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In: *Variations on community: the Canadian space*. Otrísalová, Lucia (editor); Martonyi, Éva (editor). 1st edition Brno: Masaryk University, 2013, pp. 161-171

ISBN 978-80-210-6404-1

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.81408>

Access Date: 03. 03. 2025

Version: 20250212

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The Diversity of Gender and Feminist Issues in Cynthia Flood's "My Father Took a Cake to France"

Abstract

The title story of Cynthia Flood's collection *My Father Took a Cake to France* (1992) won the Journey Prize for fiction in 1990 and was judged the best Canadian short story in that year. This paper represents a critical reading of this short story from the point of view of gender studies in general and feminism in particular. Flood exposes and indirectly criticizes the traditional, socially prescribed female and male roles in the predominantly patriarchal society through the sets of binary oppositions that are reinforced in the story (past/present, England/Canada, her father's detached scholarly manner/ her mother's genuine love and compassion). The idea that brings all these sets of binary oppositions in the story together is Flood's never-ending quest for the definition of Canadian female identity. The paper also attempts at demonstrating that Flood's standpoint is much closer to the French than to the Anglo-American feminist school since Flood regards her literary themes as universal and humanist and not just female or male oriented.

Résumé

L'histoire principale de la collection *Mon père emporta un gâteau en France* de Flood (1992) a gagné le « Journey Prize » pour fiction en 1990, et elle était appréciée pour la meilleure nouvelle canadienne cette année-là. Cet article représente la lecture critique de cette nouvelle du point de vue des études de genre en général et le féminisme en particulier. Flood, en fait, expose et critique indirectement les rôles féminins et masculins qui sont traditionnels et socialement prescrits dans la société principalement patriarcale travers les ensembles d'oppositions binaires qui sont renforcés dans l'histoire (passé / présent, Angleterre / Canada, une manière détachée et érudite de son père/ l'amour et la compassion véritable de sa mère) L'idée qui réunit tous ces ensembles d'oppositions binaires dans l'histoire est la quête incessante de Flood pour la définition de l'identité des femmes canadiennes. L'article tente également à démontrer que le point de vue de Flood est beaucoup plus proche de l'école français que de l'école anglo-américaine féministe puisque elle considère ses thèmes littéraires comme universel et humaniste, et pas seulement féminine ou masculine orientée.

Apart from being engaged in creating short stories that deal with the various approaches to the concept of Canadian female identity, Cynthia Flood has been a fervent activist of numerous socialist, feminist, anti-war and environmental groups. While reading her short story "My Father Took a Cake to France," which won the Journey Prize for fiction in 1990 and was judged the best Canadian short story in that year, the reader is constantly exposed to an indirect attack on the traditional, socially prescribed female and male roles in the

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predominantly patriarchal society. The act of writing for Flood represents a form of political activism in which a proper artist, a dissident, as Adrienne Rich would put it¹, represents the voice of the silenced and deprived. In order to describe the calculated process of silencing and depriving women throughout history, Flood does not talk about specific historical data concerning women's fight for gender equality, but rather deals with the issues – both familiar and difficult for disentangling – related to her own family.

The title of the story refers to a particular event related to the early married life of the narrator's parents – in 1928, her twenty-six-year-old father, a history student at Oxford, is on his way from London to Paris, where her mother rents a small apartment. The emotional significance of the episode of her father buying a proper cake for his wife is emphasized through the story; however, Flood does not fail to accentuate the reason of the newlyweds' separation – her mother is in Paris "because a married Oxford student is so far outside the norm as to be inconceivable to the university authorities" (307).

Although women were allowed to study at Oxford in 1884, the same university authorities mentioned in the previous quote did not allow their diplomas to be issued until the 1920s, which ominously coincides with the time frame of the episode mentioned in Flood's story. This social convention is perfectly described through the prism of the narrator's father relationship with her mother. As a student at Oxford, "he has attained an ideal separation between the life of the intellect and that of the heart and flesh, between the world of many men and a world of one woman, for he has literally to journey from one to the other across land and water, to cross national boundaries, to cross customs. And the one world knows the other not at all, not at all" (Flood 311).

