genre. Their versatile heroines, who skilfully display a proliferation of identities which will contribute to make them perfectly adjustable to the numerous favourable circumstances that they purposefully and artfully provoke in order to reach their goals, are worthy inheritors of this literary tradition. In this regard, we should point out the existence of a connection between the Gothic and the picaresque genres. Susanne Becker quotes Barbara Godard when she speaks of “the gothic’s feminising of the picaresque”. Becker goes on to say that “the parodic interrelatedness of the masculine picaresque and the feminine gothic is still powerful in the postmodern context” (Becker 1999: 67). This is the reason why we could include *Darcy’s Utopia* with the rest of the novels we have mentioned in this chapter. Its heroine is very much like Sandra in the way she is eager for and embraces change. Nonetheless, whereas the latter is moved in her actions by what could be considered as nearly standard morality, the former strikes an apparently very “immoral” pose. Apricot Smith, Ellen Parkin and Eleanor Darcy represent different stages in her life. The first name is the one unfortunately chosen by her mother when she was born. She adopts the second after becoming Bernard’s wife. As for the third designation, it stands for the identity she acquires through her marriage to the Vice Chancellor of the University of Bridport. With each new identity, improvement is invariably brought about: “Better to be out of love as Eleanor Darcy than Ellen Parkin. The Ellen Parkins of the world love only once, and if it goes wrong give up” (*Darcy’s Utopia*, 17). In this regard, the need for people to change their names in the course of their existence is advocated in *Darcy’s Utopia*, since Eleanor considers that new identities should be adopted when someone is dissatisfied with his or her life. However, this seems to come more naturally to women than to men. Gibson quotes Derrida when he says that woman is “that which evades and is in excess of the

phallogocentric structure of subjectivity” (Gibson 1996: 125), that is, the concept woman may be theoretically described as contesting, among other things, the preponderance of rationality, unified identity and the systems of thought founded on unequal power relations. In this regard, Derrida sees the tactic of “becoming-woman” as an interesting application in philosophical thought. However, Rosi Braidotti disagrees pointing out the dangers of this “metaphorisation of the feminine”, since it disembodies and dissociates women from their sexual reality. Eleanor Darcy epitomizes this concept of the ineffable essence of women, that which cannot be pinned down. She may be said to represent brilliantly Kristeva’s idea, as expressed by Susanne Becker, that “being a woman has always provided a means to another end, to becoming something else: a subject on the making, a subject on trial” (in Becker 1999: 46).

Indeed, Eleanor Darcy seems to lack the materiality that would define her as woman and between the common full-blown woman and her there is the same abysmal distance as there is between reality and Utopia. She is acutely aware of how advantageous this unidentifiable, out-of-the-margins position can be for her improvement in life and she rises to the occasion. She is great at grasping opportunities and she chooses to be a sort of unscrupulous adventuress. Her intelligence is striking and we are told that when Wendy, her mother, was with child “her friends remarked how sharp she’d got since she became pregnant” (1990: 28), as if the baby in her womb was transferring its mental powers onto her. With her attitude she challenges what is considered the proper and natural tendency in women, which, according to Sandra in *Leader of the Band*, would be ruled by an inveterate search for stability “the force that seeks to preserve the status quo is to women the same as gravity is to the apple in relation to the earth, that is to say, very great indeed” ([1988]1991: 98). She is bored and

often uses her manipulative skills to bring about changes. She artfully convinces her first husband to give up Catholicism first and, later on, all the Marxist ideals he had adopted after renouncing his religious beliefs. She uses his principles against him by carrying them to extremes and making them backfire on him. For example, in the case of Marxism he finally desists from it because she refuses to go on holidays – “the sop from the bosses: the holiday abroad!” (*DU*, 105), or to have a television – “the bosses’ latest plot to keep the minds of the proletariat addled” (*DU*, 109), to have a car instead of using buses because this would go against the grain of Marxism, or even to get the job which would allow them to reach the standard of living which other couples of friends could afford. In this very vein, the month before she gets her degree she is expelled from college for throwing paint at the Minister of Education, since she does not want to listen “to the lies of the imperialists lackeys” (*DU*, 107) any more. She uses very persuasive means and clearly excels in the art of prevailing upon others. Even if it is not always rhetoric what she avails herself of, what she does could be described as “unscrupulous, calculating, a function of the intelligence that has designs upon and seeks to subdue others” (Gibson 1999: 59), as Gibson interprets Levinas’ opinion on rhetoric. However, no matter what means she employs, she invariably falls on her feet and makes a strong impression on people. She has a magnetic personality and her influence is not always evil, on occasions it can even have beneficial effects. For instance, when, as if in a trance, the two journalists, Valerie and Hugo, who, working for two different magazines are assigned to write about Darcy’s Utopia, get sentimentally involved and leave their homes and families to live in the Holiday Inn together. No sooner does Valerie start to write Eleanor’s serialized biography, “*Lover at the Gate*,” under the latter’s supervision than her life is in turmoil, as if shaken by tremors. This is completely out of character in

Valerie, “the mistress of controlled reportage,” who, on rendering “a neat and convincing piece” (*DU*, 43) on an earthquake in Rome after being trapped under a wall for two hours on its account, received from her editor the only comment that he hoped her hair had not been dishevelled. Valerie is so fascinated by Eleanor after their first encounter, in spite of the latter’s being “disgraced, childless, alone, sprawled and wriggled against the shiny black sofa” as she was, that she cannot help thinking: “I would rather be her, her life out of control, than me as I was with Lou” (*DU*, 43).

