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“I’m the plot, babe, and don’t ever forget it”:

Margaret Atwood, Lorrie Moore, and Jennifer Egan’s Experimental Short Story Collections

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Abstract

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This thesis includes three case studies of unconventional narrative collections and analyzes how they use their experimental aspects in combination with their more traditional aspects to represent women and their experiences. The texts that are studied are Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Lorrie Moore’s *Anagrams*, and Margaret Atwood’s *Good Bones and Simple Murders*. Each text utilizes subversive forms, genres, characters, and plots to illustrate points about storytelling, gender, and the endings available to women. This thesis includes an analysis of the writers’ uses of metafiction, unusual narrative position, intertextual references, and parody to compare and contrast the three collections. Finally, this study argues that some of the studied texts utilize their unconventional nature more effectively than others.

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Introduction

At a 1983 MLA Convention session on post-realism, someone asked why there seemed to be no women writing experimental fiction. The featured panelist replied that women writers were too busy “trying to enter the mainstream to be concerned with narrative innovation, suggesting that their interests are political, not aesthetic” (Friedman and Fuchs Preface). Both the questioner and the panelist could not have been more wrong. Writers from Virginia Woolf to Kathy Acker have innovated in ways that define modernist and contemporary experimental literature (Frangello 118). Women have been experimenting with unconventional forms of fiction ever since they’ve been writing it—since the very beginning.

While “unconventional narrative” is extremely difficult to define, my working definition of it is a story or series of stories featuring perspectives, frames, or forms that defy the conventional expectation of a given genre or literary form. Experimental texts are often most successful when they blend traditional aspects of text with those that are unconventional. As narrative scholar Brian Richardson argues, “Antimimetic scenes and characters are often most conspicuous and most compelling when they are engaged in a dialectic with mimetic aspects of a given text” (4). This thesis consists of three case studies of how three different short fiction writers utilize different combinations of experimental and conventional aspects of their texts, including narration, form, and genre, to portray female characters' experiences and struggles with identity. There is nothing inherently “female” about experimental literature, but this thesis was motivated by an observation that unconventional aspects of short fiction, especially the short fiction written by those who happen to be women, often aims to represent women’s experiences in ways that conventional narrative cannot. This thesis explores how and why they do so. The

texts analyzed are Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Lorrie Moore's *Anagrams*, and Margaret Atwood's *Good Bones and Simple Murders*.

Egan, Moore, and Atwood are all big names in the popular short fiction market. All three women, for example, have edited editions of the "Best American Short Stories" collection. Their work spans the period from the 1960s to the present, although the texts I have chosen were published in 2010 (Egan), 1986 (Moore), and 1994 (Atwood) respectively. However, Atwood's *Good Bones and Simple Murders* (1994) consists primarily of reprints of works featured in *Murder in the Dark* (1983) and *Good Bones* (1992). Each writer is contemporary—all are still producing work—with Atwood publishing an essay on March 1, 2022, and Egan's next book scheduled to be released before the completion of this project. After reading hundreds of works of experimental fiction of all types, I chose to focus on collections rather than individual fictions because the way these collections tie the different works within them together is as deliberate and meaningful as the individual texts themselves.

All three works are at least partially metafictional in that they foreground the relationship between form and content. Each work is concerned with its own creation and draws attention to its status as a text. As Gayle Green writes, "draw[ing] attention to the structures of fiction...[a writer] unsettles traditional distinctions between reality and fiction and exposes the arbitrary nature of boundaries" (294). These metafictional qualities highlight the experience of reading and emphasize the heightened role of perception in women's experiences. Each writer, however, approaches this task differently. Egan revisits the same events from the perspective of different characters, Moore places the same characters in different situations, and Atwood does neither, inverting stories and forms already familiar to the reader.

Each work privileges the narratorial voice of the kinds of women characters who have traditionally been denied voices. Suzanne Keen defines “narrative empathy” as “the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another’s situation and condition” (2). By deploying previously silenced characters to narrate in first person, these writers encourage narrative empathy towards such women. Lorrie Moore writes about Margaret Atwood that “not since Edith Wharton has a female writer filled her oeuvre with so many unpleasant female characters” (Moore, NYT Interview). Both Egan and Moore follow Atwood’s practice of featuring what are typically conceived of as “bad” female characters.

All three writers utilize the very tropes they criticize to illustrate their points, and all three utilize stereotypes as one of their “traditional” aspects. However, they don’t all utilize these stereotypes in the same way. While both Egan and Moore lean into archetypes of certain kinds of women, Atwood parodies them. Because of their varied implementation of stereotypes, all three texts are inherently concerned with the notion of power—especially the power of storytelling, both who has it and how they choose to use it.

All three writers play with various aspects of unconventional narrative. Egan and Atwood both use existing forms that are often viewed as connected with women, including the celebrity tell-all, magazine articles, recipes, and poetry. Additionally, each writer attempts to create her own form at some point. Moore and Egan attempt to create their own form through prose mimicry of a non-literary form (a record and an anagram). Atwood and Egan primarily create new forms through genre hybridization and parody.

I do not want to be misread as suggesting that I believe any of these collections are only, or even particularly, for women readers, or that any of them should be construed as “women’s

writing” beyond the fact that they were written by females and feature primarily female narrators. At various times all three writers have objected to suggestions that they write only for women and have shown a reluctance to brand themselves “feminists.” I also am not suggesting there are necessarily any underlying political and/or feminist intentions in these experimentations; this study does not prove any distinct correlation between experimental technique and gender. Yet these works are feminist in the sense that they work to make points about and accurately represent the experiences of women. Moreover, nuanced portrayals of the situations of contemporary women often overlap with the interests of feminist critiques. Ultimately, all three works are unconventional in significant ways, and while not necessarily “feminist” works *per se*, the forms that their narrative depictions of women’s lives take often end up working against patriarchal binaries.

Chapter 1: Perception in Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*

Jennifer Egan's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, consists of thirteen linked short stories. The stories are told in non-chronological order from 1976 to the 2020s, set in locations all over the globe, and each is told from a different narrative perspective. Reoccurring characters link each chapter, many of whom have some form of relationship with one another. The novel contains no single authorial perspective and doesn't focus on a single period of time. Egan even uses unconventional form for two of the stories: a PowerPoint and a newspaper report, replete with David Foster-Wallace-esque footnotes. If we assign each chapter a letter according to their occurrence in time chronologically, the chapters are ordered as follows: J, I, B, A, F, C, H, K, G, E, D, L, M.

When the novel was first published, a debate over how to classify the work exploded. While most called it a novel (and thus I primarily use this designation to refer to *Goon Squad*), other classifications included a short story collection, linked short stories, and a mosaic novel. Egan herself refuses to classify the work as a single genre (Smith 143). When Stephan Lee asked Egan about the structure of the short story cycle specifically, she responded that "the structure itself has no innate appeal for me, honestly. I only used it because it made sense for this particular story." It's not only Egan's use of alternating narration that caused such a stir: in addition to her refusal to commit to one genre, metafiction proliferates throughout the novel.

As the twentieth century progressed, literary criticism began to focus on language as well as plot. Saussure argued that language, and subsequently literature, can provide no true mimesis of reality, only representation. Following Saussure's logic, art is inherently self-referential. The idea of art as self-referential lead to the explosion of metafiction, or narrative that draws attention to itself as fiction, during the postmodern movement of the 1960s and 70s. Funk sees Egan's

novel as the perfect balance between both plot-centered and metafictional (which he views as inherently less focused on plot). He calls *Goon Squad* “authentic narrative, saying that it requires Egan to surrender “her implicit authority to structure the representation of the story for an explicit stimulation of the readers to (re)create the story and the plot themselves” (Funk 42). However, Funk is incorrect in believing that Egan surrenders her ability to structure the representation of the story completely. It is her specific choice of structure that leads the reader in certain directions and not others. Egan recognized this in an interview when she explained “the more you can suggest without spelling out, the more you can encompass in the same space...fiction is always about compression and suggestion” (LeCompte 13). Egan herself insists that there is a false divide between the idea of experimentation and convention and that the best works have a synthesis of both (Smith 146).