This split between the life of the intellect and the life of the heart and flesh is quite interesting from the point of view of gender studies in general and feminism in particular. It actually evokes one of the most memorable questions in feminist literary criticism, posed by Gilbert and Gubar – "Is a pen a metaphorical penis?" which has since then become a metaphor for the academic paternity in the patriarchal Western culture. According to Gilbert and Gubar, the world of letters and the aspect of intellect belong to men and there is no place for women in this sphere:

If male sexuality is integrally associated with the assertive presence of literary power, female sexuality is associated with the absence of such power, with the idea – expressed by the nineteenth century-thinker Otto Weininger – that 'woman has no share in ontological reality'... a further implication of the paternity/ creativity metaphor is the notion that women exist only to be acted on by men, both as literary and sensual objects. (95)

1) In her influential study *A Human Eye: Essays on Art in Society, 1997–2008* (2009), Adrienne Rich distinguishes between "protest poetry" and "dissident poetry":

Protest poetry is 'conceptually shallow', 'reactive', predictable in its means, too often a hand-wringing from the sidelines. Dissident poetry, however, does not respect boundaries between private and public, self and other. In breaking boundaries, it breaks silences, speaking for, or at best, with the silenced; opening poetry up, putting it into the middle of life...It is a poetry that talks back, that would act as part of the world, not simply as a mirror of it. (Rich 130)



Margaret Atwood discusses the same idea in her essay "Paradoxes and Dilemmas, the Woman as Writer":

We found several instances of reviewers identifying an author as a 'housewife' and consequently dismissing anything she has produced (since, in our society, a 'housewife' is viewed as a relatively brainless and talentless creature)... For such reviewers, when a men writes about things like doing the dishes, it is realism, when a woman does, it is an unfortunate feminine genetic limitation. (Atwood 105)

The narrator's father, a son of a Canadian Methodist minister and a graduate of Toronto's Victoria College (whose main motto is "Truth Shall Make you Free"), though quite open for discovering new artistic and scientific insights related to the tradition of the Old World that he prioritizes in comparison to the New World, remains completely ignorant of the truth regarding his own wife and wishes her not to share the same ontological reality with him, as previously seen, but to be more mysterious, exotic, feminine, to become a perfect fit in the social mould prescribed for women: "Now my mother is and always has been a handsome woman, energetic, with snapping hazel eyes and a lively play of expression and a nose as strong as her will; yet all his life my father yearns, or part of him yearns, for her to be fragile, delicate" (Flood 311). This young scholar is basically not satisfied with the flesh and blood woman in front of him and would prefer her as a fragile and delicate heroine from the romantic novels that he enjoys reading so much; if she could be projected into one of these subtle and amorous heroines, then he himself would resemble the gallant, noble and dignified lover, a stereotypical male-savior role that he yearns for all his life:

He yearns himself to be the lover who gives gifts to this being who is other, oh very other, mysterious, unknown, in fact unknowable, as strange and distant as the inner reality of France or England is to a Canadian (this though my mother like my father is Canadian born and raised)...My mother, this other being, if correctly presented according to my father's fantasy, would be adorned, no, would be veiled in lace, silks, embroidery, furs. She would wear jewels. She would recline beautifully; my father thinks of pictures in the *Illustrated London News*, sees the languid hand trailing over the edge of the cushioned-heaped chaise longue, the curled tendrils of hair clustering delicately about the slender throat...As the marriage moves on through the decades to its golden jubilee, my father will develop an entire verbal routine (one of many, on various topics) about my mother, more specifically about his own failure to make her a marchioness. (Flood 311–312)

Obviously, although he recreates the romance-like world of lovers in his mind, in which the mysterious female is to be adorned and presented with the gifts of silk, veil and lace, this young intellectual has completely absorbed himself in the traditional gender roles: man – a generous financial provider and woman – a passive, but grateful recipient of male's financial support and attention.² He sincerely grieves for not being able to provide his wife with

2) Culturally imposed gender differences seem to be fervently embraced by the dominant patriarchal order. For instance, there is a long tradition of reactionary argument that discusses sexual difference in language, a mere reflection of the



a suitable establishment, a suitable lovely house in England, "with flanking pavilions in perfect symmetry and formal gardens sloping to the lake" (Flood 312) and considers it his greatest failure in life.

