'The Uneasy Partnership of Feminism and Ageing in Carol Shields' *Unless*'

Sarah Falcus, University of Huddersfield

Abstract

Unless (2002) is Canadian author Carol Shields' final novel, a text concerned with the mother-daughter relationship and a woman's place in a patriarchal world. It is also a novel about ageing and, particularly, with its forty-three to forty-four-year-old protagonist, about middle age. Attention to the novel's representation of time, ageing and generational identity suggests that a text usually read as Shields' most feminist work does not propound a clear and certain feminist narrative. Reta's story demonstrates that, despite the often-strident feminist politics of this novel, the implications and effects of the intersection of ageing and gender cannot be fully articulated. Following on from the proliferation of writing in English about women and ageing in the 1990s, *Unless* can be seen as part of an emerging – and not necessarily coherent – conversation about ageing and gender in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Keywords

Carol Shields, ageing, feminism, liminality, middle age, midlife

Sarah Falcus is a Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Huddersfield, UK. She has research interests in contemporary women's writing, feminism and literary gerontology, and has published on authors including Michèle Roberts, Maggie Gee, Pat Barker, Margaret Drabble and Fay Weldon. Her current research concerns the ethics and aesthetics of the narrativisation of dementia. She is the co-author (with Katsura Sako) of the forthcoming book *Contemporary Narratives of Dementia: Ethics, Ageing, Politics* (Routledge).

Teaching Carol Shields' *Unless* (2002) to a group of undergraduates, I was surprised by the vehemence of their dislike for the novel's protagonist, forty-three to forty-four-year-old Reta. Finding her irritating and self-absorbed, these largely young and predominantly female students did not connect with Reta's politics or with the pain she feels at the actions of her daughter, Norah, who has chosen to spend her days sitting on a Toronto street corner with a sign saying 'GOODNESS' hung around her neck. Though some of these reactions were undoubtedly linked to what was seen as Reta's complacently white, middle-class attitudes and lifestyle, there was certainly a generation gap evident here. This was partly a result of Reta's self-characterisation as a middle-aged woman and her self-fashioning as a member of a generation very different from that of her nineteen-year-old daughter, and partly a result of the feminist politics of the text, which are strongly connected to generations of women prior to and of the second wave. I offer this anecdote not as a prelude to exploring ageing and reader response in literary texts, but as a way into thinking about, and perhaps problematising critical responses to, *Unless*, Shields' last and in some ways most political novel. Usually read as a story of feminism and silencing, *Unless* is also a novel of ageing and of generational identity.

Well received and critically acclaimed – shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and nominated for the Orange Prize for Fiction – *Unless* was published not long before the death of American-born Canadian author Shields (1935–2003), one of Canada's most significant literary figures. Shields' creative writing career began with poetry in the 1960s and she published her first novel, *Small Ceremonies,* in 1976. The author of fiction and critical work (including a biography of Jane Austen), Shields is perhaps most well known for the fictional auto/biography *The Stone Diaries* (1993), for which she won the Pulitzer Prize. Shields' work is characterized by its meticulous attention to the banalities, incongruities and significances of the everyday, a feature of her writing that, as Mary Eagleton argues, dominates many reviews and critical responses to her work (Eagleton 2005: 72). *Unless* is no exception to this trend in

Shields' writing with its concentration upon one family and one woman at the heart of this novel. The first-person narrative presents the very ordinary, middle-aged and middle-class Reta Winters, who reflects on her own life and her relationships with those closest to her as she struggles to make sense of the seemingly inexplicable decision of her eldest daughter, Norah, to leave home to sit on a street corner in Toronto. Aside from her common-law partner Tom, Reta is associated with a largely female network that includes her mentor, Danielle Westerman, and Tom's mother, Lois, as well as Reta's other children, Natalie and Christine. And Reta's career as a writer (of light fiction) and a translator (of Danielle's academic work) is always balanced with her role as friend, mother and daughter (-in-law). *Unless* is typical of Shields' fiction not only in its attention to the everyday, but also in its interest in relationships among women, its metafictional treatment of the figure of the writer, and its concern, as Brenda Beckman-Long (2015) contends, with the auto/biographical, the story of a life.