However, this is not the only case in the novel in which characters act as if under a spell. There are also those who suffer the effects of a curse and their lives undergo sudden changes as well. Just as Eleanor had made her husband Bernard desist from holding his catholic and Marxist beliefs, so had Bernard shaken religion out of Nerina’s mind, leaving there a sort of vacuum. Nerina was a Muslim and one of his brightest students at the college. When she found out that he and his colleague Jed had tossed a coin as to who would have her, she decided to cast a curse on Bernard in a black magic group set up by the Media Communication Department in an attempt to establish an atmosphere of religious tolerance. Under the effect of the curse, Bernard’s wife was supposed to be unfaithful to him with, and this was Jed’s preposterous idea, no other than the Vice Chancellor. What is extraordinary here is how easily susceptible they both are, how easily they become willing vehicles for the curse to come into effect. After all the title of Eleanor’s biography is “*Lover at the Gate*”. And, contrary to the common fact that “in most people’s lives the lover stands there, at the gate faithful, waiting, unnoticed” (*DU*, 52) and that most people do not dare to ask him or her in, to their credit, Eleanor and the Vice Chancellor gladly acknowledge change and quickly accommodate to the new situation.

Yet, Eleanor has not become a celebrity because of her sentimental liaisons, but because her second husband, the Vice Chancellor Julian Darcy is in prison after the Treasure followed his recommendations that money should issue freely and non-stop from cash points. This happened on a Sunday on which the lives of many people improved, among others, that of Eleanor's father. The idea behind the scheme was to increase inflation to a point where money should reach complete devaluation and stop being the motor of economy. Eleanor's constant concern about political and economical issues makes her ultimately responsible for the creation of her husband's Utopia. Her welcoming attitude is also towards "the poor and the dispossessed [who], forget the lover, are at the gate" (*DU*, 185). In Darcy's Utopia there is concern about the way host communities ghettoise the minorities and try to avoid miscegenation, that is, the mixture of races, at all costs. This criticism is highly to the point, and even clairvoyant, as relatively recent events have shown. Eleanor mimics the general attitude of false complaisance: "and just please stick to your districts, and keep your own religion and dance away to tambourines, or bow to the East, or whatever you like to do to remind you of home –or home as it used to be a hundred years ago but certainly isn't now" (*DU*, 137). Notwithstanding, as Valerie finds out by the end of the book, Eleanor's credibility is doubtful and at stake. Because of her irreverent attitude one can never work out whether she is serious or joking and an instance of this is Eleanor's chauvinistic remark: "As in any legal document, the greater includes the lesser. He incorporates she" (*DU*, 8). Her focus on Utopia, on how things should be, commendable as it is, is always under suspicion of being one of the ruses she employs to get what she wants. Just as in her life with Bernard she used Catholicism and Marxism without any qualms to her advantage, Utopia is her road to success. In fact when he leaves Darcy for Hugo, the latter becomes

a sort of apostle and founder member of the Darcian Movement which Eleanor inspired and whose disciples “were of all races, all classes: the kempt and the unkempt, the rich and the poor, but mostly those in between” (*DU*, 232). Valerie discovers this when she goes to Mafeking Street, the place where Eleanor has spent most of her life and reaches the house where she lived with Bernard only to see that it has been turned into a sort of chapel, branch sixteen of this new religion. However it is not the first time this place is filled with crowds or there is a queue of expectant people in front of it.

This last mention of the house of Mafeking Street in the novel is charged with great significance. It is remarkable the way repetitions acquire structural value in this work; they are not there merely for the sake of cumulative effect, but rather to fill with meaning what could otherwise be insignificant events. We could refer here to force, as Derrida understands it, as “a certain pure and infinite equivocality which gives signified meaning no respite, no rest, but engages it in its own *economy* so that it always signifies again and differs” (Gibson 1996: 33). The elusive semantic richness conferred to a narrative text on account of the inherent arbitrariness of linguistic signs, impressed, among other things, by their adaptation to different contexts, can be proved in this novel by following the genealogy of number 39 in Mafeking Street. Thereby, comparing the different circumstances in which the house appears can be illuminating and render very clarifying results as to the nature of Eleanor’s controversial Utopia. Number 39 in Mafeking Street, the house where Eleanor used to live with her ex-husband Bernard and now a chapel for the faith she has initiated, acquires a new sense if we consider that this building had been previously inhabited by a Mr Rowse, a fraudster, a sort of healer, who had left the neighbourhood when threatened to be taken to court for deception—he was said to have millions in the bank. Ernie Rowse’s business had been compared by Ken,