The theme of the superiority of noble and dignified Europe (England and France in particular) over raw and vulgar Canada (a mere blueprint of a country, with grotesque place names like Lake Muskoka and Hogtown) is of great significance for the understanding the relationship of the narrator's father with the women in his family and women in general. Appropriately equipped with the texts that evoke the glory and nobility of the Old Continent, but, at the same time, doubt, irony and nihilism concerning the evanescence of life and beauty that reflect his personal and academic preoccupation, T. S. Eliot's *Wasteland* and Arnold Becket's *The Old Wives' Tale*, this young scholar is filled with rage and bitterness for not being able to evade his Canadian roots, a curse that he will suffer from for the rest of his life. This attitude reveals a complete dissociation from life common to those who can only experience themselves as a sort of suffering spectacle, without realizing how fortunate they actually are. Like so many academics, he possesses a detached, impartial and objective scholarly manner void of affection and sympathy regarding practical life experiences – in theory, he is a humanist; in practice, a sort of a tyrant. For instance, he criticizes his younger sister who did not accomplish anything with her musical training and finds it unfair that he was denied his musical training on her account, although the narrator finds out at his funeral that her aunt chose to sacrifice her talents and ambitions for the sake of educating "the gifted older brother," yet another instance of women sacrifice on the account of imposed male-female roles in the dominant patriarchal culture.

A good example of the narrator's father 'tyrannical' attitude towards the alleged inferior, indulging in his own intellectual snobbery and elitism, is the central episode of the story – buying a cake in the bakery shop. As a young man totally charmed with the tradition and history of Europe, as opposed to the lack of it in Canada, the first thing he notices when entering the bakery is the sound of the bell, announcing the customers. Even the sound of this bell sounds romantic and enticing in comparison to the automatic buzzing machine sound that one could hear anywhere in Canada in a similar situation. The narrator's father inhales the sweet fragrance that fills the shop and begins to smile once he pays attention to a shopping assistant, "a fair English flower" (Flood 308). Although he adores the sight of this girl – "her eyes are grey, her hair curled tight, her complexion apple blossom grafted to cherry, and she is a freshness and cleanliness incarnate in a pink shortsleeved dress with a white bibbed apron" (Flood 308) – it will soon be revealed that he prefers women to be confections, as already seen in the relation with the women from his own family. He looks at the youth and freshness

physical difference between sexes. According to this culturally implied binary opposition, the domain of women is related to the irrational, affectionate, subjective, whereas the domain of man is related to the rational, reasonable, and objective. Apart from criticizing this practice that seems to be taken for granted in the patriarchal society, Margaret Atwood suggests that women must master the male style of expression in order to rebel and oppose it:

The 'masculine' style is, of course, bold, forceful, clear, vigorous, etc., the 'feminine' style is vague, weak, tremulous, pastel, etc. In the list of pairs you can include 'objective' and 'subjective', 'universal' or 'accurate' depiction of society versus 'confessional', 'personal', or even 'narcistic' or 'neurotic'. (Atwood 104)



behind the counter with an esthetic pleasure that is distanced, not only because he generalizes on the concept of beauty and contemplates its transience in a detached, impartial, even cynical scholarly manner, but also because of the obstacles related to the social status between the two of them. He is quite aware of his prospects, being "a highly intelligent and remarkably good writer, a most distinguished mind" (Flood 308). However, he cannot help thinking about what he should have been with a mind as bright as his if he were born in the Old Continent. That is why, although enticed with the variety of beautiful cakes in the shop, he feels nostalgia for a moment, "that wrenching union of mournfulness and delight" (Flood 309), since everything eventually will turn to naught, "all, all is ashes" (Flood 308).

However, he respectfully approaches the counter as an altar and finally decides on the cake for his wife: the French cake, Gatto, decorated with the ancient armorial bearings of France. The narrator's father glories in the high romance of his gesture, completely oblivious of the possible inappropriateness of his gift. His first impressions when looking at the cake were not of a romantic nature, but of a more practical, pragmatic kind: he would dearly love to be a citizen of a nation ruled by kings, true resident monarchs and not people who show up in Canada every few years and wave from the rears of trains; next, he mourns over the fate of human enterprise by watching how, ironically, the glorious and heroic tale of Europe is reduced to a mere image on a piece of cake.

