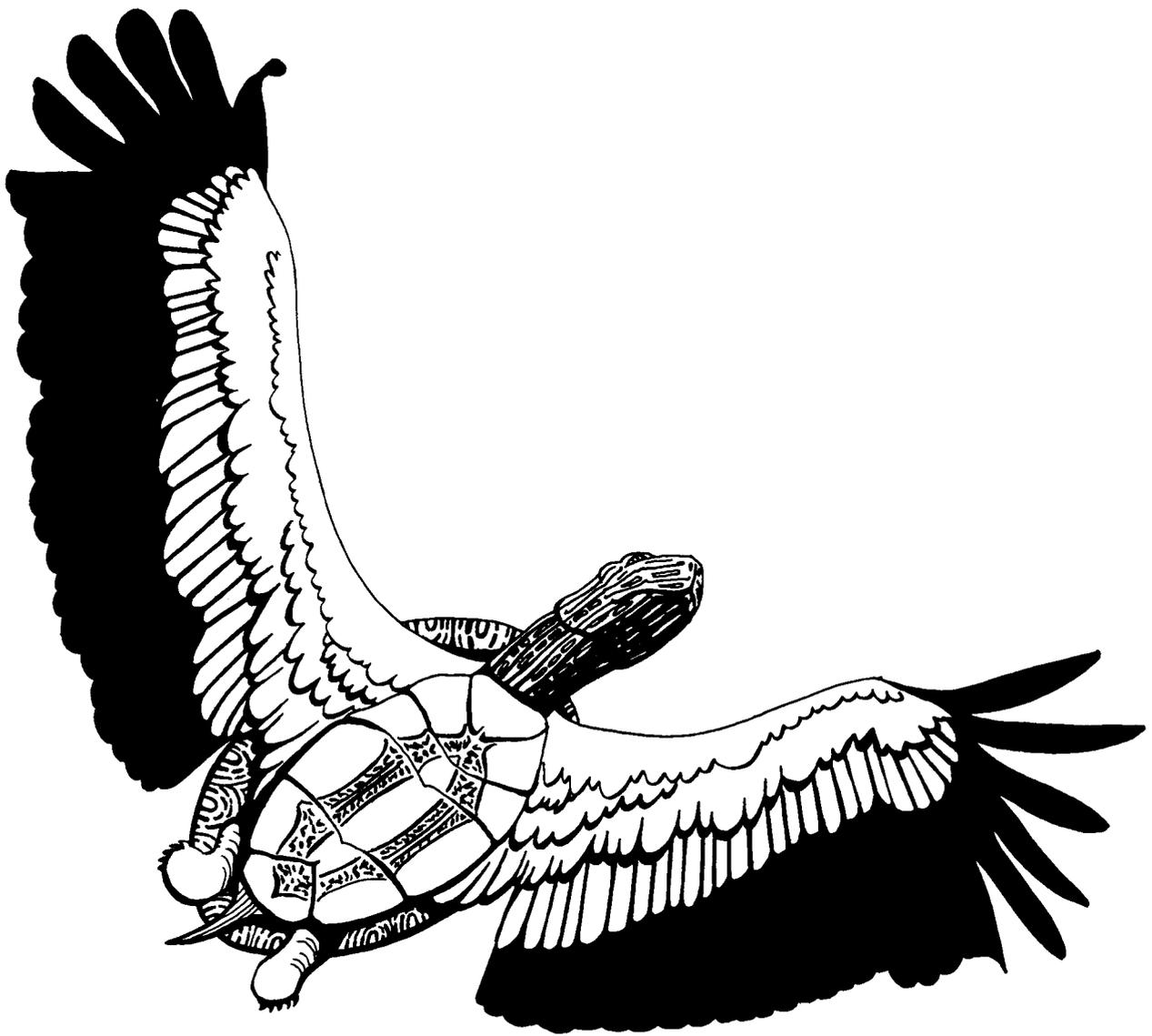


"The Only Flying Turtle Under The Sun,"





The Bildungsroman in Contemporary Women's Fiction

by Rebecca Smith

In Marge Piercy's novel Small Changes, Beth, one of the two main characters, finds herself trapped in a marriage that she had been conditioned to think was all she wanted from life, but that she actually discovers to be stifling and deadening. Beth analyzes her husband Jimbo's reaction to her dissatisfaction and her own fear in this excerpt from the book:

She felt caught in the gray web of

his gaze. His anger was muted but growing. She was something that was not working as it was supposed to. He was still trying to fix it. Soon he would lose his patience. Then would he return it or break it? One night as she lay trying to fall

asleep beside him she remembered something from the summer when she was ten. One Saturday at a company picnic . . . she had found a box turtle. He had a beautiful shell, divided into sort of shingles above and polished wood on the bottom. They brought him back and made a home for him in the yard. They put up a chicken-wire fence and built a house of broken bricks. All day the turtle went round and round the chicken wire, butting his head against the fence and standing up awkwardly on edge and flopping over backward trying to escape. . . . Round and round the fence Roxy went making a trail in the dust and rolling like a sad tank through the water dish and over the lettuce and grapes they had put down, and around again.

During the next week she kept thinking of the turtle. She was the turtle going round and round the chicken wire searching for a way out. But she did not want Jim to take her back where he had found her because that was a prison too. She studied herself as turtle. Turtles were not glamorous creatures. They were slow but dogged. Maybe it took them a long while to get someplace, even to figure out where they wanted to go, but then they kept stubbornly at it. They were not beautiful but they carried what they needed. They were not particularly brave and the idea of running

from a wild turtle would make a child laugh. Threatened, they had a shell they could draw into and tuck up inside. They were cautious and long-lived. No one could teach a turtle to do tricks. They were quiet and could be mistaken for something not really alive, a rock or piece of wood. Sometimes they aroused sadism in people. No great power had ever marched out to conquest under the emblem of a turtle.(1)

When her mother, mother-in-law, sisters, and friends align with her husband in attempting to shame and cajole her into "acting right," (p.40) she realizes that she is alone; she is the only champion under the turtle banner. She plans and executes an escape from her cage. For the first time in her life as a daughter and wife, as she sits in the plane that is taking her away, she senses the delights of freedom: "She clasped her hands and joy pierced her. She was wiry with joy and tingling. How beautiful to be up here. How beautiful was flight and how free. . . . She was the only flying turtle under the sun." (p. 46)

This particular image of "flying" is echoed in Erica Jong's Fear of Flying when the heroine Isadora White Stollerman Wing determines to leave her particular, current cage:

I thought of all the cautious good-girl rules I had lived by--the good

student, the dutiful daughter, the guilty faithful wife who committed adultery only in her own head--and I decided that for once I was going to be brave and follow my feelings no matter what the consequences. . . . I thought of D.H. Lawrence running off with his tutor's wife, or Romeo and Juliet dying for love, of Aschenbach pursuing Tadzio through plaguey Venice, of all the real and imaginary people who had picked up and burned their bridges and taken off into the wild blue yonder. I was one of them! No scared housewife, I. I was flying. (2)

Fear of Flying by Erica Jong and Small Changes by Marge Piercy, both published in 1973, are two of the growing number of novels by contemporary women writers that detail the growth of major women characters toward personhood, outside the confines of stereotyped roles. The list also includes Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen (1972) by Alix Kates Shulman, The Diviners (1974) by Margaret Laurence and Lives of Girls and Women (1974) by Alice Munro.

These five novels mentioned fit into the classification of the Bildungsroman or the "apprenticeship novel," heretofore largely a male domain. The past limitation of this genre to the artistic presentation and analysis of the development and maturation of males is indicated by the standard definition given for the term in both Holman's and Abrams' hand-

books of literary terminology. M.H. Abrams defines the Bildungsroman as a novel of "formation" or "education," tracing "the development of the protagonist's mind and character as he passes from childhood through varied experiences --and usually through a spiritual crisis --into maturity and the recognition of his identity and role in the world." (3)

Holman's definition is even more decisive in attributing gender to the genre: [A Bildungsroman is] A novel which recounts the youth and young manhood of a sensitive protagonist who is attempting to learn the nature of the world, discover its meaning and pattern, and acquire a philosophy of life and "the art of living." (4)

The standard examples include Goethe's Wilhelm Master's Apprenticeship, Mann's The Magic Mountain, Dickens' David Copperfield, Butler's The Way of All Flesh, Joyce's Portrait of the Artist, Maugham's Of Human Bondage and Wolfe's Look Homeward Angel.