Egan’s use of atypical form, in addition to her use of metafiction, highlights the reader’s experience of reading and emphasizes the heightened role perception plays in women’s experience; both women’s perceptions of themselves, and how others perceive them. As Margaret Atwood wrote in *The Robber Bride*:

Even pretending you aren't catering to male fantasies is a male fantasy: pretending you're unseen, pretending you have a life of your own, that you can wash your feet and comb your hair unconscious of the ever-present watcher peering through the keyhole, peering through the keyhole in your own head, if nowhere else. You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur. (*The Robber Bride* 392)

Egan's novel has been titled modernist, postmodernist, realist, and anti-realist, but it hasn't often garnered the critical title "feminist." Very few critics have focused exclusively on the representation of gender in the novel. But it is precisely the blend of experimental with the conventional that characterizes how the female characters move throughout the world: how they perceive themselves and others, how others perceive them, and how they remember.

REPRESENTATIONS OF TRAUMA IN "SAFARI"

In "Safari," the novel's fourth chapter, Egan uses prolepses to suggest the damage the patriarchy does to both genders. Gerard Genette defines anachronies as moments where the temporal order of the narrative diverges from the temporal order of the story. Genette considers backward-looking anachronies analepses, and forward-looking anachronies prolepses (Genette 75). "Safari" imagines Lou, a divorced music producer on a Safari with his two young children Charlie and Rolph. The memories of the two main female characters, Lou's much younger girlfriend, Mindy, and his teenage daughter, Charlene (Charlie) primarily frame the story. In a novel fascinated with time, or the story of "how did I get from A to B?" Egan uses Mindy and Lou, stereotypes of the damaging patriarchy, as the answer to that question. She uses an ever-shifting omniscient POV and seven separate instances of prolepses, propelled by the memories of her female characters, to answer that question.

The story is divided into three sections, "I. Grass", "II. Hills", and "III. Sand," that reflect the larger form of the novel (interlinked stories) and remind the reader of the important role the setting plays in this story. Each section's frame directs the reader toward a specific conclusion. Egan begins the story by drawing the reader's attention to the importance of remembering. The first section, "Grass," opens with Rolph asking "Remember, Charlie? In Hawaii?" (Egan 59). "Remember" is a motif that appears throughout the story, but this is the only time "remember" is

used concerning the past, rather than in a future prolepsis referencing the present safari. Rolph and Charlie, the asker and recipient of this question, are the characters most connected to the phenomena of memory in the story. Beginning with this question ultimately foreshadows the end of the story, wherein the final prolepsis future Charlie remembers a moment with her brother after he has committed suicide. It's as if at the beginning of the chapter Rolph is asking Charlie to remember, and at the end of the story she finally complies.

The second section, "Hills," also begins with a question. Cora, Lou's travel agent, and a minor character, asks Mindy "What on earth have you got in that backpack?" (Egan 63). This question offers insight into Mindy's character and foreshadows her future. Her backpack contains anthropology books, but they remain unread. After she muses about her structuralist tendencies, Mindy and Cora discuss why she's not reading any of the books she brought. Mindy replies "carsick," which the narrator then specifies "which is plausible" (Egan 64). This modifier suggests that Mindy is dishonest about her explanation for not reading the books and reveals significant depth in the character through just three additional words. Mindy is concerned about her appearance as a student. We learn through a prolepsis later in the story that Mindy will not complete her Ph.D. program until she's forty-five and has had two children with Lou. Mindy seems to satirize academic theorists, as throughout the chapter she provides anthropological definitions of different concepts as they relate to her traveling companions. While they may be astute observations, Mindy's classifications of anthropologic behavior make no actual improvement to any of the tense situations that occur in "Safari." Mindy's anthropological reading of the interactions on the trip are peppered through the chapter and remind the reader that they are seeing the trip through Mindy's eyes and that Mindy is quite intelligent. However, anthropologists are supposed to be independent observers. Mindy is a participant. She misuses

her application of anthropologic principles because of her status as a participant rather than an observer. Her academic commentary shows that she intellectualizes her situation as a way to distance herself from those around her.

As Martin Paul Eve points out, her first two concepts, “Structural Affection” and “Structural Resentment” are riffs of famous psychoanalytical theories. Mindy defines “Structural Resentment” by saying “The adolescent daughter of a twice-divorced male will be unable to tolerate the presence of his new girlfriend and will do everything in her limited power to distract him from said girlfriend’s presence, her own nascent sexuality being her chief weapon” (Egan 64). Here, Mindy is regurgitating Jung’s Neo-Freudian concept of the Electra complex, which is a daughter’s psychosexual competition with her mother for the attention of her father (APA). Importantly, Jung also believed the daughter blamed the mother for depriving her of a penis. Mindy observes Charlie to be a victim of this but makes no effort to overcome the complex or to help Charlie. Mindy’s next conceptual definition, “Structural Affection,” explains why Rolph accepts Mindy, “because [Rolph] hasn’t yet learned to separate his father’s loves and desires from his own.” This is a variation of Freud’s famous Oedipus complex and serves to foreshadow Rolph having an affair with his father’s girlfriend. A subsequent discussion on echoes these concepts when the children are discussing a lioness they saw get shot, and Rolph asks if Charlie thinks the lioness was the mother of the group. Charlie insists that the lioness was not the mother because she was eating with them and that even if she was “maybe the dad will take care of them” (Egan 72). Rolph seems to be searching for a maternal figure while Charlie actively rebels against one, more focused on the attention of a father. Again, Mindy is accurate in her reading of the situation but does nothing with this reading.

Importantly, Mindy defines herself as a Lévi-Straussian inspired structuralist. Among the French anthropologist Levi-Strauss's theories was the well-known "exchange of women," in which he envisioned society as based on women as property that can be exchanged to form alliances (<https://mmstudies.com/strauss/>). At this point in her life, Mindy sees herself as a commodity, and so does Lou, who proclaims to his son that "women are cunts" (Egan 82). Lou also seems to operate according to the Levi-Straussian market process when he sees Mindy as a way to mediate his relationship with the men around him. Lou feels the need to spend an hour "fucking Mindy senseless" because he is "a man who cannot tolerate defeat—can't perceive it as anything but a spur to his own inevitable victory" (Egan 79). Lou only "fucks her senseless" because his son tells him that he noticed something in Mindy's relationship with their tour guide.

In the third section, "Sand," the POV switches to the second person for the only time in the story, when Mindy provides her final structural definition—"Structural Dissatisfaction: Returning to circumstances that once pleased you, having experienced a more thrilling or opulent way of life, and finding that you can no longer tolerate them." (Egan 81). Here Mindy epitomizes the stereotype of the "gold digger," when she abandons her studies at Berkeley to marry Lou, despite having cheated on him and knowing he does not care about her, because she has gotten used to his money. If anything, Egan comes closer to upholding a stereotype here than deconstructing one: Mindy confirms her intentions are just what the reader expected. Egan even addresses the reader directly immediately after providing this definition, saying "but we're getting off the subject" (Egan 81) before she returns to the story of the safari. Egan's address to the reader places the reader in a role similar to the one Mindy believes she plays: that of the anthropological observer.