The centrality of Norah's actions – the mystery at the heart of the novel – makes *Unless* a story about maternal loss (see İnceolğlu 2014), but it is also, intertwined with and inseparable from this, a story of ageing. Ageing and the end of youth permeate the novel, from the loss of childhood innocence outlined in the 'Thereof' chapter, to Reta's memory of feeling old at thirty-five (2003: 7). As Brenda Beckman-Long (2015) demonstrates, feminism is the subject of *Unless.* Wendy Roy, like many other critics, reads this text as one in which Shields finally confronts explicitly the problem of the silencing of women (Roy 2003).[1] The feminism in this novel is sometimes strident and angry, in particular in the unsent letters of complaint written by Reta and included within the novel. Nevertheless, attention to the novel's representation of time, ageing and generational identity suggests that, as Alex Ramon and Beckman-Long argue, the novel's feminism is more 'ambivalent' (Beckman-Long 2015: 110), 'equivocal and ironic' (Ramon 2008: 167) than its critical reception suggests. Reta's narrative of herself as a middle-aged woman, no-longer young and not-yet old, demonstrates

that the implications and effects of the intersection of ageing and gender cannot be defined or fully articulated.[2] As many cultural gerontologists and social scientists argue (see Chivers 2003; Paloge 2007; Arber, Davidson and Ginn 2003; Twigg 2004; Woodward 1999), ageism is something directed more sharply, and earlier, at women than men, in large part because their social value still depends on the body, and women are undervalued in their desirability and function as they approach old age. Nevertheless, age has not been high on the feminist agenda. Even as feminism has found itself interrogated by other forms of social inequality, age tends to lag behind as a social and cultural issue. However, over recent decades this has started to change and age is now occupying a more prominent position within feminist studies (see Calasanti and Slevin 2006; Whelehan and Gwynne 2014), as in society more generally. As a result, the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have seen a proliferation of age-conscious, often autobiographical, writing about women and ageing in English-language works, a continuation of the 'personal is political' theme by women deeply affected by the second wave of feminism (for example, Greer 1991; Friedan 1993; Heilbrun 1997; Segal 2013). This has accompanied what Constance Rooke (1992) identified back in the early 1990s as an increasing trend in fiction to represent middle-aged and old characters in prominent and complex, rather than reductive, ways. More recent critical work makes clear that the interest in the process and discourses of ageing, particularly for women, continues amongst writers of fiction (see Watkins 2013; Oró Piqueras 2013). *Unless* can therefore be seen as part of an emerging – and not necessarily coherent – conversation about the intersection of ageing and gender in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Looking more closely at the novel's feminist politics reinforces this link with gendered critiques of ageism emerging in the last decades of the twentieth century. Reta may be in her early forties in the year 2000, but her politics seem to owe more to the author's generational identity and life experiences than to her own. Citing Anita Brookner's (2002)

description of the novel and its themes as 'resolutely old-fashioned', Elizabeth Reimer states that the 'Gender politics in the novel are, at times, ones that I associate with that generation of women born between the wars, the generation that Shields has had such an abiding interest in and to which she belonged' (Reimer 2009: 263, note 13).[3] Assessments such as this rely not only upon the very domestic nature of Reta's life and primary concerns, but also upon her many meditations upon patriarchal oppression and the silencing of women. The tendency to read this novel as autobiographical and stress its status as Shields' final novel, written whilst she was suffering from breast cancer, exacerbates this sense that this is a narrative not only about twenty-first-century feminism, but also about the gender politics of earlier generations of women, women who were writing in the postwar years or baby-boomer generation. Still, Reta, like Shields (see Hollenberg, 1998), started writing fiction relatively late and both author and protagonist suffer critical responses to their work that stress its lack of depth and ambition (see Ramon 2008, Eagleton 2005 and Atwood 2005 for defences of Shields). Like Reta, Shields admitted to coming to feminism late (Stovel 2006: 51) and the story of Reta's struggles to articulate a coherent feminist narrative could indeed be Shields' own.[4] *Unless* can at the same time be aligned with the group of texts studied by Helen Paloge in *The Silent Echo* (2007): novels of middle age written in the final decades of the twentieth century and first decade of the twenty-first century by women in the postwar or baby-boomer generations. Paloge argues that these texts fail to produce the *bildung* of the middle-aged woman, instead resorting to denial and evasion, in particular, the evasion of the middle-aged female body, which is 'the silent echo at the core of women's fiction' (Paloge 2007: 6). Taking issue with Margaret Morganroth Gullette's optimistic view of novels about middle age in her early work (Gullette 1988), Paloge argues that such novels retreat from 'a full encounter with what middle age signifies' (2007: 14, 19). In one sense, *Unless* is a text where middle age is 'a silent echo' – obliquely rather than directly addressed and rarely fully acknowledged in the