The calamity that occurs afterwards is related to the price of the cake. Being so completely immersed in the role of a young and perspective intellectual, the narrator's father believes that he should not be bothered with the issue of financial standing. However, the cake is too expensive, and it is too late for him to change his decision, since the possible change would bring into question the public image he enforces and thus disturb his peace of mind. Buying the cake would simply mean that he should skip the lunch on his way to France. This incident results in another contemplative outburst on his part:

Why is he poor and why are so many undeserving people rich? Stupid vulgar Canadians who could not write a shapely sentence if their lives depended on it, who know nothing of Greek mythology or the French impressionists or Dickens and Macaulay, who say anyways and lay down, who holiday in Florida (in later life he will reserve a special loathing for these), who are Jews or have funny names from Eastern Europe or both, who do not have university degrees, who wear brown suits... (Flood 314)³

- 3) This attitude is also a good illustration of what is meant by the phrase "garden culture" discussed by Zygmunt Bauman in his study *The Uniqueness and Normality of the Holocaust*. The phrase is used by a fascist society to establish a false analogy between the garden and their pathological vision of a perfect arrangement of human conditions. To achieve this perfection, the design presupposes a necessary defense – against the unrelenting danger of disorder, e.g. weeds. In a fascist society, all racial minorities, and for the sake of this short story analysis, gender minorities as well, like all weeds, are to be exterminated: "Like all other weeds, they must be segregated, contained, prevented from spreading, removed and kept outside the society boundaries; if all these means prove insufficient, they must be killed" (Bauman 87). In other words, the process of weeding out, from the gardener's point of view, is a creative, not a destructive activity. It serves as a justification of any kind of genocide, states Bauman, and concludes:

Modern genocide is genocide with a purpose. Getting rid of the adversary is not an end in itself. It is a means to an end: a necessity that stems from the ultimate objective, a step one has to take if one wants ever to reach the end of the road. ... Modern genocide is an element of social engineering, meant to bring about a social order conforming to the design of the perfect society. (Bauman 85)



The narrator's father facial expression, containing explosive movement, causes an instinctive, even sacrificial shrinking in the young woman's body standing opposite him in the bakery shop. As a good psychologist, the clever intellectual senses it, and instead of sympathizing with the shop assistant, he persists in making her miserable in order to forget about his own financial misery. For him, it is a sort of training, well practiced and utterly beneficial to his ego: "...he presses in immediately, concentrates his gaze so that it is chilled metal, cold and killing, and sends its force out to nip her warm flesh. He will not let her go. Concentration, intensity, strength. He makes the glare persist. Do that long enough and the other person will collapse, he knows" (Flood 315). Having exercised the act of mental violence over the shop assistant, the "fatal shining" appears in the girl's eyes confirming the young man's mental superiority and he is "glad" (Flood 315).

The expression of the Nazi-like superiority directed towards an inexperienced young woman in the bakery shop is just one way of pleasing this young man's ego (as seen, he also directs it towards other target groups: the Jews, the people from Eastern Europe, the people with no university degrees, etc.) However, for the purpose of this paper, it is of vital importance to comment on this act of mental violence over women.

The image of sacrificing women's integrity and creativity in order to pay respect to male ratio in the patriarchal culture has been a burning issue both in the feminist and gender studies movements. Since the 1970s, there had been a lot of debate on the part of liberal and radical feminists about the future of the woman's movement: as a result, two dominant feminist trends appeared – 'constructionist' – based on the idea that gender is made by culture in history, and 'essentialist' – based on the idea that gender reflects a natural difference between men and women that is not only biological, but also psychological and even linguistic (Kostić 74).⁴

The constructionists state that gender identity is a construction of the patriarchal culture; for example, the idea that men are superior to women, as exemplified and implied in Flood's short story. The constructionists' greatest worry was that the essentialists interpreted the subordination of women as women's nature, which, if we return to "My Father Took a Cake to France" seems quite natural and taken for granted from the point of view of the narrator's

Such a vision of a bureaucratic perfection was the rationale behind Hitler's Final Solution. In his slightly different version of the gardening process, he regarded the Jews as bacilli or a particularly dangerous kind of vermin. It was essential that they should be denied as part of humanity, for, in that way, they were no longer entitled to the protection we instinctively accord a human being, observes Paul Johnson in his study, *A History of the Jews*. The methods that Hitler used in his genocidal campaign against the Jews – "a bewildering, pragmatic mixture of law and lawlessness, system and sheer violence" (Johnson 475) – correspond to those that the young scholar uses in his treatment of the shop assistant girl, who, though not a member of a racial minority group, still represents the Other that has to acknowledge the alleged intellectual superiority of the narrator's father, that further entails the acknowledgment of the class gap between the two of them, in order to gain his sympathy and approval. Thus Flood's short story constitutes prophesy and a warning: in it we recognize "a type of society that made the Holocaust possible, and that contained nothing which could stop the Holocaust from happening" (Bauman 83).