Charlie, Lou's daughter, who is noticeably excluded from the toxic masculinity that seems to permeate the family, frames the majority of the prolepses in the chapter. Heather Duerre Humann argues that *A Visit from the Goon Squad* and its unusual form need to be read through the psychoanalytical concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, or "a mode of belated understanding or retroactive attribution of traumatic meaning to earlier events" (Humann 89). Humann explains that understanding the way the characters experience and remember trauma is key to deciphering the novel's unusual narrative structure. Humann focuses on Sasha throughout the novel as the prime example of *Nachträglichkeit*. "Safari" acts as a microcosm of *Nachträglichkeit* as it displays the concept in a single story through Charlie, who frames most of the narrative jumps into the future. These prolepses happen more and more rapidly near the end of the chapter, closer to when we learn of Charlie's trauma. The final prolepsis in the story provides context that changes how the reader views the events of the past 25 pages:

In fact, this particular memory is one she'll return to again and again, for the rest of her life, long after Rolph has shot himself in the head in their father's house at twenty-eight: her brother as a boy, hair slicked flat, eyes sparkling, shyly learning to dance. But the woman who remembers won't be Charlie; after Rolph dies, she'll revert to her real name—Charlene—unlatching herself forever from the girl who danced with her brother in Africa. Charlene will cut her hair short and go to law school. When she gives birth to a son she'll want to name him Rolph, but her parents will still be too shattered. So she'll call him that privately, just in her mind, and years later, she'll stand with her mother among a crowd of cheering parents beside a field, watching him play, a dreamy look on his face as he glances at the sky. (Egan 83)

After this revelation, the reader understands for the first time that the chapter is a memory. At the beginning of the story, Rolph asks Charlie to remember, which is ultimately ironic considering he is merely a memory. The reader has received this story through Charlie's trauma, as that is the only way she can make sense of the events of the safari. Charlie is only able to ascribe meaning to the events of the safari long in the future. Even the final prolepsis itself isn't temporally straightforward. Time jumps forward in the first half of the first sentence, and then backward again after the colon: "her brother as a boy, hair slicked flat, eyes sparkling, shyly learning to dance" as if Charlene is remembering with the reader in real time. The present becomes the past and the future becomes the present through Egan's use of the future perfect tense to describe Charlene's adult life after Rolph's suicide.

Egan foreshadows the importance of *Nachträglichkeit* in "Safari" before the reader ever learns of Rolph's suicide and Charlene's memory. After the incident where the lion kills the safari-goer, the narrator says that Rolph's mind "bends again and again to the jeep, but his memories are a muddle: the lioness springing; a jerk of impact from the gun; Chronos moaning during the drive to the doctor, blood collecting in an actual puddle under his head on the floor of the jeep, like in a comic book" (72). Rolph is barely able to reconstruct the events of the interaction with the lion on the jeep because he can merely remember fragments of what occurred. In this small moment, Egan demonstrates *Nachträglichkeit* in action without revealing that the entire story is also a lead up to a fragment in Charlie's mind and that her memories are also colored by trauma. Moreover, the whole novel is constructed of different characters' traumatic fragments pieced together to make a whole story.

The final prolepsis drapes a sense of dramatic irony over the story as a whole. The reader knows something those on the safari do not know yet: that Mindy will abandon her academic hopes (at least until middle age), that Charlene will join a cult and struggle with addiction, and that Rolph will kill himself. Egan uses the prolepses throughout the chapter, always presented through the memory of women, to dramatize the trauma that is often suffered, by both women and men, due to the patriarchy: Mindy's struggle to provide for her children and significantly delayed career, Charlie's drug problem and cult membership, and Rolph's suicide.

KITTY JACKSON: SEXUAL ASSUALT AND CELEBRITY

The three chapters concerning Jules Jones and Kitty Jackson explore gender and the implications of sexual assault by using form to illustrate how different characters experience the same event (as well as its ramifications). Aside from a passing reference, Egan first introduces Jules in the seventh story, "A to B," which is told in first person from Stephanie Salazar's perspective. Stephanie introduces Jules as her older brother, who had been in Riker's Island for the attempted rape, kidnapping, and assault of teenage celebrity Kitty Jackson. She writes that his incarceration was outrageous, "given that the starlet had walked into Central Park with Jules of her own free will and sustained not a single injury" (Egan 119). The following chapter, "Selling the General," details Kitty's life almost ten years after the attempted assault, where she agrees to marry a homicidal dictator at a publicist's request. This story is told from the perspective of the General's publicist, La Doll. Finally, in chapter nine, Egan provides us with the story of the attack, in the form of an editorial written by Jules Jones himself, which he publishes from prison a month after attempting to rape Kitty Jackson. The text is formatted in narrower columns, as if in a magazine, and almost half of the chapter is written as Jules's

footnotes to the reader and editor, mainly musings on physics, stylistic choices, and stories from his past.

Egan uses this chapter to “merge the high-art aspirations of highly self-conscious writing with the low-art obsessions of celebrity culture—all the while taking into account the ways in which women are excluded in the first instance and overexposed in the second” (Johnston 175). She uses the celebrity profile, a form typically looked down upon and associated with superficial female readers to illustrate her point. The interview, ultimately, is about Jules rather than Kitty, and his playful first-person tone is contrasted with grotesque descriptions of his violence. When Jules feels he has failed to get at Kitty’s “core life” through his interview, he tries to reach her core by raping her:

But more than that, I feel this crazy— what?—rage, it must be; what else could account for my longing to slit Kitty open like a fish and let her guts slip out, or my separate, corollary desire to break her in half and plunge my arms into whatever pure, perfumed liquid swirls within her. I want to rub it onto my raw, “scrofulous” (ibid.), parched skin in hopes that it will finally be healed. I want to fuck her (obviously) and then kill her, or possibly kill her in the act of fucking her (“fuck her to death” and “fuck her brains out” being acceptable variations on this basic goal). What I have no interest in doing is killing her and *then* fucking her, because it’s her life—the inner life of Kitty Jackson—that I so desperately long to reach. (Egan 182)

This story directly reflects the mind of a sexual predator, one that Egan originally introduced to the reader as innocent. His own narration of the events is what ultimately implicates him. Jules’s narration serves as a terrifying reminder of how quickly we as readers are willing to exonerate a

perpetrator of sexual assault in our minds. At the beginning of his chapter, Jules is a compelling and likable narrator. His confession implicates the reader in his crimes. The three chapters taken together depict a young woman robbed of innocence by a selfish man who ultimately suffers far fewer consequences than those that result from what he inflicts on her.

In chapter 8, “Selling the General,” Egan hasn’t yet elaborated on Kitty’s attack. However, when publicist La Doll, her daughter Lulu, and Kitty Jackson travel to the unnamed country to meet the genocidal General, after suggestions that she struggles from a drinking problem, Kitty says to La Doll: “But I want to forget...I’m actively trying to forget. I want to be like Lulu—innocent” (152). This moment is directly contrasted with Jules’s later description of Kitty that took place ten years prior: “Because Kitty is so young and well nourished, so sheltered from the gratuitous cruelty of others, so unaware as yet that she will reach middle age and eventually die (possibly alone), because she has not yet disappointed herself, merely startled herself and the world with her own premature accomplishments, Kitty’s skin—that smooth, plump, sweetly fragrant sac upon which life scrawls the record of our failures and exhaustion — is perfect” (180). The suggestion here is that Kitty has lost her innocence in between these two time periods. Notably, Jules grounds his description of Kitty’s innocence in her physicality. Earlier in chapter 8, La Doll says that “a sardonic expression had taken up residence in her face, as if those blue eyes were rolling heavenward even as they gazed right at you. That look, more than the first spidery lines under Kitty’s eyes and alongside her mouth, made her seem no longer young, or even close. She wasn’t Kitty Jackson anymore” (148). Both descriptions of Kitty link her innocence to her physical appearance—a comment on the cultural premium on female celebrities’ attractiveness above all else. However, La Doll, giving a woman’s description of Kitty’s jaded worldview, emphasizes her gaze, or the look in her eyes, rather than something as

removed from her control as her skin. But La Doll still says that “she wasn’t Kitty Jackson anymore,” emphasizing that it was her physicality that made her identity. Importantly, we hear about Kitty’s loss of innocence directly from her, whereas we hear about her perceived innocence as a young starlet only from her attacker.