Eleanor's father, to Harrods' sales because of the amount of followers it had attracted and because of the huge profits obtained. It should be noticed that Ernie Rowse had been ultimately responsible for the death of Eleanor's grandmother and step-mother since the only medical attention she had sought, when terminally ill, had been the cares and remedies gladly provided by the faith healer in his lucrative pseudo-clinic —due to their lack of economic resources and to Ken's meagreness, he had discouraged his wife from visiting a proper hospital. It is also worth-mentioning that dysfunctional families abound in this novel. Eleanor's grandmother, Rhoda, also happens to be her father's wife — Ken left the daughter, Wendy, for the mother, Rhoda. After Rhoda died, Ken found a similar family composed of a mother and a teenage daughter, "the kind of house he understood" (*DU*, 66). Likewise, when Nerina, Bernard's student, is pregnant by Jeff, she marries Sharif and they live with her mother. The parallelisms between the households are emphasized in the book when it is said of Nerina's household that "They were all bound together: like Rhoda to Wendy, to Ken" (*DU*, 214). In the same way as there is a repetition of family patterns, there is a recurrence in the line of business going on in number 39 Mafeking Street with a margin of several years in-between. The fact that both ventures share a common space is a piece of information of the utmost importance. It is a revealing clue as to the fraudulent nature of their overlapping activities, so that we may not be misled by mischievous Eleanor and believe otherwise. We have seen in this novel how characters are susceptible to enchantments and curses and all sort of manipulation and now we see how Eleanor manages to channel people's suggestibility for her own benefit, as Ernie Rowse had done before her.

In the course of this novel we also follow the fortunes of Eleanor's three friends, Liese, Brenda, and Belinda. Brenda and Belinda approach Valerie, the journalist

responsible for “Lover at the Gate”, and the former is not completely uncritical of Eleanor because over the years the friends’ “patience has worn a little thin” (*DU*, 188), but she defends the idea of Utopia, “Brenda’s Utopia, a kind of toned-down version of Apricot’s,” her friend’s initial name. As for Belinda, she intends to write “the gospel according to St Belinda” (*DU*, 201), to counterbalance Valerie’s version. In this novel we get glimpses of different points of view. Valerie’s biography and Hugo’s interviews contribute to make her a mythical presence. However, Valerie’s encounter with her friends or, for instance, Brenda’s letter to Hugo in which Eleanor is described as a “love and muddle carrier” (*DU*, 189) belie this idealized image. Valerie, the narrator of the last chapters will have to decide whether Eleanor is merely an adventuress who always falls on her feet, since, first she manipulates Bernard, then, after maliciously ruining Julian Darcy’s career, she leaves him for Hugo. However, insofar as the tone of admiration for her “life force” never abates in the book and her magnetism is constantly acknowledged, judgement is avoided. Besides, she is as susceptible as the characters she somehow manipulates and therein lies her virtue, in her openness to the event: she undauntedly accepts everything she encounters, all that comes her way. This is why she can make this kind of statements which sound so strange in the mouth of a woman: “I have been re-born. Risen guilt free as Eleanor from the ashes of the past” (*DU*, 176-7). In this regard, her awareness that things might be otherwise is encapsulated in her insistence on the utopian ideal.

We should also consider the stretch of time Valerie is under her influence as a not completely unsatisfactory period. A very composed person, Valerie loses all constraints for a while and lets herself be carried away in her involvement with Hugo, “a woman needs the excitement of a lover from time to time: a re-basing, as it were, in the

physical: the reincarnation of the carnal self in a body which gets, over the years, far too controlled by spirit and mind" (*DU*, 54). On the other hand, she returns to her husband happily and willingly when she finishes writing "Lover at the Gate", as if by magic, and her husband is waiting for her without a protest. He even pays for the bills the illicit couple has incurred without making any fuss. Valerie thinks that she has been somehow transmitted Eleanor's "sure touch" with men, but this resolution of Valerie's story rather highlights the difference between things as they are and things as otherwise they might be. This is not the expected denouement to a situation like this. Unluckily, deceived husbands usually do not react so politely. It implies a variation of common experience. It modifies our expectations based on general assumptions, what Levinas describes as "the sphere of the common" and to which he opposes "the radical anarchy of the diverse". In this regard, Andrew Gibson says that "the specific ethical significance and value of a novel today is likely to lie in the profundity with which it calls 'the sphere of the common' in question" (1999: 103). Without this narrow and constricted "common sphere", there is no space for judgement. In a society where Eleanor's male counterparts are allowed to get away with almost everything in sentimental matters and be really successful at it, a woman who plays the same game is entitled to the same level of success and to be admired on top. Eleanor represents that metaphor of woman, the essence of that which cannot be pinned down, adapted to a phalocratic world. That is the only common ground with a chauvinistic society this novel admits to and assumes. No other moral guide-lines are offered. It conspicuously exudes admiration for a woman experiencing life without the encumbrance of false expectations and self-deceptions. Valerie vicariously benefits from the freedom from social constraints that Eleanor has achieved for herself. Furthermore, the feeling of exultation following the release from

unnecessary commitments and restrictions thanks to a feat of imagination and fantasy is what the picaresque and Gothic experiences share in common.

