

Gender & Genre in Gertude Story's Schroeder Trilogy, a Twentieth Century Canadian Feminist Bildungsroman in English

DEDICATION: To all those who would end the silence.

"In this work, when it shall be found that much is omitted, let it not be forgotten that much likewise is performed."

- Samuel Johnson, Preface to A Dictionary of the English Language

INTRODUCTION:

Language is power. Dr. Terry Matheson unequivocally demonstrated this truth in the spring of 1992 when he shattered the silence in a University of Saskatchewan English Satire class with one simple profanity: "Fuck," he mouthed at thirty unsuspecting students. The electrical jolt created by this utterance was immediately followed by a variety of emotional reactions: disbelief, anger, shock, indignation, confusion, discomfort, fear. Dr. Matheson had proven his point: language is a kinetic force with its own source of power. If a single word uttered in a mere matter of seconds can cause such a powerful and sudden response, what, then, will the complex arrangement of thousands of words over millions of seconds cause?

Literature represents one of the most effective of these arrangements, and one particularly effective piece of such literature is Gertrude Story's *Alvena Schroeder* trilogy.

Literature has long served as a conduit for the power of language. W. H. New finds that "Power over speech controls the shape of the past; power over the past controls the mind of the present and the kind of future that the present can conceive" (292). George Orwell clearly exemplified the effectiveness of this strategem in *Animal Farm* (1946). In nonfictional life too, authority figures manipulate power through censorship and literary canonization, frequently rewriting the rules to accommodate their own needs as did Orwell's pigs. As New suggests, this manipulation influences our conception of the past, our present ideology and the possibilities for the future. By advocating some literary works over others, canonization promotes the ideals of those who control the power of language. Conversely, book burning and other forms of literary censorship restrict access to "undesirable" information, thereby limiting access to the ideals of those who do not control the power of language.

The (ever varying) hierarchy of genres, as determined by the ideological preferences of the elite, further advances the ideals of those who control the power of language. One such genre is the *Bildungsroman*, its place ensured by its dynamism - the ability to change along with changing ideologies. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the *Bildungsroman* most often served as a vehicle to promote patriarchal ideals,

acting as an exemplum to the reader. It would teach the reader by example to be a model citizen. In western literature today, however, the genre's liberal, predominantly female-defined and female-oriented counterpart has largely displaced its conservative, predominantly male-defined and male-oriented forerunner. Today's female Bildungsroman demonstrates the ability of women to move beyond sexually-defined roles in order to discover true self knowledge and achieve autonomy and independence. Feminism, initially liberal feminism, has influenced this displacement.

Feminism has far-reaching implications, affecting virtually every aspect of society, including politics, medicine, commerce, religion, education, and familial relationships. Literature responds to this influence by finally accepting women's issues and experiences as worthy literary subjects. This acceptance facilitated the development and popularization of the feminist Bildungsroman. The relationship between feminism and the feminist Bildungsroman was symbiotic: while feminism facilitated the development and perpetuation of the genre, the genre facilitates the cause of feminism. It enables authors like Story to reclaim the power of language by foregrounding women's issues and experiences, thereby increasing the potential for rejection of patriarchal expectations.

In her Alvena Schroeder trilogy, Story combines feminist Bildungsroman conventions with a viewpoint most closely aligned with liberal feminism. Yet, Story's trilogy does not confine itself even to the recently established feminist Bildungsroman conventions of spiritual and intellectual journeys, self realization and the recognition that the problem is social rather than individual. She presents yet another variation: she extends the protagonist's development into old age and beyond that period into the realm of death.

Story did not set out to write a Bildungsroman, a fact evidenced by the trilogy's form and content. Contradictory to the genre's traditional lengthiness and chronological consistency, some components of Story's trilogy were first published by NeWest Review as short stories. The plot, too, departs from the standard. Rather than terminating with either of the usual choices of the arrested or successful development of the protagonist, the plot continues past her death. Further, Story herself denies that she intended to pen a Bildungsroman, a liberal or any other kind of feminist exposition because she is merely the amanuensis for the spirit which channels itself through her brain; it is her Joan of Arc voice which does the speaking and Story merely writes down what she is told. In fact, Story claims not to be a feminist. At a reading of *The Book of Thirteen*, she once refuted the accusation that she is "a gol' darned women's libber." "No, she replied, "I am a human libber. Everybody born to this planet earth has a right to develop in a way that's free and with equal opportunity as everyone else. And if a person starts with less than others, there should be something in place to make the opportunities equal" (telephone interview August 24, 1998). As these indicators suggest, authorial intent is irrelevant in these novels. What

is relevant, as Story contends, is "what the reader finds in [the texts] to relate to his or her own inner mind and heart" (Voices 71). So despite Story's intentions, her Alvena Schroeder trilogy lends itself closely to a liberal feminist interpretation, and as a variation of the feminist Bildungsroman, offers feminism a potentially powerful tool.