Jules’s image of Kitty specifically details a common myth that men are unable to control themselves around beautiful women. Jules’s imagines Kitty’s inner monologue as “*I know I’m famous and irresistible—a combination whose properties closely resemble radioactivity—and I know that you in this room are helpless against me. It’s embarrassing for both of us to look at each other and see our mutual knowledge of my radioactivity and your helplessness, so I’ll keep my head down and let you watch me in peace*” (179). He continually describes Kitty in terms of quantum physics throughout the story, as an indescribable force that renders those around her incapable. Jules thus intellectualizes his explanation for attempting rape. The use of footnotes in the chapter further this intellectualization, as footnotes suggest academic contexts.

G rard Genette conceptualizes paratextual elements such as footnotes as a mediation between an author and their audience (Genette 17). As Joanna Hartmann notes, footnotes juxtapose a text and its surroundings. In a self-narrative the juxtaposition that is highlighted is often between memory and forgetting. Further, Hartmann explains that through “main text and footnotes, the text acquires the character of a double-narrative in which processes of identity construction through self-narration are subverted” (107). Importantly, the first time Jules mentions the attempted rape is in the second footnote, as if the rape is merely an interruption in the greater story he is writing. Genette also emphasizes the importance of where in the text the footnote occurs (Genette 17). Jones presents the moment of the second footnote, where Kitty sucks the salad dressing off her finger, as a turning point, the moment he decided to rape her. As

he reflects on the moment from Riker's Island, he attempts to reconstruct his thoughts at the moment they happened. He presents them in a list:

Thought 1 (at the sight of Kitty dipping her finger and sucking it): Can it possibly be that this ravishing young girl is *coming on to me*? Thought 2: No, that's out of the question.

Thought 3: But *why* is it out of the question?

Thought 4: Because she's a famous nineteen-year-old movie star and you're "heavier all of a sudden—or am I just noticing it more?" (—Janet Green, during our last, failed sexual encounter) and have a skin problem and no worldly clout.

Thought 5: But she just dipped her finger into a bowl of salad dressing and sucked it off in my presence! What else can that possibly mean?

Thought 6: It means you're so far outside the field of Kitty's sexual consideration that her internal sensors, which normally stifle behavior that might be construed as overly encouraging, or possibly incendiary, such as dipping a finger into salad dressing and sucking it off in the company of a man who might interpret it as a sign of sexual interest, are not operative.

Thought 7: Why not?

Thought 8: Because you do not register as a "man" to Kitty Jackson, and so being around you makes her no more self-conscious than would the presence of a dachshund. (Egan 173)

This is the second list that Jones presents in a footnote; the first is a list of theoretical explanations for why everyone in the restaurant is so drawn to Kitty. Lists further distance the

paratextual footnotes from the main text. As Brian Richardson explains, lists “serve as a psychological indicator of clarity, organization, planning, and success” (Richardson 337). Here, Egan’s inclusion of Jones’s thoughts as a list emphasizes the importance of this one moment and makes a wider comment on rape culture. Jones’s ability to methodically retrace his thoughts indicates premeditation and meticulousness. Jackson is merely licking dressing from her finger and clearly doesn’t realize the significance of this moment in Jones’s perception. The suggestion by Jones here is that Kitty should have been more aware of his perception of her and should not have sucked off the dressing, as he saw this as a potential advance. Jones at this moment is acutely aware of how Kitty is perceiving him, as not a “man,” and Kitty is seemingly unaware of the depth of Jones’s perception of her.

Egan’s multifaceted approach to depicting Kitty Jackson emphasizes the increased importance of perception, or the act of being perceived, in the female experience. Jackson’s career is about being perceived, which is why she is presented throughout the novel only through the lens of a publicist, a reporter, and a PR agent, all careers focused on molding perceptions. Kitty herself recognizes the importance of perception when she burns herself so it appears she was at La Doll’s celebrity gala where everyone was accidentally burned with scalding oil (Egan 149). Kitty’s lack of innocence is once again evident in La Doll’s perception of her body, but this time, Kitty deliberately alters others’ perception of her.

Unlike in “Safari,” where we learn the outcome of characters’ actions at the end of the story, Egan presents Kitty’s future in “Selling the General” before she presents her trauma. This atemporal presentation emphasizes Kitty’s lack of control over her trauma and the fact that it was not a result of her own actions. However, like “Safari,” Egan uses the nonlinear plot structure to mirror the effects that trauma has on women’s identity and memory.

SASHA BLAKE AS THE SILENT PROTAGONIST

If there is a protagonist in *Goon Squad*, it's Sasha Blake. She appears in more chapters than any of the other characters. Significantly, however, not a single chapter is written from her point of view. And, except for her daughter, Sasha is exclusively narrated through the eyes of men. The portrayals of Sasha are so disjointed they are primarily united only by her name and references to shared experiences. In one chapter she is a nagging mother, in one a delinquent runaway teen, and in another a beautiful but unintelligent assistant. The focus here will be on evaluations of Sasha's chapters in the order in which Egan presents them, to highlight their significance in chronological time. Egan presents Sasha's story in a deliberate order to alter the readers perception of her and how it changes over the experience of reading the novel.

The opening chapter, "Found Objects," begins with analepses, as Sasha looks backward from a therapy session in an unspecified present. It remains unclear that Sasha is speaking in a therapy session until after the first few paragraphs, when her therapist, Coz, says "I get it" (Egan 4). While the chapter is written in the third person, the narrator seems to mainly follow Sasha. The chapter is both a personal narrative told by Sasha to Coz and a third-person narrative about Sasha. It takes place both in the present and the past. However, Sasha as a narrator quickly proves unreliable. The narrator tells us early on that Sasha is thirty-five, but "not even Coz knew her real age" and "her online profiles all listed her as twenty-eight" (Egan 6). Egan opens her novel with her protagonist telling a story. Through this, she highlights the importance of the theme storytelling. Through the early unreliability of the narrator, Egan emphasizes her focus on who is doing the telling and when they are telling the story.

Sasha, like many of the other female characters in *Goon Squad*, is fascinated by people's perception of her in part because she seems unable to see herself. Sasha struggles with kleptomania and steals a woman's wallet in the bathroom on her date with Alex. When she ultimately returns the woman's wallet, she asks herself "What did she see? Sasha wished that she could turn and peer in the mirror again, as if something about herself might at last be revealed—some lost thing" (Egan 11). Sasha never wonders what Alex thinks of her because she already knows how he sees her. It's significant that she wonders how a woman perceives her, as she seems fully aware of how the men around her perceive her (at least on the surface). It is no coincidence that Sasha steals the wallet in the bathroom: a prototypically gendered place. For Sasha, her kleptomania is an experiment with perception and story. It's not about how people perceive her. Rather, it's about the feeling she gets when she steals and the stories she imagines behind the objects. Like herself, she says the objects only tell "the whole story when you really look" (Egan 299). When Alex goes to Sasha's apartment and looks at her collection of stolen objects, it stirs "something in her" (Egan 12), and she immediately has sex with him. Alex's seeing her depth, represented by the objects she steals rather than just the image Sasha presents to Alex on the surface, arouses her (Dango 51). These "found objects" all represent stories that make up Sasha—that is why she feels the need to steal from people rather than stores. After they have sex, Sasha realizes that Alex doesn't actually perceive her deeply at all, and confidently predicts how Alex will forget her in the future. It jars Sasha to think of herself as a "glint in the hazy memories that Alex would struggle to organize a year or two from now: 'Where was that place with the bathtub? Who was that girl?'" (Egan 14). Sasha is incorrect in her prediction; Alex will forget her for years, but he will remember her beyond her bathtub when reminded.