Obviously missing from this historical listing, and implicitly absent from consideration in the definition, are the comparatively few, but nonetheless powerful, apprenticeship novels written in the past by women: Olive Schreiner's The Story of an African Farm, Dorothy Richardson's Pilgrimage and Virginia Woolf's Orlando. Indeed, in the past, apprenticeship novels by women were infrequent. In the works of the great women writers of the past, such as Jane

Austen, the Brontes, George Eliot or Mrs. Gaskell, women protagonists usually are shown to reach physical and emotional maturity, at which point they find the only possible identity, role or pattern for their lives by fitting themselves into the existing social structure, usually through a conventional marriage. Women in these earlier novels, by virtue of their bodies, frequently had a single and quite obvious identity as wife and mother.

However, with the re-emergence of feminism in the 1960's came strong emphasis for the first time, actually, on the fact that forces besides biology most significantly shape a woman's fate. For example, Naomi Weinstein examined and attacked the psychological conditioning of women in the now-classic "Psychology Constructs the Female." Eva Figes revealed the inherent flaws in the existent Western social structure in Patriarchal Attitudes. Following in the footsteps of the early feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman, many studies such as the Canadian Status of Women report have explained how the existing sexist economic structure controls the lives of women. The resurgence of feminist activity in the 1960's caused many women to perceive and then to attack the sexual inequality and injustices so evident in all areas of society, as in Friedan's The Feminine Mystique, Millett's Sexual Politics, Greer's The Female Eunuch and Shulamith Firestone's The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution. All of these had been published by 1970. By that time the cata-

logging of wrongs based on gender was nearly complete and women were ready to move to the next phase--the establishment of positive alternatives to the existing obviously bad situation. A result was the proliferation in the 1970's of Bildungsroman in which sensitive female protagonists encounter the attempts of society to force them into stereotypical roles as they move from childhood through adulthood; they alternate between acceptance, the path of least resistance and rebellion; but finally they must attempt to live in the world on their own terms, so they suffer through to a new, authentic, human role.

This pattern is quite observable in the new post-1970's genre of the female Bildungsroman. The protagonists are exceptionally intelligent and perceptive, in a society that generally undervalues these qualities in a female. For example, Sasha Davis in Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen is accused by her friends of being a "brain":

"Come on, admit it," said another friend. "You have to be a Brain to get into those Eastern colleges"

"That's not true--" I began excitedly. (5)

Del Jordan in Lives of Girls and Women is the second brightest person in her class and is taken on encyclopedia-selling trips by her mother because she can remember an extraordinary number of facts. (6) Similarly, Morag Gunn in The Diviners, Isadora in Fear of Flying, and

both Beth Phall and Mariam Berg in Small Changes are, ironically, made to suffer because of their intelligence and perceptiveness. They must learn to deny their intellects and subordinate them to those of men--their boyfriends, their lovers, their bosses, their husbands. Each of these women has been properly conditioned by society to inhibit her curiosity, intellect and ambition and emphasize her physical attractiveness, that is, to try to become the "prom queen" of Shulman's title. Advice on this subject is given to Mariam Berg when she tries to talk with an older, successful, experienced professor of computer science of whom she is in awe:

. . . You have an unusual intuitive mind--the best thing one can say about any scientist. But you're an attractive, a very attractive woman. So you'll do nothing. Why should you. . . Only homely women survive to accomplish in their field.(p. 371)

All the women recognize their own intelligence, and it is recognized and encouraged to a point, by men--such as the class brain, professors at university, graduate students--who then try to "groom" these curious creatures, these intelligent attractive women. However, as Sasha and the others learn, it is of course the woman who must subordinate even her education to that of the man:

Though we had agreed to study like fury till our money ran out and then take turns getting jobs, at bottom we both knew it would be he who

would get the degrees and I who would get the jobs.(p. 184)

Ultimately, the women learn that they are sought not for their intellects but for their cleverness, for their charming combination of good looks and discreet amount of intelligence, for their value as a bright possession. Sasha describes the attitude of her first husband Frank, who vowed never to marry a woman who was not both beautiful and bright:

Frank took visible pride in me then, showing me off and openly admiring my cooking. . . . Even after [he and his graduate student colleagues] fell into shop talk, while I cleared away the dinner dishes, he would send me affectionate glances for everyone to see. (p. 185)

And her second husband Willy is made nearly speechless with injury and tears when she has her hair cut. In a similar way, Morag, suppressing her desire to take time for her writing, at first chooses her hair style, her clothes and her ideas to meet the quiet demands of her professor husband Brooke:

Her long black hair had been cut much shorter and permed in the prevailing manner of the day. . . . She feels slightly peculiar each time she gets her hair done, but Brooke likes her this way and she has to admit it does look more feminine.