CONCLUSION:

Fay Weldon started writing at the end of the sixties and she is still publishing at a rate of a novel per year. As I have attempted to show, through her narrative we get a very thorough and vivid description of what life has been like for British women in several decades, a subject she superbly commands. Her long-spanning output also keeps track of the transformations effected from what she describes as the pre-feminist days to the present time, in which she has been criticised by feminists because a belligerent attitude towards male chauvinism is no longer a priority on her agenda. Despite her prolonged creative activity, Fay Weldon is mainly known as an emblematic British author belonging to that group of engaged novelists writing at the time of the second wave of feminism, that is, end of the sixties and the seventies. She contributed to this movement with fictions classified as acerbic black comedies with a satiric stamp in which the silenced and humdrum domestic existences of women were outspokenly and shockingly focused and highlighted. Fay Weldon's first novels represented a courageous exposure and condemnation of the dominant unequal sex-relations which were a reflection of the prevalent male values of a society in which heterosexual couples were organised following a binary polarity according to which it behoved the male to hold on to the dominant subject position while the female was reduced to marginality and submission. In her first writings we see to what extent the culturally created conception of masculinity and femininity, deeply ingrained in men and women, guaranteed the survival of this unjust state of affairs. Women's strong relational tendencies, coupled with an "insufficiently individuated sense of self", according to Chodorow (1978: 212) led them to comply masochistically with whatever was required of them. Although these

features in women were advantageous to their male counterparts, they triggered sadistic behaviour on their part. Women unwittingly entrusted men with their very existence, with their identity, only to learn to their cost how far they had been driven and in what extremely precarious situations they had been landed. Men, having had to abruptly curtail all their relational tendencies by the end of the Oedipus stage in order to break the strong bonds that joined them with their mother, turned out to be sentimentally handicapped beings that were unable to cope with women's inflated affective requirements. All too aptly, the narrator in *She May not Leave*, whom we might describe as an impersonator of Weldon, quotes Shakespeare when referring to heterosexual relationships “ ‘Men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love’ ” (2005: 25), and remarks how the opposite could be applied to women of her generation. Taking into account that it was men who conferred them social status, their liaison with a man was of the essence in order to be endowed with identity and, if this meant to be abused or ill-treated, or even to die, so much the worse.

However, the satiric bent of her novels proves that they do not entail an attitude of resignation towards these gruesome situations, but, rather, one of encouragement to action so that women may wake up from their long-lasting unjustified sleep. Through her fiction, we become aware of the unbridgeable gap between the romantic ideals that imprison women and their narrow vital circumstances, for which they themselves are to blame. Weldon's narrative lampoons the fact that the pain women suffer is but a consequence of self-inflicted damages, since they seem to have been educated to endure all kinds of grievances, especially, and, therein lies the irony, those brought upon by their unwitting attitudes, which may only be compared to the harm perpetrated by their *sisters*. Nonetheless, what Weldon undertakes in her work goes far beyond a satirical

portrait of external circumstances –and this is what I have been trying to prove in this thesis. The Gothic element enters the scene the moment a constructive solution is sought, which, paradoxically, entails the dissolution of all that has been previously known and accepted. Since women are held responsible for the absurd state of affairs in which Weldon's novels portray them, they are required to plumb inner depths in order to accomplish the necessary deconstruction of the traditional standard version of female masochistic personality if further development is to be achieved. In what I have unhesitatingly described in this thesis as Weldon's humorous Postmodern reproduction of Gothic patterns, women forced by circumstances to abandon the sphere of the proper, are bound to confront "the horror" of all those aspects of themselves that they have originally suppressed in order to accommodate to sanctioned models of female personality and which, inconveniently, reappear as looming threats requiring attention.