Sasha's reluctance to provide details of her past or reasoning for her behavior to Coz warns readers that they will receive little information about Sasha's inner self beyond her struggles with her identity evident in her therapy session. "Found Objects" contains many references to psychoanalysis, and beginning the novel in a therapy session primes the reader to examine the novel through a psychological approach (Humann 87). Priming the reader to be thinking psychologically makes it all the more obvious when Egan gives us no further insight into Sasha's psyche. Coz connects the first object Sasha ever stole, a screwdriver, with her father. The phallogocentric connotations of this moment are heavy-handed. Sasha describes the screwdriver as having a "silvery shaft, sculpted" (Egan 7), and a few moments later says the screwdriver is "a symbol" (Egan 7). Coz explicitly connects this phallic symbol to Sasha's father, or lack of a paternal presence. Sasha minimizes Coz's theory and refuses to talk about her father "for Coz's protection and her own—they were writing a story of redemption, of fresh beginnings and second chances. But in that direction lay only sorrow" (Egan 9). Sasha positions herself as a narrator here, or a crafter of her story. In third-person narratives with omniscient narrators, the focus is often on the characters featured in the story rather than the narrator themselves. Sasha's life only exists within the confines of the narratives we hear about her. Egan positions her here as narrator-like, hinting at the fact that the reader will not receive a backstory from her. The narrator also tells us that Sasha and "Coz were collaborators, writing a story whose ending had already been determined: she would get well" (Egan 6). Sasha's outcome seems to be predetermined for her. While Sasha deems herself the writer of a story, she is never given the opportunity in *Goon Squad* to do so. Her ending has already been determined—just not by her.

Every chapter that features Sasha also features her objectification. In the second chapter, her boss, Bennie Salazar, introduces her by describing her breasts as "the litmus test he used to

gauge his improvement” (Egan 22) in his sexual desire. He explicitly says that he “rarely thought of Sasha as an independent person” (Egan 28). Only after she prompts his first erection in months does Benny “really *see* her” (Egan 30). Beyond his own sexual needs, Benny could not care less about Sasha.

The second person point of view in “Out of Body,” a chapter narrated by Sasha’s college friend Rob who drowned in the East River, only further emphasizes the reader’s distance from Sasha’s interiority. When Rob informs the reader about Sasha’s habit of stealing, he says “she was better now, hadn’t stolen anything in two years” (Egan 194). Chronologically, this chapter takes place before “Found Objects”; through Rob’s comment the reader understands that either Rob is wrong, and Sasha has lied to him, or that Sasha begins to steal again after his death. Not only is Rob’s report of Sasha incorrect, but, again, the reader is left with no backstory as to why Sasha would develop a disorder such as kleptomania. Although Rob is our narrator, the second-person point of view forcibly aligns the reader with Rob’s experience. Rob seems to not particularly care about Sasha’s kleptomania outside of his experience, so the reader doesn’t either. Sasha remains one-dimensional.

Rob uses Sasha to endure his struggle with his sexuality, and he is ultimately willing to sacrifice her secrets to her boyfriend Drew. Rob describes sleeping in bed with Sasha exclusively in reference to his struggle with his sexuality:

You’d fall asleep holding Sasha and wake up with a hard-on and just lie there, feeling this body you knew so well, its skin and smells, alongside your own need to fuck someone, waiting for the two to merge into one impulse. *Come on, pull this all together and act like someone normal for a change*, but you were scared to put your lust to the test, not wanting to ruin it with Sasha if things went wrong. It was the biggest mistake of

your life, not fucking Sasha—you saw this with brutal clarity when she fell in love with Drew, and it clobbered you with remorse so extreme that you thought at first you couldn't survive it. You might have held on to Sasha and become normal at the same time, but you didn't even try—you gave up the one chance God threw your way, and now it's too late.

(Egan 196)

Rob isn't actually attracted to Sasha. He waits for his urges to feel Sasha and his urge to have sex to merge into one, but they never do. He wants to use Sasha sexually to “act like someone normal for a change.” Sasha is literally an object here, and Rob wants to “hold onto her.” While it might seem like Rob resents Sasha and Drew's relationship because he's in love with Sasha, it quickly becomes apparent that Rob is probably actually attracted to Drew. Rob says, “If you could see Drew naked, even just once, it would ease a deep, awful pressure inside you” (Egan 199). Rob's remorse is over Sasha no longer being “his” and his loss of Drew as a protentional romantic partner. Sasha is merely a vehicle by which Rob intends to confirm his heterosexuality—something he tells readers he has no intention of doing with any other woman.

Alison Blake, Sasha's daughter, delivers what is arguably the most famous chapter in *Goon Squad*. The chapter is delivered entirely in PowerPoint slides. Egan herself calls this chapter the “lynchpin” of her novel because “it accomplishes at a chapter scale what the novel does as a whole” (Omnivoracious Podcast). The reader can look at each slide and choose what order to read it in, whether from left to right, or up or down. The reader also has to physically rotate the book 90 degrees to experience the chapter, which is in a sense its own metafiction: this very motion reminds the reader of the book as an object and reading it as an engagement with the story.

Although Alison Blake narrates the chapter, it primarily tells the story of Lincoln Blake, Allison's brother, who is on the spectrum. While for many of the stories in the book men narrate women's stories, here, notably, Allison tells her brother's story because he seems unable to verbalize it himself due to his autism. While the men of the novel narrate women's stories in forms that don't represent the women as complicated characters, the one time a woman narrates a man's story she adapts it to a form reflective of his experience.

Allison's form also reflects an implicit understanding of her mother's experience with trauma. For example, one slide is titled "Mom's Reason's for Not Talking About That Time" (259). "That Time" refers to her younger years as Bennie Salazar's assistant in New York. The slide features a 3D funnel shape that contains three different speech bubbles, all from Sasha. The top two bubbles sit at the opening of the funnel and aren't blurred. They read "I don't trust my memories" and "It feels like another life." The final bubble sits further down in the funnel, the words slightly obscured. It reads: "it's all so imbued with my own struggles." The words are physically obscured by the funnel, just like Sasha's memories are imbued, or dyed (OED), by her own struggles. Allison's layout of this slide reflects trauma theory itself.

While Allison's mother Sasha does take a stereotypically "feminine" path, a housewife, Allison's use of PowerPoint and her dialogue with Sasha about the form of her "slide journal" suggests some hope for the next generation of women in the novel. The form of a PowerPoint presentation is often associated with business or other professional careers. Sasha seems irritated by Allison's use of PowerPoint to make a "slide journal." She asks her, "why not try writing for a change?" (253). Allison responds that this is her form of writing. Sasha then clarifies, "I mean writing a paper" (253). Sasha's hesitance to see Allison's PowerPoint as a legitimate form of authorship represents her tendency towards the traditional. Younger Allison understands new

ways of authorship in the digital age, and her skilled use of this form suggests a potential career in a field that uses PowerPoint as a medium.

The chapter itself is entirely reflective: the form is used to reflect on the rest of the narrative, while simultaneously disrupting it. Allison's PowerPoint slide journal has remarkable similarities to Sasha's found objects: taken individually, the objects or slides make little sense beyond what's explicitly written on them, but taken together, they tell a story, much like the chapters of the novel as a whole. It's significant that female characters, specifically mother and daughter, that make use of this disjunctive form of storytelling.

While Egan's form may be unconventional, the endings she provides her female characters follow the traditional romantic plot. Motherhood and marriage seem to be the inevitable conclusion for the "successful" woman. The novel features many absent fathers, from Sasha's distant father, to Lou, Bennie, and Jocelyn's father. In contrast, the mother's love in *Goon Squad* is constant. Sasha is the parent who understands her autistic son, Dolly will do anything to ensure Lulu's success, and Mindy abandons her career aspirations to take care of her children. Charlie, after recovering from her drug problem and escaping a cult, ends up being the mother to a baby boy. Sasha, after living life as a punk rocker, traveling around the world, and struggling with kleptomania, ends up as a homemaker to her college boyfriend (now a surgeon) and raising two children. In another chapter, Jocelyn, a woman who was exploited by Lou when she was just seventeen, sobs into her old friend Rhea's shoulder, asking "You have three children...what do I have?" (Egan 91). Jocelyn sees her life as empty without fulfilling her societal role as a mother (Wiig, 87). It's disappointing in a novel so focused on the idea of escaping tradition that when our female characters are "reformed," they are almost exclusively reformed into mothers, while the male characters go on to be rock stars or successful executives,

their families playing only a peripheral role in their ending. However, Egan's use of the most groundbreaking form in a chapter narrated by a young girl, Alison, may suggest that this is a generational experience, and Alison will continue to transverse boundaries even in her adult career.