Through its character representation and symbolism, Story's trilogy both exemplifies a variation of the Bildungsroman in its contemporary feminist state and offers an alternative to conventional notions of social roles. It testifies that a woman can successfully claim the right to be a self-determining individual regardless of patriarchal constraints. Although it may lack the immediacy of impact which Dr. Matheson's dramatic example held, it nonetheless conducts its own kinetic force. And despite its relative neglect by critics, Story's trilogy is comparable to the powerful fictions of Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood, and Marge Piercy in that it offers a model of resistance to women's oppression. Through the contemporary western Bildungsroman genre, Story's Alvena Schroeder trilogy portrays the self-development of a female protagonist, while concurrently depicting the plight of women in a society plagued by the debilitating forces of patriarchy and one alternative to that plight.

The trilogy's low public profile presents challenges because the paucity of criticism and inaccessibility of publication figures can raise questions about a work's literary value. However, several factors may account for this low profile. Thistle-down Press is a small publisher in a small Canadian city and, except to Revenue Canada, does not disclose its publication statistics. Story is from the same small city as her publisher, and is a regional writer. She is a very private individual who actively seeks neither fortune nor fame but began writing simply to create a source of income following her husband's death. The available criticism is mainly Canadian, and in particular, local. It ranges from rave reviews to pans - more raves than pans - and generally captures the essence of the trilogy. Cary Fagan and Beverly Rasporich denigrate the writing style as unsatisfactorily crafted - rambling and fragmented (Fagan 11 - 12), (Rasporich 157 - 58), yet Ron Marken rates the series highly and finds the concluding book "utterly breathtaking" (CBC review). In direct contrast to Fagan and Rasporich, Pamela Black finds in the writing a "lulling poetic quality" (65) which "does not allow the personal to become esoteric or un-structured [sic]" (66). Black particularly commends Story's treatment of the after-death theme that is "so often awkwardly treated in literature" (66). She recommends the trilogy for study, suggesting that "enterprising English teachers could make much of it in advanced literature classes" (66). Anne Hicks finds in *The Need of Wanting Always* "a prose style that can breathtakingly establish a vivid still life even as it moves forward" (92), suggesting that the text "is likely to inspire, perhaps influence" (92). S. A. Newman captures the trilogy's message, suggesting that the book examines "the changing roles of women . . . where regardless of circumstances . . . women must find the perfect balance between what is expected of them, and what they can accept, without guilt" (20). Coral Ann

Howells finds in Story's work "evidence of the vitality of the western Canadian literary tradition and the important role of regional publishing houses" (340). Howells opposes the exclusion of Story's works from the *Double Bond* anthology (340 - 41). Anne Hicks and A. Burke draw parallels between Story's work and that of canonized writers like Munro, Kroetsch and Laurence. Burke adds that "Gertrude Story, by sheer breadth of vision and technical virtuosity, has achieved a place among writers like William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf" (33). She renames *The Need of Wanting Always* "a Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman" (34). So regardless of the missing traditional markers - prolific criticism and canonization - it is apparent that Story's trilogy is being read and taken seriously as a work of art. During my graduate studies, I was fortunate enough to be introduced to Story's trilogy by another fellow student, Jesse Stothers, who knew of my interest in female protagonists and feminism. I encountered in the texts a more powerful resonance than I had experienced in any of my previous reading. The struggles, frustrations and successes of the protagonist echoed those of my own life experience, and Alvena's persistence made me pursue more earnestly my own rightful share of happiness. I have no doubt that Story's trilogy furthered my own *Bildung*. Although it may be too soon to gage the trilogy's overall sociological impact, it is evident that the trilogy carries significant potential for impact on others as well.

As literary criticism commonly demonstrates, acceptance of a work of art does not guarantee consistent interpretation of that art. Therefore some critics might interpret Story's trilogy from perspectives other than liberal feminist. Interpretation is always at least in part subjective. Marxist feminists, for example, might convincingly argue that it is Alvena's ultimate financial independence which frees her, while radical feminists might just as convincingly argue that it is her psychological (and oftentimes physical) separation from patriarchy which finally liberates her. Even some liberal feminists might dispute components of my theoretical standpoint. Liberal feminists seek equality, focusing "their efforts on winning rights and equal opportunity for women within the existing structures. . . . [Their] primary concern . . . is the fact that women have been excluded from access to . . . power" (Adamson 174 - 75). Thus a few liberal feminists might argue that Alvena's lack of effort to change institutions excludes her from their ranks. In particular they might find fault with the trilogy's lack of emphasis on the inadequacy of the legal system which enabled Harold to take possession of Alvena's farm. Others might disagree with the emphasis placed on Alvena's need to control her own body because these proponents, like their liberal forerunners, "do not conceive one's body to be an essential part of oneself" (Jaggar 180). Alvena's pilgrimage however, is individually-focused: she moves toward and finally achieves self realization through autonomy and independence, and it is for this reason in particular the trilogy aligns most closely with liberal feminism. The reader should also keep in mind Jaggar's argument that "social reality can be perceived or conceptualized in a variety of different ways (Jaggar 10)" and what "kinds of analysis one provides . . . depends on one's purposes in undertaking the analysis (Jaggar 10)."

Therefore, it is simply in the interest of fairness that I declare my theoretical perspective at the outset.

New's observation (above-mentioned) implies that those who control language can retard or advance the achievement of the equality sought by feminists. Writers like Story, then, can influence female destiny through perception-changing literature to create what Frank Lentriccia calls a "collective will for change" (Waxman 320). By changing perceptions, these authors encourage their readers to redistribute the control of language, an essential task if self-awareness rather than biology is to determine destiny.