novel's reception – but attention to the struggles and tensions around ageing in *Unless* suggest that it is a text in which middle age is not denied and evaded, but left unresolved and uncomfortable, for reader and protagonist. *Unless*, therefore, foregrounds the difficulties facing the middle-aged woman as she attempts to tell her own progress narrative, in the face of the dominance of ageing as decline. As Gullette argues, we are aged by a culture that increasingly promotes a decline narrative of ageing, a narrative that relates ageing only to redundancy, restriction and increasing frailty (2004: 14–18). In her later work, Gullette accepts that her argument about the inevitability of the emergence of the progress narrative may have been too optimistic in the face of the dominance of the decline narrative and she offers a more nuanced and less binary model of decline and progress (2004: 28). A progress narrative would 'affirm […] the value of aging in time' (2011: 147). This is not an idealised vision of ageing, but a story 'in which the implicit meanings of aging run from survival, resilience, recovery, and development, all the way up to collective resistance to decline forces' (2004: 17). *Unless* is not a straightforward narrative of progress or decline, but instead a text that demonstrates how telling one's life story as a movement through valued stages of the lifecourse becomes more and more challenging as one ages into middle age and beyond.

In this reflective and partly retrospective narrative that takes place over the nine months of Norah's absence, Reta is poised between the past and the 'Not Yet' (that forms the title of the final chapter). This strongly temporal construction, where immediacy is given to the stasis of the fleeting present of the short, fragmented chapters that make up the novel, foregrounds the significance of time (clock, calendar and seasonal) and the lifecourse in the narrative. Time is both a structural principle and a thematic concern in *Unless*. But this concern with time is a paradoxical one: time is marked (it passes), but the narrative is underpinned by a sense of stasis that comes primarily from the absence of Norah in the everyday life of the family. Reta is suffering what Nora Foster Stovel calls 'the winter of her

discontent' (2006: 58) as a result of Norah's sudden decision. In the face of her lost happiness, Reta considers her present position as a liminal one, at the threshold of before and after, promoting a narrative of lost naivety, youth and innocence (2003: 1).[5] Though the liminal is now used in a variety of ways in approaches to literary texts (see Kay et al. 2007), I draw here specifically upon its origins in the anthropological work of Victor Turner and Arnold van Gennep, where the liminal is a stage in a rite of passage. This understanding of liminality implies movement and progress in time, leading to the emergence from the liminal and a return to society. This can be read as a form of progress narrative, one that emphasises the importance of movement through time and the life course, echoing Gullette's definition of the progress story as one that supports 'the value of aging in time' (2011: 147). But the emphasis upon the stasis of Reta's liminal period undermines this sense of progress through the rite of passage and along the lifecourse, forcing us to stay in a period of middle-aged uncertainty. Of course, this uncertainty is primarily linked to the loss of Norah, but it is also, as I will argue, an uncertainty about the form life may take and the value it may hold during and after middle age. The chapter titles in *Unless* emphasize this lack of movement; they are 'little chips of grammar (mostly adverbs or prepositions) that are hard to define, since they are abstractions of location or relative position, words like *therefore, else, other, also, thereof, theretofore, instead, otherwise, despite, already* and *not yet'* (Shields 2003: 313, original italics). This sense of linguistic indirection reinforces the structural and thematic emphasis upon stasis. Significantly, this stasis is prolonged in the novel and, even at its conclusion, the novel does not effect a clear movement forward into the future.