In view of the fact that the value and richness of Fay Weldon's narrative tend to be overlooked, I have tried to propose here a method of analysis which may prove revealing when dealing with it. For a proper and necessary revaluation of Weldon's fictions it is of the uttermost importance to emphasize the Gothic element in them instead of discarding them as extravagant or commercial without further ado. As regards the second aspect, there is no denying that, instead of being averse to answer consumer's demands, she enjoys keeping in tune with them, and this accounts for the fact that her books so easily become best-sellers. However, Gothic literature has been adapted to conform to the latest public requirements since its very inception. In this regard, Fay Weldon is also given to unusual exploits to attract the attention of the public. The fact that she wrote a novel commissioned by Bulgari, the Italian jewellery firm, suitably entitled *The Bulgari Connection*, was highly criticised, even if taking up this assignment

did not entail going against the grain of her narrative. On the contrary, her professional background made her the suitable candidate for such an enterprise. The skills acquired in the field of publicity when she worked as an advertiser at the beginning of her career have always benefited her fiction. And, as I have shown, objects in her novels are presented with all their manifest virtues only to become magnified by circumstantial factors which contribute to impress them with a new meaning in a characteristically Gothic twist. A photograph of a threesome in *Trouble*, which, since taken with a Polaroid camera, fades quickly, constitutes, for example, the perfect complement to a story that has to be erased and obliterated forthwith. Likewise, a Magimix with an imperceptible vestige of carrot trapped inside bespeaks a tale of psychological harassment in *Leader of the Band* –the owner of the Magimix being a squeamish housewife who would have never left that carrot trace behind had she not had to run for dear life. Former wives take their revenge on their usurpers through the still-standing relics of a time in which they held sway over the household. These items are there as reminders that a similar destiny awaits the current wife at the hands of the next one, who will invariably behave as abominably towards them as they did to their predecessors. In addition, this fixation with objects seems reminiscent of Walpole's inclination to collect antiques in the eighteenth century so as to recreate the life of historical characters. Therefore, in the first place, as I have tried to prove, this uncanny value conferred on items is a feature Weldon's narrative shares with the genre it refashions: the Gothic. Secondly, the purposeful incorporation of market tastes to her fiction does not undermine its literary value, but rather emphasizes its similarity with a genre which since its very origins has primarily been a market phenomenon. In line with this, her attempt to reach large audiences and the commercial success of her fiction, although

constituting deeply offensive factors in the eyes of the upholders of high-brow culture, contribute to strengthen the value of her literary production, rather than diminish its significance. On the other hand, a flirtation with market tastes comes naturally to Weldon, and not necessarily as a drawback, since it is mainly a question of aesthetics and it is obvious that she feels at ease among mainstream and popular tendencies. As was mentioned, in *Auto Da Fay* she explains that she likes “blockbusters out of Hollywood, thrillers, gold taps, country music, Chinese takeaways, kidney dressing-tables and coca-cola. People wince” (2002, 141). Incidentally, since the Gothic is characterised by “exaggerate[ing] its own extreme fictionality” (Hogle 2008: 14), this penchant for gaudiness and frippery, this taste for the kitsch shown in her novels is a perfect companion to any remodelling of a genre which from its very inception has absorbed aristocratic as well as popular influences

Incomprehensibly, Weldon’s works are hardly ever categorised as Gothic recreations despite the fact that they are glaringly punctuated with allusions related to this genre. We need look no further than *The Bulgari Connection*, the novel above mentioned, in order to find some loose analogies with *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: the portrait of an evil person disintegrating and revealing her true character, a woman growing younger per days at the same pace as her young partner grows old as a variation of the theme of Dorian Gray’s imperviousness to age, the episode of the lovers actually falling back on Chinese medicine evocative of the opium dens to which Dorian resorts, we even come across a mock ghost contributing to create Gothic ambience by the end of the novel. With the reappropriation of Gothic motifs women’s lives are decontextualized and the realistic and day-to-day tenor of Weldon’s works is counterbalanced with a parodic Postmodern remodelling of this traditional and popular genre. The resulting

effect of counterbalancing harsh realism with the disorders with which Weldon's heroines are afflicted is employed for comic purposes in order to make us see how absurd some situations are and that unjust states of affairs may be reversed. Accordingly, the lack of spirituality which accompanies women's uneventful existence has its counterpoint in the ambitions they secretly harbour, in what Weldon defines as a "stream of alternative realities" (*Mantrapped*, 211). Thus women's unfulfilled and repressed desires, or just their small whims or fancies are given full rein in parodic neo-Gothic exercises of multiple and divided personalities which eventually help her heroines win the day.

I have also tried to demonstrate in this thesis how the apparently unambitious character of her novels is presently denied by her well constructed and diversely engineered plots as well as by the wide range of subjects handled. We should not be misled by her short sentences, lacking "gravitas" as she says, or the colloquial style she employs even to abuse. Weldon's masterful and pliable narrative technique is at one with the tales of growth offered to the reader so that they may gain experience and learn in conjunction with the heroines and be transformed with their new-acquired knowledge. Something similar happens in *The Lives and Loves of a She-Devil*, and here the ambivalence is served, since this novel entails the absorption of the aesthetics of the popular gothics. However, their messages of hope in order to appease the yearnings triggered in women by their mediocre lives, by the abyss between their aspirations to be immensely pretty, inordinately rich, and be married to a charming prince and the prosaic lives they lead, though conveyed, acquire here a very disturbing character. Whereas the popular gothics' main function is that of consolation once dissatisfaction has been identified, the novel under consideration goes far beyond that aim, since it involves a