- 4) In her influential study, *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler gives primacy to psychological identity, rather than emphasizing physical or biological difference between men and women. She claims that women can appropriate the male identity, while men might embrace culturally imposed ideas of masculine conduct due to their obedience to the dominant patriarchal order. In Flood's short story, there are no examples of women appropriating 'male' roles; there is the case of the narrator's father who unconsciously embraces the cultural codes of male dominance and takes them for granted being a perfect product of the dominant patriarchal culture, though.



father. In the constructionists' opinion, there is a need for change: the way the patriarchal culture traps woman's identity should not be changed – but the way all gender (both male and female) is fabricated should be definitely altered. Perhaps one instance of this change is presented in the story through the character of the narrator, the artist, herself. She is the one who directly responds to the unjust treatment of the women in her family and ultimately, women, in general, unlike these women themselves whose voice is not to be heard throughout the story, probably out of obedience to cultural codes – the narrator herself appropriates the voice of the silenced and the depraved. The narrator's response to the male domination in her family changes as she matures: "In my teens I found this routine amusing, in my twenties embarrassing. In my thirties I despise it. Now in my forties I feel a sour pity that slowly sweetens" (Flood 312).

As already discussed in "Feminist Theory and Practice in the Work of Adrienne Rich," Luce Irigaray, the dominant critical figure in the French feminist theory, claimed that "women's physical differences (giving birth, menstruation, lactation, etc.) make them more connected to the world around them than men" (Kostić 74). However, bearing in mind the superiority of the male and the masculine over the female and the feminine in the dominant patriarchal culture, Irigaray even suggests that "the feminine finds itself defined as lack or deficiency or as imitation and negative image of the subject. In extolling the female, the woman does not break the pattern of binary thought whereby she is defined in relation to the male but continues to operate within the existing system" (Kostić 74). For example, the women in Flood's short story are completely immersed in the traditionally prescribed roles, as mentioned, they do not feel the urge to change their position and find numerous ways to make their situation as acceptable and meaningful to themselves as it is possible. Although the narrator's mother dedicated her whole life to the care of her husband (being a proper housewife, preparing his favourite dishes, letting aside her creative impulses and even human integrity), the only instance of her impulsive nature described in the story is the mock-orange episode on her wedding day. Characteristically impulsive, the narrator's mother breaks the sprigs off a mock-orange shrub they pass while walking towards their ceremony in the little London church. Being so fond of the mock-orange smell, she completely disregards her lover's objections and his wish to buy her a proper bouquet. The only form of her resistance to the dominant male will be seen in her act of planting mock-orange in the garden of every house they rent, as well as in the one they finally own, when her husband finally retires.

According to Irigaray, the only way of nay-saying to patriarchy is that the feminine role should be assumed deliberately. She even suggests a new term for this process - "mimicry" – the feminine is not a natural predisposition for women, it is "the conscious utilization of a deconstructive method" (Irigaray 568). Irigaray stresses that this is a perilous undertaking:

To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself – in as much as she is on the side of the 'perceptible', of 'matter' – to 'ideas', in particular to ideas about herself that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make 'visible', by an effect of playful repetition what was supposed to remain 'invisible' – the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means to 'unveil' the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they



are not simply absorbed in this function. THEY ALSO REMAIN ELSEWHERE: another case of the persistence of 'matter', but also of 'sexual' pleasure. (Irigaray 570)

Thus, for both major representatives of the French feminist school, Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray the creative rests on difference as multiplicity and heterogeneity. Cixous emphasizes the binary oppositions on which the Western culture rests⁵ in order to assert that female sexuality is not uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes; her conclusion is that the feminine cannot only be defined in relation to the masculine, it escapes "being theorized, enclosed, coded" (Cixous, "Sorties" 579) She focuses on movement, abundance and openness, instead. In order to avoid the patriarchal hierarchy according to which women are seen as inferior, Cixous insists that

Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reason, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into the history – by her own movement. ... Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it. (Cixous, "The Laugh" 320)