The link between *Unless* and the myth of Demeter and Persephone (a very clear intertext for this story) reinforces this reading of the novel as a rite-of-passage narrative and reminds us of the centrality of maternity in the text.[6] The fact that *Unless* takes place over nine months, something observed by many critics (see, for example, Stovel 2006), reinforces

the inescapably maternal nature of Reta's liminality, as do autobiographical readings of the novel that see it as a metaphorical response to Shields' breast cancer (Stovel 2006). When read in these terms, the novel is a fiction that looks forward not only to the next stage of Reta's life, to ageing further into and beyond middle age, but also to the postmaternal. This is a term put forward by Margaret Morganroth Gullette (2002) to describe a period of women's lives that she claims has no adequate nomenclature because it is neglected. Instead, it is left to patently inadequate terms such as 'empty-nesters' to describe this stage where women are no longer primarily carers for children, since these children have become independent: 'It is no wonder then that many women who raise children still anticipate its "sorrows" and "dreads" or later adopt "emptiness," as a primary truth of their midlife identity' (Gullette 2002: 557). Of course, in one sense Reta is not postmaternal since two of her children remain at home, but the sudden loss of Norah focuses Reta's attention on her own ageing and her imminent movement into the phase of her life beyond daily caring for children, positioning her in the transitional phase between caring for children and finding those children independent. As Gullette suggests, postmaternity is traditionally conceived of as a time of loss or decline, a time of 'emptiness'. Despite the traumatic nature of Norah's disappearance, Reta's loss of Norah could be seen as not entirely out of the ordinary, but as exemplary of maternal loss, however inexplicable. The whole text's sense of stasis is therefore a reflection of Reta's self-professed identity as a middle-aged woman experiencing separation from a child and fear about her movement into the next stage of her life.[7]

The spectre of the postmaternal and the stasis and uncertainty that accompany middle age shadow the feminist politics of this text and are reinforced by the protagonist's awareness of her chronological age. Reta mentions her age at a number of points in the novel, stating on the second page that she is 'forty-three, forty-four in September' and identifying herself – when with her female friends – as one of 'four women in early middle age' (2003: 121).

Kathleen Woodward argues that a common trait in our culture is an 'obsession with chronological age, of a concern with precise numbering which in the end collapses into the polar divide of youth and age' (1991: 4) Reta certainly seems to exhibit this concern and, significantly, she connects this anxiety to the loss of Norah: 'I've entered early middle age now and I have a nineteen-year-old daughter who lives on the street' (2003: 30). Reta's narrative tends to situate her identity within a binary of youth and age, emphasising this demarcation of generations. The 'Thereof' chapter, for example, offers a lengthy reflection on the nature of ancestry and childhood, moving from Reta's musings on genealogy and genetics in terms of character in fiction to her memories of her own childhood ignorance and naivety. Reta's reflections see her judging her young self harshly, viewing lack of knowledge, ignorance and emotion in childhood as dangerous and debilitating. Reta positions herself as well past this stage, in terms which suggest that with the loss of Norah comes age-awareness: 'This is one of the very few easy comforts still available to me at age forty-four – that there is no need to suffer that degree of guttered fear and ignorance again' (Shields 2003: 152). The reference to 'very few easy comforts' makes clear that although there may be a benefit in the loss of childhood ignorance, ageing that is linked to loss is seen by Reta as a time of decline and restriction.