sharply critical parody of women's aspirations. Considering the fact that the tackling of women's discontent on account of their lack of power involves matters concerning the formation of individuals according to gender parameters, the Gothic method of estrangement is probably the most suitable vehicle to deal with subjects as intricate as those relating to the "bio-politics" governing the construction of femininity. Thus, through a process of defamiliarisation, traditional beauty becomes grotesque. If in *The Lives and Loves of a She-Devil* Ruth was initially a freak because of her physical appearance, now she could still be said to remain a freak because of her monstrous psyche or because of the dodgy and painful methods she has chosen in order to achieve her transformation. Concepts are deconstructed into its opposites when coming so close into contact with them and the end-result obtained after this experiment is a contradictory and hybrid cross between the myths of Frankenstein and Galathea. The theme of beauty is by now imbued in the Gothic and has lost its original innocence; deep layers of dark meaning have been added to it and have made it abhorrent. Consequently, the incorporation of Gothic material and aesthetics is accompanied with a considerable degree of complexity and ambiguity.

Reading Weldon's books we become aware of the unbridgeable gap between the romantic ideals that hold women in thrall and their narrow vital circumstances, for which they are to blame. And, noticeably, women are held responsible for following the ridiculous and restrictive prescriptions society and a normative conception of femininity impose on them. The strong satiric aim of Weldon's fiction can be corroborated insofar as we are shown how absurdly aimless are all women's efforts to try to reach this ideal. We can also see how preposterous and harmful it is for women to adapt to these conventions in the fact that some of her most representative narrators suffer from self-

inflicted paralysis, blindness or disabilities. There are even mock-ghosts to attest to the incapacity to achieve full-development and outgrow the victim status. When all is said and done the task that most women set themselves to achieve is not only impossible but ludicrous, since it merely gives them a feeling of defeat. However, inasmuch as Weldon's fictions are primarily of a positive and optimistic nature, urging women to take the reins of their lives, improvement and self-development have always constituted their main concern. Hence, many of her novels entail a journey from marginality and dissatisfaction to success and happiness, thus following the pattern established by Ann Radcliffe one of the pioneer writers of Gothic fiction, whereby, according to Jerrold E. Hogle, "the primal Gothic scene of a woman confined" is turned into "a journey of women coming into some power and property by their own and other feminine agency" (2008: 10).

I have underlined throughout this dissertation how Weldon's heroines overcome pressure and duress Gothic-fashion through a constant deconstruction of artificially imposed identities, that is, by means of a pliability expressed in a display of split selves which represent what Kristeva would describe as "subject-in-the-making" (Becker 1999: 46), that is, originally, beings in a liminal state —women, being traditionally dependent on others, lack properly delineated individualities— and open to change and transition. The complex play of subjectivities which characterizes the genre remodeled in Weldon's fiction is the result of a reformulation of identity sparked, in some cases, by the loss of identities induced by the terror produced by intensely extreme and stressful situations. Left to their own devices and wit, and once they have finally become aware of their so far neglected needs and desires, Weldon's most artful heroines are on their way to recklessly rise in the world against all odds. In her novels we see women making the

best of their resources, even taking advantage of their liabilities in order to fulfil their hidden wishes, to appease their so far unheard and unattended desires, and we learn, if not to entirely subscribe to their behaviour, at least to admire their spirit as Weldon herself puts it (*Darcy's Utopia*, 235). In *The Lives and Loves of a She-Devil*, for instance, Ruth uses her domestic skills for very profitable purposes. Likewise, in *Darcy's Utopia* Eleanor plays with her lack of convictions, which may go hand in hand with a less “rigid and punitive superego” (Chodorow 1978: 169) than that of men, to get what she wants.

The very frailty that makes women become victims may be transformed into a redeeming disposition. Their suppleness, an ingrained female feature which, to all intents and purposes, seems a liability, finally lands them on their feet in their journeys of self-discovery. From a biological point of view, we have seen to what extent women's bodies subject them to a pattern of indeterminacies and randomness which place them in a state of liminality. As I have tried to prove in this work, this biological indeterminacy is concomitant to women's pliability, to that quality of being for others or *ethical alterity*, to borrow Levinas' words, which can be understood as the ambiguity or ambivalence behind a constant exercise of reformulation of personality. This would be in line with a creative ethics based not on set values but in a continuous process of persistent becoming and active self-formation. If Weldon's narrative is, above all, about solving conflicts, the Gothic formula based on the dissolving of boundaries or limits, as corresponds to a literature prone to unreason and excesses, is appropriately employed in her novels though, possibly, taken to extremes in some cases. Let us think, for instance, of Madeleine in *Remember Me*, who, when alive stubbornly refused to traverse boundaries which, although of a challenging nature, would have opened the doors to