She watches her diet carefully and is slender. She wears lightly tailored suits in the daytime, with

pastel blouses, sometimes frilled. In the heat of the summer, cotton dresses with flared skirts. . . .

In the evenings, meeting academic friends, she goes in heavily for the little black cocktail dress. . . . She looks smart.

She is a competent cook. Her apricot bread and peanut butter cookies are splendid, and her chocolate cake with fudge icing is beyond compare.

She reads a great deal. (7)

And she promises Brooke to remain his child/wife: ". . . I will. Be--the way you said. I will." (p. 227)

As a consequence of their properly restrained intelligence, these women usually are thought to be successful in society's terms. But subtle feelings of unease emerge and increase. Indeed, as The Diviners relates, one day Morag--permed, feminine, slender, smart and competent--in total frustration and despair "throws a Benares brass ashtray through the kitchen window." (p. 221) All the women protagonists become progressively torn by the conflicting pulls of their authentic selves and their public roles. This tension is crystalized in an episode in The Lives of Girls and Women: Del Jordan reads an article describing the difference between male and female modes of thought. When looking at the moon, according to the male psychologist author of the article, a boy "thinks of the universe, its immensity and mystery; the girl thinks, 'I must wash my hair.'" But Del cannot fit herself into the prescribed

female's role: She says that she never thinks of hair washing when she looks at the moon. Instead, she insists; "I wanted men to love me, and I wanted to think of the universe when I looked at the moon. I felt trapped, stranded; it seemed there had to be a choice where there couldn't be a choice." (p. 150) The most poignant description of the women's situation is given by Isadora in Fear of Flying:

It was hopeless. If you were female and talented, life was a trap no matter which way you turned. Either you drowned in domesticity (and had Walter Mittyish fantasies of escape) or you longed for domesticity in all your art. You could never escape your femaleness. You had conflict written in your very blood. . . . And the lesson was clear: being a woman meant being harried, frustrated, and always angry. It meant being split into two irreconcilable halves. (p. 157)

When the conflict emerges, some of the women seek resolution of the tension through psychoanalysis--and are admonished to "Ackzept being a vohman" (Fear of Flying, p. 157). Sasha is advised by her psychoanalyst, Dr. Webber, to "feel": "When you are fully able to do that, you will be able to give yourself totally to your husband and have that blissful union with him you long for. (p. 208) Mariam Berg's psychoanalysis results in similar advice. The five women protagonists discover that society

provides little support for the woman seeking self-awareness and self-identity.

Finally, because of the rigidity of the structure in which they are forced to exist, all break away in what is, under each of their particular social circumstances, a profound and irrevocable way. Del Jordan chooses to live independently, like the men in her society, and to "go out and take on all kinds of experiences and shuck off what [she] didn't want and come back proud." (p. 147) So she makes her plans to leave her hometown Jubilee and go away to university, while all her friends remain to marry local boys. Sasha and Isadora leave their husbands for mad dashes through Europe in search of what Isadora calls the "zipless fuck." Morag Gunn runs away from her husband and becomes pregnant by Jules, a Metis. Beth is forced to physically escape from her husband twice and finally chooses a lesbian relationship. And Mariam returns with eagerness to her neglected work and friends, following her realization that:

Out of such connections she could weave no security, no protection against her worst fears. But of such connections were wrought an end to the slow relentless dying back she had known, and the slow undramatic refounding, single thought by small decision by petty act, of a life: her life. That life shone too dimly but with considerable heat, banked coals in the dark. (p. 538)

By these various means the heroines begin to break down the general and particular barriers that have kept them from achieving self-awareness, self-confidence and self-affirmation. All of their lives have constituted the "spiritual crisis" that these women, the protagonists in the female Bildungsroman, must face. But single crystal-clear moments of anger, pain and awareness have precipitated the actual acts of self-affirmation. And after the characters make the break, the change prophesied by Del Jordan's mother, Ada, can begin:

There is a change coming I think in the lives of girls and women. Yes. But it is up to us to make it come. All women have had up till now has been their connection with men. All we have had. No more lives of our own, really, than domestic animals It is self-respect I am really speaking of. Self-respect. (pp. 146-147)

With the dramatic breakaway, the women protagonists experience a sense of freedom for the first time and images of flight, rebirth, transcendence and "rekindled fires" are crucial as the writers attempt to share with the reader this awareness of personal freedom and power experienced by the protagonists as they move under the banner of the "flying turtle."