Even in her imagination, Reta insists on a woman in her forties living a life of narrowed opportunity and suppressed desire as she evokes a picture of her house's previous inhabitant, Mrs McGinn. She imagines Mrs McGinn's life as not so different from her own, as they both stand over the same sink (Shields 2003: 56), or brush their mops against the same porch railing (Shields 2003: 107). Mrs McGinn is:

> a woman of about my size and age, a medium frame, still slim, but widening at the hips. Middle forties with a lipsticked pout. Some essence has deserted her. A bodily

> evaporation has left her with nothing but hard, direct questions aimed in the region of her chest, and no one would ever suspect that she might be capable of rising to the upper ether of desire, wanting, wishing. (Shields 2003: 56)

Reta's projection of Mrs McGinn – whose first name she does not know, but speculates might be Lillian or Dorothy or Ruth (Shields 2003: 55) – extends to imagining her reticence and her 'tiny, whispery laugh' (Shields 2003: 55). Based upon local gossip, Reta even imagines some underlying tragedy in the family. What is significant is the way that Reta perceives her as an image of middle age, so with age comes loss: of 'essence', of the articulation and recognition (by others) of the right to desire. Indeed, as Stovel notes, Shields herself subscribed to some of these ideas, seeing forty-three as 'the oldest point at which a woman could still exert sexual allure' (2006: 53). Both author and narrator seem to experience a paucity of imaginative resources when it comes to the liminal space of middle age, reminding us of Paloge's metaphor of middle age as a 'silent echo'.

This is a novel with a very self-reflexive and self-analytical first-person narrator, a narrative that explores Reta's growing awareness of 'that roar which lies on the other side of silence'. This allusion to Eliot is used in the epigraph, and articulated here in terms of a feminist politics that rails against the suppression and silencing of women. It is not surprising, therefore, that Reta exhibits some awareness of ageism and the way that ageing women are constructed within prevailing ageist discourses. For example, Reta's analysis of her interview with the book columnist in Toronto links gender and age clearly. The interviewer refers to her as 'Mrs', implying seniority (not positive) and aligning her with 'clothelines and baking tins' (Shields 2003: 32). Reta feels herself anonymized and reduced by her "*comfortable beige waistcoat*" (Shields 2003: 35), her attraction dimmed and herself aged. As with Mrs McGinn, the sense of undesirability in middle age is clear. Announcing that she will pay the bill, Reta

sounds to herself like a '*grande dame*, adding twenty years to [her] age' (Shields 2003: 32). The final irony of this event is that the interviewer spots a man he thinks may be Gore Vidal at the end of the interview and the writer is described as 'a silver-haired man … seating himself gracefully at a table' (Shields 2003: 34). The ageing man is clearly read very differently from the ageing woman and throughout this scene Reta analyses the way she is marginalized and stereotyped in terms of both age and gender.

Nevertheless, despite the novel's obvious concern with the ways in which ageing women are constructed by the gaze of others, particularly the gaze of youth, *Unless* demonstrates that Reta cannot escape her own ageist assumptions and is unable to make the imaginative leap that would connect her story not only with that of her daughter – a connection the whole novel attempts to make – but also with women of the previous generation. One of the ways we make sense of the lifecourse and our progress through it, our ageing, is through the shaping of generations. And this text draws attention to the way that Reta shapes her own generational identity and those of the women around her. Reta identifies strongly with others in her generation, such as her coffee friends. She also refers to Tom and herself as *soixante-huitards* [68ers] (Shields 2002: 57). This latter observation reminds us, however, of the fictive nature of such age cohorts, since, as Reta admits, she was only twelve in 1968 and, indeed, she stresses the seventies as the formative time in their lives. Crucially, Reta sees herself as different from, if connected to, other generations: that of her daughters, that of Danielle (a woman in her eighties) and Lois. This expression of cohort identity is a reminder that 'Generation gaps are constructed, rhetorically shaped for their moment' (Gullette 2004: 57), and Reta's generational identity ultimately serves not to create a narrative of continuity and connection across the lifecourse, but to underline the stasis within the novel and Reta's inability to imagine her future as an older woman, her postmaternity.

In an apparent contradiction, Reta's sense that she is a woman connected across time to other generations of women is strong in some parts of the novel, echoed by the extranarrative sense that Reta's politics are those of the older Shields. Reta feels a bond with her version of Mrs McGinn, for example, and places herself in a female line that includes her dead mother, Lois, and Danielle, elderly mentor and friend. However, Reta also exhibits a resistance to recognition of the older woman as one like herself. If, as Reimer argues, 'for Shields, ''recognition'' by others can be affirming, essential in fact, to the kind of subjectivity she often depicts as an interdependent process; as Reta Winters repeats to herself in *Unless*, '''[w]e are real only in our moments of recognition''' (2009: 242), then Reta often fails to extend her ethical acts of recognition to women significantly older than her.