The narrator in this story purposefully combines different time frames (past, more recent past, present time) like a well-made cake that her student-father bought as a present in London on his way to his young wife living in Paris in order to point to different aspects in approaching the concept of femininity. The attitude of the women mentioned in the story (her mother, her aunt, the shop-assistant girl) culminating in the example of an elderly cleaning woman, that has been a constant in their family life for fifteen years, who surreptitiously sponges her father's slippers stained with excrement due to his cancer body disorder and urges his daughter not to tell professor that she knows about his "little accidents" (Flood 316) shows the willing appropriation of the cultural codes imposed on women. However, the narrator-daughter puts herself in the text and re-appropriates her femininity, as Cixous suggested. Flood acknowledges the problematic, dominant gender roles, but does not pass a severe judgment on them – she actually makes an open-ended ending to her story. Basically, the story ends in an expectation of her mother's version of the same events, once we have witnessed her father's vision of their shared past ("She...") (Flood 317). This is how, hopefully, the voice of the silenced and deprived will ultimately be heard.

-
- 5) Where is she?
Activity/Passivity
Sun/Moon
Culture/Nature
Day/Night
Father/Mother
Head/Heart
Intelligence/Palpable
Logos/Pathos
Form, convex, step, advance, semen, progress/
Matter, concave, ground – where steps are taken, holding-and dumping-ground
Man/Woman (Cixous, "Sorties" 578)



It seems to me that Flood's short story "My Father Took a Cake to France" can straighten out some of the controversies in recent feminist literary criticism. In a way, Flood offers a sort of reconciliation between two seemingly incompatible approaches to the question of feminine writing.

Elaine Showalter, a main figure in the Anglo-American feminist literary theory differentiates between two kinds of feminist criticism: the first one is the feminist critique, mostly based on the feminist readings of male texts that question the stereotypes of women in literature. Showalter's opinion is that this approach is rather limited because it presents male critical theory as universal. Thus, she sees the feminist critic as a 'gynocritic', a term that was later coined and described by Mary Eagleton, whose role is to offer a female framework for the analysis of women's literature and develop new models based on the study of female experience:

The gynocritic dedicates herself to the female author and character and develops theories and methodologies based on female experience, the touchstone of authenticity. The gynocritic discovers in her authors and characters an understanding of female identity – not that she expects her authors and heroines to be superwomen, but the essential struggle will be towards a coherent identity, a realization of selfhood and autonomy. (Eagleton 9)

However, it has to be emphasized that both Showalter and Eagleton are obviously gender limited, e.g. female oriented, because they mainly perceive women as biological entities that fight for their rights.

The main difference between these two dominant feminist critical schools is in the method they apply: on the one hand, Anglo-American critics are looking for women in history, while French critics are looking for woman in the unconscious, that is, in language.⁶ Thus, although we may uncover forgotten novels by women writers, French feminist critics are unwilling to see them as necessarily a part of female tradition. In this vein, Shoshana Felman questions the definition or status of 'woman':

6) "French feminist literary theory grew out of linguistics and psychoanalysis. French feminist critics relied upon Lacan's readjustment of Freud." (Kostić 73) When describing phases in the development of a child, Lacan uses Freud's theory and translates it into linguistic terms. Thus, Lacan perceives the pre-Oedipal (pre-natal) phase in a child's development, the phase based on the close connection between mother and child as the imaginary or pre-linguistic phase. This closeness is interrupted with the appearance of the father, whose imposed language is viewed as the embodiment of the Symbolic Order. "Kristeva's starting point was exactly this Symbolic Order in which, by entering it, we have to repress all chaotic bodily instincts (the imaginary). However, the repression of the Imaginary is not total. It can be detected in the so-called Semiotic Speech and is manifested in undermining all clear, definite meanings and opposites on which our culture rests (life/death, man/woman, father/mother, ...)" (Kostić 74). Kristeva sees the Semiotic (body speech), which is subversive of the Law of the Father, as not exclusive to women only, and emphasizes that it actually originates in the pre-Oedipal phase in which both men and women enjoyed the unity with the mother's body. On the other hand, one of the most influential feminist thinkers today, Judith Butler claims that Kristeva's insistence on the "maternal" sphere that precedes culture and on poetry as a return to the maternal body is an essentialist trap: "Kristeva conceptualizes this maternal instinct as having an ontological status prior to the paternal law, but she fails to consider the way in which that very law might well be the cause of the very desire it is said to repress" (Butler 90). Butler here claims, in a rather revolutionary fashion, that even the term "maternity" can be seen as a socially imposed construct, whereby the Symbolic Order purposefully invents the concept of feminine in order to repress it.