fuller and more satisfactory experiences for her. As a reparation for past injuries inflicted on her by her husband, who, however, and, in contrast to her, has embraced life to the full and, to make up for her shortcomings, she has to cross the ultimate frontier. After dying she is to reappear as a ghost to sort her problems out and make her peace with the past, in order to overcome her previous inability to cope with and welcome all those novel events, which, even if they had come in the shape of misfortunes, could have helped her to acquire a new, better, more mature existence. Moreover, other boundaries, apart from the one that separates life from death are crossed in Weldon's novels. As I have explored in full detail, the concept of a single identity is constantly transgressed and replaced by that of duality or even proliferation of personalities. When referring to the phenomenon of the *doppelgänger*, *alter ego* or the modern multiple self, Karl Miller, explains that "the idea of the divided mind has been attended, since the Romantic period, by that of an openness to the world" (Miller 1987: 311). As I have already pointed out, in Weldon the demolition of limits reaches a point in which reality and fiction converge, as we have seen happen in novels like *Mantrapped*, *She May not Leave* or *Chalcot Crescent*, and this may well be behind the fact that her fiction so easily reaches out to her readers, helping them enrich their personalities and, accordingly, their existences at the same pace as those of her characters.

In order to negotiate their space in society and lead a rich and fulfilled life, Weldon's heroines have to sort out outer obstacles as well as those inner barriers in the shape of "the irruption of fantasies, suppressed wishes and emotional and sexual conflicts" (Botting 1996: 11) that hinder their happiness. These forms of social and self-alienation, in which women find themselves on account of their passive and submissive behaviour, best represented as the Gothic mazes of unrest that constitute what I have

described as the labyrinthine structures of Weldon's novels, have to be transcended for the sake of survival and in order to reach complete maturity. By labyrinthine I mean that minor strands of plot vie for importance in an already crammed story, thus, one thing leads to another until we are overflowed by a surfeit of incongruousness and get the impression that everything is suffocatingly connected, as Sandra Sorenson, the protagonist of *Leader of the Band*, comments: "What terrifies me is the way it all ties up" (1991: 133). In most Gothic novels the turning point in the development of the characters will be triggered by horror or, what has been described as the horrific sublime. They invariably experiment a moment of visualization transcending reason thanks to which they are allowed a glimmer of the abyss between things as they are and things as they should be. In Weldon's particular remodelings of this genre, as I have tried to prove, the shock of recognition is produced not by horror but, rather, by the acknowledgement of the glaring absurdity escaping understanding that inadmissibly governs their lives. Realising the preposterous nature of the plight they are in, her heroines will finally react and take the reins of their lives. In order to do so, they are to come to terms with, among other things, the wayward nature of their bodies, which has supposedly placed them on the fringes of society. Weldon's characters are finally in a position to fend for themselves the moment they dare confront the dark fears and inhibitions they have repressed to conform to what is socially expected of them. In "A Great Antipodean Scandal" we see how a heterosexual pair, finally realising that they are cross-dressers at a time when that concept did not still exist, appear at their daughter's deplorable wedding the man dressed as a woman and the woman as a man. Indeed, the ensuing scandal put an end to the ceremony, which was definitely for the best: "by saving their own natures, they saved Pippy [their daughter] from ruining her

life” (*A Hard Time to Be a Father*, 217). For the sake of self-discovery, Weldon’s heroines have to embark on a journey, on what Barfoot would describe as the “quests, of a physical as well as of a spiritual kind” (in Tinkler-Villani 1995: 160) to which Gothic heroines feel drawn. This constant state of passage, this border-crossing of the self, which becomes entirely comprehensible if we trace the origins of the Gothic genre to the Romance *gest*, may be described in Weldon’s novels as a Postmodern adaptation of a Gothic game of sliding personalities.

The Gothic genre, born out of a complex range of sweeping contradictions, is the perfect medium to explore all the extremes of being. The malleability resultant from the aesthetic excesses of the Gothic mode offers scope for the experimentation of a whole spectrum of possibilities; together with characters, readers can vicariously and safely, probe beyond the frontiers of sanctioned identities. Thanks to this constant self-transcendence Weldon’s heroines will come out unscathed from this encounter with the beckoning “abyss”, with the space of the monstrous and socially inadmissible, of all that they have *abjected* in order to be proper social beings — *proper* and *social* in the case of women can be replaced by *feminine*, a concept which has to undergo a process of deconstruction in order to afford women satisfactory and fulfilled existences.