As a mother struggling to understand her daughter's narrative (Reta spends much of the novel trying to imagine Norah's story, a story that would explain her decision to sit on a street corner), Reta's relationships with maternal figures of a previous generation are not so empathically or ethically conducted. Danielle, Reta's (feminist) conscience, the voice of dis/approval in her head (Shields 2003: 108), is explicitly aligned with Reta's mother at moments in the novel (Shields 2003: 3, 108) and the two women share the French language that is her own mother's tongue, even though Reta insists throughout that Danielle is not a mother and cannot therefore understand her 'investment' in her daughters (Shields 2003: 103). Despite the close bond between the two, Reta prefers to see Danielle in opposition to herself: the 'other voice in [her] head' (Shields 2003: 151), a muse and intellectual conscience, a non-maternal woman who cannot fully understand the pain she suffers because of her daughter's loss. Danielle's latest memoirs are called *The Middle Years* and would seem to suggest a clear link between Danielle and the self-identifying middle-aged Reta, but this is not the case. Reta admires Danielle's new 'gorgeous fluidity and expansion of phrase', but links this eloquence to her friend's old age and possibly to senility, for Danielle has 'gone

senile to good effect, a grand loosening of language in her old age' (Shields 2003: 14–5) There's very little sense of empathy or connection here. Danielle is clearly othered as an old woman and, significantly, as a woman with no children, representing not only the aged woman, but also the non-maternal:

> There's something missing in these memoirs, or so I think in my solipsistic view. Danielle Westerman suffers, she feels the pangs of existential loneliness, the absence of sexual love, the treason of her own woman's body. She has no partner, no one for whom she is the first person in the world order, no one to depend on as I do on Tom. She does not have a child, or any surviving blood connection for that matter, and perhaps it's this that makes the memoirs themselves childlike. They go down like good milk, foaming, swirling in the glass. (Shields 2003: 15)

Despite the narrative recognition that this may be a 'solipsistic view', the fear and resistance to Danielle as both an old woman and a woman without children is palpable. She even belittles Danielle's narrative voice with her 'good milk' simile, which is both an image of childhood consumption and maternal feeding. Reta positions Danielle as other to everything she holds dear and that confirms her own identity – her motherhood, her wifehood, her relationality. In doing so, she shores up a binary between herself and the aged Danielle.

Other stereotypical ideas about ageing are perpetuated here too, such as the notion that Danielle might be suffering 'the treason of her own woman's body', a description which recalls Reta's vision of the unhappy and frustrated Mrs McGinn. This idea of the ageing female body as prison is found in relation to Danielle at other points in the novel too, where Danielle's physical frailty and the signifiers of old age that are found on her body are emphasized: her bruised and spotted legs, her 'fragile body', and the oddity of Danielle still

having her nails done twice a week at her age (Shields 2003: 8). Even Reta's attempt to view Danielle's life and her experiences as part of her ageing are fashioned into an image of entrapment, where Reta 'marvel[s] at the number of years locked up in her body' (Shields 2003: 181) and Reta stresses Danielle's physical isolation – she is only touched by Reta, her doctor and her manicurist (Shields 2003: 8). Reta here perpetuates stereotypical ideas about the ageing body as imprisoning and declining, demonstrating her inability to imagine old age as a valued stage in life. Reta, therefore, prefers to style her hair in a chignon copied from 'young Danielle, early Danielle, that vibrant girl-woman who reinvented feminism' (Shields 2003: 180), not the later Danielle, whose hair has been dyed so often it has become 'a soft rust and purple turban' (Shields 2003: 180). Dismissing the elderly woman and her ageing body, instead Reta closely aligns feminist politics with youth.