... if 'the woman' is precisely the Other of any conceivable Western theoretical locus of speech, how can the woman as such be speaking in this book?...Is she speaking the language of men, or the silence of women? Is she speaking AS a woman, or IN PLACE OF the (silent) woman, FOR the woman, IN THE NAME OF the woman? Is 'speaking as a woman' a fact determined by some biological condition, or by a strategic, theoretical position, by anatomy or by culture? What if 'speaking as a woman' were not a simple 'natural' fact, could not be taken for granted? (Felman 58)

Kristeva, one of the leading French feminist critics, pleads for 'gynesis', a kind of writing that disregards the sex of an author and mainly concentrates on the 'feminine' qualities within the text itself that unconsciously reveal the proper identity of an author:

... gynesis – the putting into discourse of 'woman' as that process diagnosed in France as intrinsic to the condition of modernity; indeed the valorization of the feminine, woman and her obligatory, that is historical connotations, as somehow intrinsic to new and necessary modes of thinking, writing, speaking. (Eagleton 9)

Thus, gynocriticism's belief in the control of the text by the author is refuted by gynesis, which gives no special emphasis to female authors and characters; moreover, most of the examples of 'feminine writing' it considers are by men.⁷

Put into the context of the difference between the two dominant feminist schools nowadays, the Anglo-American and French, Cynthia Flood's short story "My Father Took a Cake to France" does offer a sort of reconciliation: Flood is a female writer in search of the feminine identity (Canadian, to be precise), which is basically what the Anglo-American feminist school is dedicated to; at the same time, it is significant to emphasize that Flood's standpoint in this short story is much closer to the French than to the Anglo-American feminist school since Flood regards her literary themes as universal and humanist, and not just female or male oriented, so that the identity and gender of the author is not as important as the text itself, as well as the impact that it leaves on the reader.

In conclusion, another rather influential fraction in the field of gender studies and feminism should be mentioned here. After the attempt to resolve the conflicted stands of two major feminist schools, Judith Butler in her study *Gender Trouble* (1990) undermines the main feminist principles, those taken for granted both by the Anglo-American and French feminists, by attacking one of the central assumptions of feminist theory: the belief that there exists an identity and a subject that requires representation in language and politics. For Butler, the category of 'woman' and 'female' is complex since it contains not only the gender aspect of identity, but also includes class, ethnicity, sexual preference etc. The idea that Butler emphasizes in her study as potentially dangerous is that the universality of these terms is nowadays mostly taken for granted, which may lead to a possible diminishment of the oppression over women in the history of the patriarchal Western society. Thus, Butler becomes a main figure in a new fraction of coalitional feminism that criticizes the basis of identity and gender.

7) For further difference between the two trends in the recent feminist thought also see Milena Kostić, "Feminist Theory and Practice in the Work of Adrienne Rich," *Facta Universitatis* 4.1 (University of Niš, 2006): 71–84. Research results were quoted and applied in the analysis of Flood's short story.



In her introduction to *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler approves of the main idea expressed by the feminist constructionists that gender and sex are cultural constructs; furthermore, she goes a step further and claims that gender is performative. The socially imposed acts that are supposed to construct gender identity represent a mere illusion and falsification of the dominant patriarchal culture. Gender can never be fixed or universal, it is mainly constructed through the cultural practices of performance. Thus, both gender notions (that of woman and man) ultimately remain open for new interpretations. In this way, Butler provides an opening for subversive action. She calls for gender trouble, for people to trouble the categories of gender through performance (Butler 90–95).

Whether Cynthia Flood had in mind the concept of 'gender trouble' when writing "My Father Took a Cake to France" is a question that remains open for debate. However, the mere fact that her story ends in the expectation of the female version of the same story does not include the possibility that 'herstory' could subvert the existing categories of gender and cause some 'gender trouble', as Butler suggests. Perhaps the answer to this question could be obtained through the analysis and discussion of Cynthia Flood's other works, which remains an academic task to be performed in the future.

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