Chapter 2: Lorrie Moore's Struggle to Reflect Identity in Form in *Anagrams*

Lorrie Moore's first longer work, *Anagrams*, consists of four short stories followed by a novella. Each story features three characters, Benna, Gerard, and Eleanor, leading different iterations of their lives. In the style of its title, instead of rearranging letters to make a new word, Moore rearranges characters' positions and situations to craft an alternate story. Moore herself has described *Anagrams* as "a kind of cubism, really – laying out mutually exclusive angles and possibilities, refusing to choose, refusing to allow one perspective to obscure another. Ironically, of course, it ends up revealing what few possibilities and arrangements a single life may ever have, even allowing for the reckless ride of the imagination" ("The Art of Fiction CLXVII" 65).

Moore, like Jennifer Egan, also addresses storytelling as an act of exchange between writer and reader, but she calls attention to this relationship through language rather than form. Moore's stories are littered with punning and wordplay that illustrate the flexibility of language. The relationship between this language and the unusual form of the pseudo-novel, though, is tenuous at best. Perhaps because of this, the collection was generally not well received. Moore says she "got so many bad reviews" she "actually had to stop reading them" (Moore, "The Art of Fiction CLXVII" 65). Despite her poor reception from the critics, her novels and other collections, including *Anagrams*, are still widely read by the general public. Moore herself, however, has deemed *Anagrams* "unreadable" ("Columbia Talks" 159).

One of the themes that ties all five stories together (besides the reoccurring characters) is Benna's complicated relationship between motherhood and her identity. Moore herself has described the book as being about "childlessness" ("Columbia Talks" 157). Although Benna's position (occupation, friends, location, romantic partner) keeps changing, her preoccupation with motherhood remains. Because of this, Benna's identity doesn't change significantly throughout

any of the stories. While Moore's form of changing the roles in each story is clever, the anagrammatic form of the collection ultimately highlights how life is unlike an anagram. Anagrams are word games in which the same letters are rearranged to create a different meaning. Moore's kaleidoscopic form reveals that even with the rearranged positions, given the fact that Benna's struggles with identity remain the same, nothing new can be created. Moore's emphasis on the role of motherhood in Benna's understanding of her own identity ultimately renders her form ineffective. In *Anagrams*, the content ultimately reflects the opposite of the form.

“ESCAPE FROM THE INVASION OF THE LOVE KILLERS”

The first story in the collection, “Escape from the Invasion of the Love Killers,” introduces the collection's protagonists, Benna and Gerard. The story is only six pages long, but the themes it introduces echo throughout the collection. Benna is a widowed and cynical nightclub singer, while her neighbor, Gerard, teaches aerobics to children and is desperately in love with Benna, although too shy to act on his feelings. The story is told in third person, with the narration primarily identifying with Gerard, rather than Benna. It is the only one of the collection not to follow Benna's thoughts and feelings. It is also the only story where Benna shows absolutely no interest in motherhood and family, but she assumes the role of the independent career woman. The man, Gerard, instead assumes this role.

The story's science fiction title, “Escape from the Invasion of the Love Killers,” echoes Benna's concern about motherhood. Moore's choice of “escape” reflects a moment early in the story, when the narrator describes Benna as “a woman who knew she was ovulating by the dreams she'd have of running through corridors to catch trains; she was also a woman who said

she had no desire to have children” (*The Collected Stories* 484). This moment, given the unique point of view in its primary association with Gerard, illustrates a popular stereotype of women who don’t want to have children. The image of running to catch a train is emblematic of Benna’s latent or subconscious desire to act on her biology and have a child. Thus the dreams occur when she is ovulating, as if she’s missing something she’s not supposed to miss. However, in the second half of this sentence, Moore reminds the reader that there is another way to interpret this dream. Moore specifies that Benna is a woman who “said” she doesn’t want to have children, rather than one who legitimately did not want to reproduce. The addition of this “said” reminds the reader that this story is not told in first person, and that they don’t have access to Benna’s perspective. Rather, the narration grants the reader access to Gerard’s mind, and he assumes that Benna has a subconscious desire to reproduce that she must “escape.” However, the image of Benna’s running to catch a train may also suggest Benna’s escaping the societal pressures to become a mother rather than her biological drive to do so. Moore potentially writes Benna as escaping both her genetic drive and the social pressure toward motherhood.

Gerard comes over one night when Benna is watching a science fiction movie. When he asks her its title, she replies: “Escape from something, or maybe it’s invasion of something. I forget” (*The Collected Stories* 485). Benna links the concepts of “invasion” and pregnancy earlier when she describes her reaction while witnessing a birth. She realizes that “a baby’s...just a little anagram of you and what you’ve been eating for nine months” (*The Collected Stories* 484). Significantly, the first use of “anagram” in the collection is explicitly linked to the phenomenon of motherhood. While the deployment of “anagram” obviously draws attention to this moment, the description of a baby as eating what its mother eats and taking part of the mother carries connotations of a parasite, an invader, for which the mother only serves as a host

(Macpherson 575). Like her cancer in the following story, a pregnancy would be a foreign invader in her body, even further alienating Benna from her material self. Benna's desire to escape motherhood is also a desire to escape this invasion. This moment also introduces a motif that will run through the other four stories: the self as merely a series of fragments, crucially tied together, albeit precariously, by language. In this first story, Benna appears to have no desire to be a mother. She is firmly in the camp of "career woman," and says she's too "busy from work" (*Anagrams* 7) to have a child. The following stories diverge from this characterization of Benna. However, what does remain consistent throughout the whole work, is Benna's view of motherhood and her career as two dichotomous realities, unable to exist simultaneously.

STRINGS TOO SHORT TO USE

In Moore's next story, "Strings too Short to Use," Benna and Gerard have not only reversed roles (Gerard is an entertainer and Benna teaches aerobics to the elderly), but they have an established romantic relationship. The story is written in first person from Benna's point of view. Benna finds a lump in her breast, gets pregnant, and Gerard cheats on her with her overweight best friend Eleanor. When a nurse tells Benna that the lump in her breast could have grown because she hasn't been pregnant before, Moore explicitly identifies a dichotomy that will haunt Benna throughout the collection. Benna says, "I suspect it was talk like this that had gotten women out of the factories and immediately started the baby boom" (*Anagrams* 21). Like in the previous story, Benna perceives motherhood and a career as diametrically opposed. Again like in the other story, Moore explicitly mentions anagrams, this time when Benna says:

There was a period where I kept trying to make anagrams out of words that weren't anagrams: *moonscape* and *menopause*; *gutless* and *guilts*; *lovesick* and evil *louse*.... I would scribble the words over and over again on a napkin, trying to make them fit--like a child dividing three into two, not able to make it go. (*Anagrams* 17)

The significant difference between the letters in these words suggests the specific anagrams Benna struggles to make are by no means random. It is hard to believe Benna sees these words as literal anagrams. The first, “*moonscape* and *menopause*,” are powerfully linked. Menopause signifies the end of fertility by the end of menstruation, itself a process intimately connected to the moon. It is widely accepted that the menstrual cycle has a synchronous relationship with the lunar rhythm (Law). Moonscape, besides its obviously lunar connotations, also means “a desolate and barren scene.” Both words evoke the link between women’s fertility and the moon, an entity typically viewed as feminine, but both words also allude to an end to this fertility—a barrenness—something of which Benna seems acutely afraid.

“*Gutless* and *guilts*” also reflect Benna’s internal struggles. She clearly feels guilt about her deliberate avoidance of pregnancy and about getting pregnant despite being unmarried. Benna, at this moment, is very much not “gutless”: there is a fetus growing inside her, one that signifies her guilts. Benna even admits that her desire for a “Marriage Equivalent” makes her feel “guilty and bourgeois” (*The Collected Stories* 459). Even though Eleanor, not Benna, is the character who connects the strings she finds labeled “too short to use” to Catholicism, sex, and guilt, Benna suffers from similar guilt.