The lack of recognition Reta accords to the ageing Danielle is echoed in her relationship with Lois, her partner Tom's mother. Lois retreats into silence after Norah leaves, a silence Reta interprets as all about Norah's actions. Reta worries about Lois's withdrawal, but does not connect Lois and Norah as women who may be suffering some of the same strictures; nor does she link Lois's silence to her own struggle to articulate her feelings about her position as a woman in society, feelings articulated most forcefully through the fictional letters she writes to various men in the text and never sends. Reta reads Lois into invisibility in a way which cannot be separated from Lois's age and their respective generational positions.[8] Reta's centrality in domestic life is implicitly contrasted with Lois' marginality, as Lois's only domestic function seems to be to bring dessert for the meal Reta cooks each night, and even in this role she is gently mocked by her granddaughter for her file of one hundred desserts (Shields 2003: 296).

It is not until she is asked about herself by the editor Arthur Springer that Lois begins to talk. The irony (and comedy) here is of course the fact that Arthur only asks Lois about

herself because he has recently been on a training course in power relationships, so Arthur has no genuine interest in Lois's life and experiences. Nevertheless, this invitation to talk results in 'Beginning With', a short chapter that touches upon Lois's earlier life, her own midlife 'hard time', her current widowhood and her theory about Norah's actions: that 'women were easily injured', particularly when they spoke (Shields 2003: 299). Though Lois' narrative is framed as Reta's account of what Lois told Arthur, the seemingly third-person narrative within this chapter provides a textual interruption to Reta's solipsistic first-person account.[9] Lois' story mirrors Reta's in many ways, with its emphasis upon domestic life and motherhood, and with its feminist consciousness. This chapter also undermines Reta's account, in its description of Mrs McGinn, for example. Unlike Reta, Lois knew Mrs McGinn and remembers her not as a timid, unfulfilled Lillian, Dorothy or Ruth, but as Crystal McGinn, an educated woman with a large family of 'boisterous youngsters' (Shields 2003: 297). By the end of the novel, Reta accords to both Danielle and Lois the sort of recognition Shields' characters depend upon for their interrelational identities (cf Reimer 2009). Having been given some explanation of Norah's actions, Reta directly asks Lois and Danielle for their stories. This belated recognition supports Roy's argument that Shields' narrator mystery-solvers are often 'bad reader[s]' who 'cannot accurately interpret the world around them until they are allowed to take control of the writing and reading of their own and others' narratives' (2008: 115). Nevertheless, the optimism of this generational connection is undermined by the uncertainty that characterizes the end of this novel.

Norah eventually returns to the family home and the novel provides a comforting image of her asleep in her childhood bed. This reinstatement of Reta's role as mother to Norah offers narrative fulfilment, but the title of the final chapter, 'Not Yet', indicates an uncertainty that unsettles this happy ending. Is this the 'not yet' of feminist achievement, or a 'not yet' that holds in abeyance Reta's own ageing? Tellingly, Reta recognizes at this point

that, though her feminist reading of Norah's actions may have validity, Norah's decision to sit on a street corner may also be a result of her mother's own concerns and fears:

> My own theory – before we knew of the horrifying event – was that Norah had become aware of an accretion of discouragement, that she had awakened in her twentieth year to her solitary state of non-belonging, understanding at last how little she would be allowed to say….but it is also probable that I was weighing her down with my own fears, my own growing perplexity concerning the world and its arrangements, that I had found myself, in the middle of my life, in the middle of the continent, on the side of the disfavoured, and it may be that I am partly right and partly wrong. (Shields 2003: 309–10)

Maternal guilt comes together with feminism, ageing and time in this paragraph. Reta's feminist theorising may or may not be right; here there is deep uncertainty – as there is throughout the novel in the questioning and reiterative nature of the way Reta tries to solve the puzzle of her daughter's actions – about the adequacy of Reta's feminism to answer the concerns of the women in this text. In this most feminist (Roy 2003: 126) of Shield's novels, Shields does not seek to show that feminism offers a grand or totalising narrative, but instead, as Beckman-Long contends, she acts as a 'writer-critic' and produces a 'complex feminist critique' that 're-examine[s] the feminist subject' (2015: 113, 110). The reiteration of the liminal is also very significant at this point in the novel. Instead of leaving behind the stasis imposed by Norah's absence and completing her rite of passage, Reta emphasises her liminal position in midlife, expressed in geographical and gender terms, but clearly inflected with a decline narrative of ageing. Narrative itself fails, is incomplete or is contested in this novel: the narrative of feminism and the *bildung* of the middle-aged woman. Reta's decision not to