The female Bildungsroman has become an important genre for contemporary women writers whose consciousnesses have been informed by the current women's movement.

This is true because, as Ellen Morgan states in "Humanbecoming: Form and Focus in the Neo-Feminist Novel," the "novel of apprenticeship is admirably suited to express the emergence of women from cultural conditioning into struggle with institutional forces, their progress toward the goal of full personhood, and the effort to restructure their lives and society according to their own vision of meaning and right living." (8) The five woman protagonists--Sasha in Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen, Morag in The Diviners, Del in Lives of Girls and Women, Mariam and Beth in Small Changes and Isadora in Fear of Flying are faced at the end of the novels with the knotty, unsolved problem of applying their new "recognition of [their] identity and role in the world," mentioned in Abrams' definition, and their new "philosophy of life and 'the art of living,'" noted by Holmans in his definition of the Bildungsroman, to their actual lives--to "reality," as Del Jordan says.

Indeed, there are no unequivocally happy endings to these female apprenticeship novels: Sasha is shown at the conclusion of Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen calling her only friend to make plans, it is implied, to take her two small children and leave her second husband. Morag remains alone in her farm house on the riverbank. Del has a whole lifetime of

new crises yet to face. Beth is in hiding with her lover Wanda because of laws that prohibit a lesbian from raising her own children. Mariam is about to be left with her two children by her husband who has found a younger, more sympathetic, and less intelligent woman. And Isadora--minus the "cold stone" of fear that she had worn inside her chest all her life (p. 311)--has returned to work out her relationship with her husband Bennett. But Isadora knows, at the end of the novel, as do the other protagonists, that she will survive by "being born over and over. It wasn't easy, and it was always painful. But there wasn't any other choice except, death" (p. 311) of her mind and spirit. Morag will continue to "look ahead into the past, and back into the future, until the silence." (p. 453) And even timid Beth finally knows that, despite her fear, she "can fight. And sometimes, sometimes win." (p. 527)

The protagonists are left to deal with their new-found freedom, power, relative fearlessness and unlimited potential. Thus, the conclusions of these five Bildungsroman are realistically affirmative--providing new, strongly positive models for all women to follow as they as well begin to align themselves under the banner of "the flying turtle."

NOTES

1. Marge Piercy, Small Changes (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications Inc., 1973), pp. 39-40. Hereafter, references to this book will be given in the body of the text.
2. Erica Jong, Fear of Flying (New York: Signet Books, New American Library, 1973), p. 171. Hereafter, references to this book will be given in the body of the text.
3. M.H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, 3rd ed. (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1971), pp. 112-113.
4. C. Hugh Holman, A Handbook to Literature, 3rd ed. (New York: Odyssey Press, Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1972), p. 39.
5. Alix Kates Shulman, Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), p. 147. Hereafter, references to this book will be given in the body of the text.
6. Alice Munro, The Lives of Girls and Women (Scarborough, Ontario: New American Library of Canada, Ltd., 1974), p. 56. Hereafter, references to this book will be given in the body of the text.
7. Margaret Lawrence, The Diviners (New York: Bantam Books, 1974), pp. 220-221. Hereafter, references to this book will be given in the body of the text.
8. Ellen Morgan, "Humanbecoming: Form and Focus in the Neo-Feminist Novel," Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives, Revised ed. Susan Koppelman Cornillon, ed. (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green, University Popular Press, 1973), p. 185.
9. In an essay entitled "Woman as Outsider" (from Woman in Sexist Society, eds. Gornick and Moran, N.Y., 1971), Vivian Gornick explores an idea akin to de Beauvoir's, that women have for so long been regarded as somehow alien and unreal that they are not treated as human beings but as members of a race apart, as myths and stereotypes, archetypes and clichés: "I am a collection of myths. I am an existential standin. The idea of me is real--the temptress, the goddess, the child, the mother, but I am not real." (p. 144)
10. For instance, Katherine Waters, in "Margaret Atwood: Love on the Dark Side of the Moon," writes "And the final insight of the apparently victimized Marion [sic] . . . is that she may well be implicated in the cannibalism from which she was trying to escape . . ." From Mother Was Not A Person, ed. Margaret Anderson (Montreal, 1972), p. 104.
11. Eleven Canadian Novelists (Toronto, n.d.), p. 25.