In this dissertation, I have interpreted the playful games of identities which riddle Weldon’s fiction as traces or extensions of the figure of duality pervading Gothic literature, an obvious example of which would be *Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and it has helped me explain many intriguing factors of her novels. Thereby, a simulacra of doubles in the Gothic fashion enriches Weldon’s narrative by adopting many shapes: Narrator and protagonist joined by a physical and figurative blindness in *The President’s Child* as corresponds to reformulations of a literature of an affective nature, or narrators,

like that of *Chalcot Crescent*, are mischievously placed astride reality and fiction showing in a feat of crossing borders the ethical openness of this kind of narrative. The complexity of identities may be further increased if science fiction is allowed to play a part, like in the *Cloning of Joana May*. As for *Splitting*, stressful situations will derive in a multiplication of the personalities which will eventually help the protagonist win the day. However, in a novel like *Darcy's Utopia*, characterised by its leanings towards the picaresque genre there is no need to resort to Gothic conjuring tricks so that the reader may indulge in a liberatory experience. Eleanor, the protagonist, being a trickster and a charlatan, gets away with any infringement of unnecessary commitments and social restrictions. The reader is forced to witness with wonder all her exploits and transformations and cannot help but admire the dexterity with which she makes the best of all circumstances.

I have also maintained that the Gothic conception of a multiple and divided subjectivity has been reintroduced in Weldon's Postmodern Gothic adaptations in an exercise of representation based on a Postmodern playful deferral and postponement in which we have seen narrators depicted in an unending mirroring game. This complex play of identities is much in line with the double code employed in a narrative dominated by an ironic view according to which, what is implied is in sheer contradiction to what is stated. This constitutes the best mechanism to detect that characters are in denial of those disturbing feelings haunting them which will eventually acquire uncanny proportions and end up by engulfing them. Their lives will be suddenly encroached by a "whole spew of nastiness and corruption" (*Auto Da Fay*, 134) and they will be subsumed in an absurd labyrinthine plot from whence escape is difficult. The multiple identities of narrators sustained by a prank which opens the novel to reality and

makes it transcend fiction —Fay Weldon describes *Mantrapped* as a *reality novel*, comparing it somehow to a reality-show— is the cue the reader may take in order to see their actual anxieties reflected in her fictions and vicariously experiment the solution to the conflicts alongside her heroines. Readers will be alerted to that policy of understatement adopted by abnegated and self-contained female protagonists who, being afraid of confronting their nagging concerns, renounce to the changes that would enhance their existences. A typical instance of this self-deceived woman can be seen in the story “Delights of France or Horrors of the Road” collected in *Polaris and Other Stories*. The main character stubbornly refuses to recognise that the yearly trips made with her husband to France for over thirty years have constituted a nightmare for her and her children, thus, flying in the face of all evidence as shown by the hysterical paralysis that affects her. Fay Weldon herself seems to have been in need of the therapeutic effects offered by her work. In *Mantrapped* she compares herself with the protagonist of one of her short stories, “A Gentle Tonic Effect”, who works in a power plant and maintains that radiation is not harmful. As she goes on to explain: “the more I suspected myself that what I wrote might be explosive, the more I maintained its harmlessness” (2004: 120). After all, in real life she also had to keep the pretence of being the “port and lemon girl: the amiable barmaid type” (*Mantrapped*, 120), the practical one in the family in the eyes of her second husband. In no way could she behave and adopt the role of the talented writer she really was in front of him, a frustrated painter. She was forced to make him feel far above her if she wanted to keep the relationship going. In this regard, Fay Weldon takes after her most successful heroines and she has cleverly learnt to take advantage of her feminine traits as far as her writing is concerned, to apply her domestic resources or liabilities onto her work. As for her policy of understatements, that is, her

tendency to downplay conflicts, it becomes a great asset in her novels since it invariably triggers the ironic double vision which characterizes her acerbic satire. However, as I have tried to prove in this thesis, Weldon does not consider satire and humour as sufficient elements to prod women into action and that is the reason why she has had to resort to playful daring Gothic exercises so that her heroines, and her readers alongside them, may become aware, through an irreverent deconstructive game, of the precarious character of their existence as a consequence of the path filled with contradictions they have unquestioningly and absurdly followed. Through her garish parodic creations, Weldon's heroines, and her readers, in a vicarious fashion, are spurred to take control of their lives, to recover from their self-inflicted paralysis and to start to enjoy life to the full without having to drag the unbearable ballast with which they have been wrongly educated.

I hope that through the development of this thesis I may have proved that only by using the Gothic genre as its proper frame of reference, can Fay Weldon's work be fully appreciated. The apparently frivolous pose, which as I have tried to show, is the moral stance which corresponds to a gender of such an ambiguous nature as the Gothic, can be rated as one of most outstanding, indeed brilliant features of Weldon's fiction and is behind its ethical richness. An unconditional endorsement of the incongruous and the preposterous, already inherent in the sensationalist and gruesome tenor of Gothic literature and its taste for exaggeration, results in the black humour which characterises her work. Laborious tales of deconstruction of identities painfully acquired are made light by means of novels which parody the Gothic spirit. Through these parodic exercises Weldon manages to put her readers at rest and happily brush aside all the concerns and anxieties they have seen articulated in her works. At this point, we are left

with the impression that her performance in the execution of this aim is as skilful and masterful as that of her heroine in *The Heart of the Country* when parting and saying farewell to a one-time and no-longer-required lover: “And she waved her feather duster at him and brushed him out of her life” (1987: 191).

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