“*Lovesick* and evil *louse*” are most directly connected to Gerard: Benna clearly loves him, even though he treats her terribly. “Louse,” again, brings up parasitic images connected to

motherhood and Benna's pregnancy. In this way, the unborn child and Gerard are the same: despite their parasitic qualities, Benna seems to love them both. A third parasite compounds these: the cancer. Benna desperately tries to piece her life and her different identities together, just like she tries to force the anagrams. Although the words are all related, like Benna's different permutations of herself, they cannot be fitted together because they are fundamentally different. Perhaps Moore includes this moment to illustrate the wider impossibility of translating anagrams into life.

"YARD SALE"

The next story in the collection, "Yard Sale," is also narrated in first person by Benna. However, in this shorter fiction, Moore provides less information about Benna's life. The reader learns that Benna and Gerard are a couple, but Gerard is moving to the west coast for law school and taking the dog with him. Eleanor is their married friend in this story. Gerard and Benna are having a yard sale to sell all the possessions they no longer want. Benna continually uses the refrain "it's two against one out here" to refer to the characters' changing positions within the story. At first, Gerard and Eleanor are the two, as they are both moving away and looking to start over. Then, Eleanor says to Benna that "Gerard will rue the day" (*The Collected Stories* 515), and Eleanor and Benna become the two and Gerard becomes the one. Finally, Benna reaches under the table to grasp Gerard's hand, and the couple becomes the pair. This final time, Benna says "it's two against one out here, we all just keep taking turns" (*The Collected Stories* 515). While important to the individual story, these shifting roles are also a microcosm of the wider collection as a whole; the characters' roles shift within "Water" in a similar manner to how they shift between each story. As in the collection as a whole, no matter what roles shift, the outcome

is still the same: Gerard is leaving, and Benna is miserable. Again, here, Moore's attempt to mimic an anagram with her characters struggles because their lives aren't reshuffling to create anything new.

Throughout "Yard Sale" Benna's primary identity concern is her femininity. Benna seems to conceptualize a connection between plants and womanhood, or, more specifically, motherhood. When Benna sells her Chinese evergreen, she personifies the plant, saying that it is "looking at her in disbelief, betrayed." Benna describes the couple as scooping the plants up like "kindly rescuers of children," and once again personifies the Chinese evergreen, claiming that it screeches "you're not fit to be a plant mother!" (*The Collected Stories* 517). The end of Benna's relationship seems to also signify an end to her quasi-motherhood. She seems to understand she will never have children, now. The plants berate her for her failure as a woman. Reproduction and the end of Benna's relationship are even further linked when Eleanor hangs a stained lace teddy she wants to sell on a tree in the yard. The teddy serves as ever-present reminder of the duties of womanhood considering it is an underwear garment typically worn by women (OED) and therefore associated with female sexuality. Benna even refers to the teddy as "some kind of organic spin art, a flower or target; a menstrual eye bearing down on me" (*The Collected Stories* 518). The hanging symbol functions as a grotesque reminder of what Benna will never have or her failures as a woman. Immediately after Benna comments on the lace teddy staring down at her, the narration jumps to future tense for a brief paragraph where Benna predicts the end of her relationship. The teddy serves as the catalyst for this prolepsis because of its association with female sexuality and therefore reproduction. Through prolepsis, Benna explains that Gerard will promise to stay in touch and then slowly fade away. Unlike many other of Moore's stories, like "How," this use of future tense is not hypothetical: it is definite. This strange definite future tense

also suggests Benna's cognitive and experiential displacement (Margolin 3). Moreover, Margolin argues that when future tense is inserted into present, as it is here, the tense shift turns possibility into an actuality and imagination into experience. Whether or not the breakup actually ends up happening, because of the prolepsis and its definite nature, the reader experiences this potential future as an actuality. The predetermined nature of Benna's future reflects Moore's wider point throughout the stories: no matter what decisions Benna makes; she more or less ends up in the same place. There is no hypothetical future because the future is definitive due to Benna's lack of choice.

In the final prolepsis, Benna says that children may come up to Benna's porch and ask her if she has kids. Moore doesn't provide Benna's explicit response in the negative but does tell us the kids will ask "Why not? Don't you like kids?" (*The Collected Stories* 524). Benna seems unable to tell the reader herself that she will not have children; the reader is expected to gather it from context. Significantly, this future is hypothetical—it is all framed by "maybes" and "mights." Of the six prolepses, only the beginning of the final is hypothetical. But while continuing to speak in future tense, Benna quickly returns back to definite, when Benna says, "And when I almost run over them with my car, in my driveway, I will feel many different things" (*The Collected Stories* 524).

Benna's mother, who often mails her daughter coupons for tampons with messages about how she can't use them (another evocation of fertility), is proud of Benna's identity as an independent woman. She tells Benna that "not every woman thinks like you and I do. Some just want to settle down" (*Anagrams* 43). The irony, here, is that Benna's mother did settle down and have children but seems to have a deep desire to identify with Benna as the independent career woman, despite Benna being unhappy herself about her single identity. Once again, Benna's

mother reminds the reader that Benna experiences limited choice: either a career or motherhood, but her identity cannot contain both.

It is Gerard and Eleanor's insistence on Benna's declaring an identity (even in jest), that leads to her breakdown. The precarious and ambiguous nature of language is key in Benna's meltdown. Before she collapses, Benna says that her exhale is tinged with hysteria. "I know what hysteria is," she says, "it is your womb speaking up for its own commerce. 'This is your sex speaking,' it says. 'And we are getting a raw deal'" (*The Collected Stories* 524). Hysteria is a descriptor inarguably linked to the female sex, and historically was a pseudo-medical disorder leading to inappropriate emotional behavior due to a displacement of the uterus (OED). The many connotations of "commerce" almost all apply in Moore's deployment of it. Commerce most commonly means trade, evoking images of women's bodies as mere objects of exchange, but it also has other meanings: 1) sexual intercourse; 2) a game in which bartering is the main feature; 3) conversation with God; and 4) "to communicate physically" (OED). In this metaphor, Benna is hysterical because her displaced womb is complaining about its lack of use. The choice of the uterus as a metonymy for all of womankind is ironic. The female sex gets "the raw deal" because feminine identity is so often predicated on notions of motherhood or literal use of the uterus. This hysteria occurs when Benna is commanded to declare an identity because she sees her identity as dependent on whether or not she makes use of her womb: she is either a mother or an independent woman, but not both.

Benna closes the story by describing the edge of her own body "fading from the center first like a bloodstain or a bruise...my perimeter lingering" (*The Collected Stories* 525). This image of a bruise appears once before in the story in connection with the teddy that Eleanor hangs on the tree. She says that the stain will "fade like a bruise." Benna's identity, linked to the

stain on the teddy, fades without her connection to motherhood. Also, the bodily connotations of a bruise explicitly link sex, motherhood, and bodily harm (Kelly 55). Benna's desire to be a mother, and struggle with her sense of self when she realizes she will not have the opportunity to do so, grows more intense with each passing story, although she remains childless up until the final novella.

“WATER”

The penultimate story in *Anagrams*, “Water,” is told in third person, and features Benna as a single, childless art history professor in California. Gerard is her graduate teaching assistant, whom she discovers late in the story is married with a daughter of his own. Having recently moved to California, the narrator explains that every time her paycheck arrives, Benna is stunned at the huge amount taken out in taxes for a single woman with no dependents: “the money starts to feel like an insult” (*Anagrams* 57). Early on, Benna starts to feel like society punishes her for being childless, and the success of her career—her paycheck—is also the primary reminder of this childlessness. However, this moment also highlights Benna's distorted perception of parenthood: children are reduced to a tax break and nothing more. The final story, “The Nun of That,” where Benna achieves a strange form of parenthood, reflects this distorted perception of motherhood.