give her comic novel, *Thyme in Bloom*, the happy narrative closure of a wedding emphasises this open-endedness, as does her comment on the writing process: 'I have bundled up each of the loose narrative strands, but what does such fastidiousness mean? It doesn't mean that all will be well for ever and ever, amen; it means that for five minutes a balance has been achieved at the margin of the novel's thin textual plane; make that five seconds; make that the millionth part of a nanosecond' (Shields 2003: 317–18). The fragility of the 'textual plane', the space of the novel, self-reflexively reminds us that the novel has not offered resolution, has not been able to imagine a future where 'all will be well'. What is clear in both of these quotations is that the journey that Reta has been on throughout the text, her rite of passage, has not led to her emerging as a woman secure in her middle age and imminent postmaternity.

Unless is part of a significant collection of novels written by women in the postwar or baby boomer generations that deal with middle-aged women in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. While it can also be seen in the context of the wealth of critical work on ageing and gender that has emerged from different disciplines in the past two to three decades (for example, Waxman 1990; Wyatt-Brown and Rossen 1993; Gullette 1997; Woodward 1999; Bernard et al. 2000; Arber, Davidson and Ginn 2003; Chivers 2003; Calasanti and Slevin 2006; Dolan and Tincknell 2012; King 2013), it is not a novel that is usually read in terms of ageing. Most often, *Unless* is read in terms of feminism and mother-daughter relationships, which are clearly central in the text. By paying attention to ageing, time and multiple generations, we see that the novel offers an alternative perspective on its feminist politics, reinforcing both Beckman-Long's and Ramon's arguments that the feminism of this text is complex and ambiguous, and that it does not seek to offer a coherent feminist narrative. I would suggest that one strength of the novel is precisely the fact that *Unless* draws attention to this lack of coherence. The stasis of this novel and its refusal of narrative closure disrupt the narrative of middle-aged development and force us to consider

the contradictions of ageing and gender in Reta's narrative, as she is both subject to and perpetrator of practices that reinforce the silence and marginalisation of the middle-aged and older woman. This novel does not offer a sustained critique of the way that ageing women are denied power and marginalised by society. Yet a reading of the novel through the lens of ageing encourages the reader to recognise the centrality of ageing in women's lives and the historical failure of feminist theorising to account fully for the experiences of middle-aged and old women.

Notes

[1] See also Roy 2008.

[2] Shields does, of course, write from the perspective of an older woman in other texts, most notably *The Stone Diaries* (1993).

[3] Reimer notes the anachronistic nature of the reference to macramé in the novel as an example. Shields admitted in an interview that she belonged to a group of friends who met weekly for coffee (not unlike Reta and her friends in Orangetown) in the seventies and called themselves the macramé group. (Hollenberg 1998: 342) Other connections between Reta and Shields include the emphasis upon family over writing (Hollenberg 1998: 343).

[4] Brenda Beckman-Long argues that Shields' work and politics straddle the second and third waves of feminism (2015: 16).

[5] Whilst acknowledging the general link Ramon makes between Shields's dual identity (as American and Canadian) and liminality, as he argues that 'a doubleness of perspective [is] central to [Shields's] work' (2008: 16), this paper seeks to employ the concept of the liminal in a very specific way as it relates to both ageing and the maternal.

[6] See Stovel 2006 for further discussion of the use of this myth.

[7] This echoes Gullette's (2004) argument about contemporary novels narrating the deaths of children, where she suggests that these plots of 'perilous parenting' are less about the children than about the adults and fears of ageing and decline (2004: 66–7).

[8] See Woodward 1999: xvi on female invisibility in older age.

[9] The letters provide other interruptions, of course, but these are still obviously in Reta's voice.

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