Benna is an expert in Mary Cassatt, an artist famous for painting images of mother and child, despite having no children herself. Images of Mary Cassatt appear in multiple stories throughout *Anagrams*:

The old familiar notes about the childless Mary Cassatt giving herself babies with paint; the expatriate Mary Cassatt, weary and traveling, dreaming homes for herself in her work; woman Mary Cassatt, who believed herself no woman at all. (*Anagrams* 58)

Benna's mention of Mary Cassatt suggests multiple things about her sense of her identity as it is connected to motherhood. First, there is an obvious parallelism between Mary Cassatt and Benna herself. Both women are childless, both women are without a home (as Benna has just moved to California), and both women struggle with their identity as single and childless. Mary Cassatt's "giving herself babies with paint" foreshadows Benna giving herself a child (Georgianne) with her imagination in the following story, "The Nun of That." Like Mary Cassatt, Benna relocates her home because of her work, and Benna sees Cassatt as able to "dream" homes for herself like Benna "dreams" her child. Benna's obsession with Mary Cassatt throughout all the stories represents a struggle between identity as a woman and motherhood.

Benna begins to mention imagination in this story as a cure to her longing for motherhood. She explains that her friend Eleanor, with whom she corresponds, has begun to feel "more imagined than real" (*Anagrams* 57). The cure to Benna's loneliness in writing to her friend is explicitly linked with imagination—yet another foreshadowing of Georgianne. Then, when Benna is blindsided to learn that her graduate student has a child, she thinks to herself that "perhaps he has only an imaginary daughter" (*Anagrams* 59). Benna retreats into her imagination when confronted with loneliness due to her situation, and the third person narration used in "Water" reflects this distance.

While the previous stories link Benna's identity crisis and her desire for motherhood only tenuously, "Water" marks a pivotal point when Benna begins to fully escape into her imagination

where she can achieve a fulfilling identity through her role as a mother. A true anagram uses the letters that already exist to make something new, and so Benna's reliance on make-believe to develop a different solution for her motherhood plot fails to parallel the idea of an anagram.

“THE NUN OF THAT”

The novella that closes out *Anagrams*, “The Nun of That,” features Benna as a widowed adjunct professor of poetry at a community college, and Gerard, her one-time lover and best friend, as an aspiring opera singer and current carpet salesman. Besides dating her student, Darrel, Benna spends most of her time with her daughter Georgianne and her friend Eleanor, another adjunct professor at the college who teaches physical education despite being overweight. We learn relatively early on that both Georgianne and Eleanor are figments of Benna's imagination. Georgianne is a combination of Benna's late husband, George, and her niece Annie. Benna's healthiest and happiest relationship throughout all the stories in the collection is with the imagined Georgianne. Benna, whose basic characteristics do not change between stories as her occupations and societal positions do, seems most at peace when tasked with the role of mother, albeit imaginary. The sheer length of “The Nun of All That, —163 pages as compared to only 59 for the other four stories combined— along with its singularity as the only story that grants Benna motherhood, emphasizes its importance within *Anagrams* as well as in the thematic development of the motherhood role. Finally, the suggestion in this story, given Benna's delusional state, is that the previous four shorter stories were merely figments of Benna's imagination, or other lives she tried to live in her head.

“The Nun of That” regularly switches between first and third-person point of view, reflecting Benna's fractured mental state. Benna narrates her personal life, like her interactions

with Gerard, Eleanor, and Georgianne, in first person. Whenever the story details Benna's professional life, though, she is referred to as "the teacher." "The teacher" is an even more distanced marker than if an omniscient third-person narrator used "Benna." These rapid shifts in narrative perspective illustrate the importance of language in storytelling and identity formation. Sharon Willis writes that "given the text's strategy of veiling and unveiling, where 'I' veils herself as 'she,' but where 'she' just as frequently masquerades as 'I,' we cannot maintain a rigid and secure separation of self and other, interior and exterior" (Willis in Richardson 65). The only other times the narrative switches to third person are moments of crisis in Benna's life, like when she learns of Gerard's death. This third-person narration continues from Gerard's death for the next thirteen pages, through Benna's upsetting and borderline-incestual experience when she goes to visit her brother for the holidays. It is only the reappearance of the imagined Georgianne and Benna's role as mother that ushers first-person narration back into the final pages of the novella. The switches in point-of-view show the schism between Benna's identity as a mother and her identity as a professional. One role must be narrated in third person because both cannot exist simultaneously in her one identity.

Identity is clearly important to Benna. She begins her class by telling the reader that she already knows the different "kinds" of students she will have (*Anagrams* 67). Benna seems to rely on assumptions about identities to understand her students. She even asks them to draw their souls on index cards as an introductory activity. Benna's identity struggles are most obvious through her struggle with her name. People, including her stepmother, classmates, and multiple students, can't seem to get her name right, and often call her "Donna." "Donna" is not even an anagram of "Benna," but a different word entirely. Despite the different letters in the names, when Benna sees a young autistic girl on TV named Donna, she identifies with her. The

paragraph begins with Benna's observing, "It's as if I know the girl. She almost has my name..." (109). By the middle of the paragraph, however, Benna says "I have been her" (109). Rather than just her knowing Donna, now Donna becomes a past version of Benna herself. Finally, by the end of the paragraph, Benna is identifying the two as the same person, commenting "we are invisible; when they say our name, if they really look at us, they don't mean it" (109). Benna's switch into using first person plural "we" reminds the reader of her unreliability as a narrator (Richardson 42). She speaks for Donna, a girl who she doesn't even know. Benna seems unable to understand that the significant difference between an anagram and a near-anagram. Benna and Donna are not anagrams; therefore, they are not grouped, and Benna shouldn't use the first-person plural to refer to them. Anagrams are predicated on the precarious nature of language—if one letter is different the anagram will not work. Identities are even more precarious, but Benna struggles to grasp this concept. Immediately before a student mishears her name, a student approaches Benna and asks, "Do you have the class list?...I want to see if I'm here" (*Anagrams* 70). Benna assures the student that he is, in fact, there, but the ensuing struggles with her name suggest that she's not sure whether or not she's there. It is not just Benna that is unsure in her identity; her students even lack certainty about who she is. When she gives a speech at the beginning of the year, one student accuses her of fabricating her toughness, telling her she's just "talking tough because it's the beginning of the year" (*Anagrams* 71). Due to the third-person narration of the classroom scenes, the reader is left with the sense that it is Benna as teacher that is a performance, as opposed to Benna as mother, despite the fact that her role as mother is imagined and her role as teacher is not. This shift in point-of-view suggests that Benna is most "herself" when she is a mother and that her role as "teacher" and her role as "mother" are irreconcilable.

Benna's satisfaction in motherhood is perhaps due to the fact that the imagined Georgianne seems to behave the way only an ideal child would because she's entirely fabricated. Georgianne's imagined state allows Benna to be a mother without having to suffer any of the consequences that accompany motherhood—she doesn't even have to give birth. When Benna finally reveals Georgianne's imagined existence to Gerard, she explains herself by saying that it seemed “one of the few decent ways to bring someone into the world” (*Anagrams* 201). Here Benna returns to the part of her identity illustrated in “Invasion of the Love-Killers”; despite her desire for motherhood, she has no intention of bringing a child into the world. Benna's comment reveals one of her struggles throughout the stories: she seems to have an innate desire for motherhood, but no desire for children.

In Benna's final scene, where the narration finally returns to first person after a long break following Gerard's death, Benna and Georgianne wait in Grand Central Station, getting ready to travel to the Caribbean. Whether or not Benna is supposed to be at Grand Central physically is unclear, as she's had a psychotic break and her narration is flagrantly unreliable. The image of Benna's waiting for a train with her child is evocative of a similar train image in “Invasion of the Love Killers,” when the narrator describes Benna as the kind of woman who had dreams “of running through corridors to catch trains” (*The Collected Stories* 484). While Benna as a childless woman is running to catch the train, Benna as a mother is allowed to patiently wait to board with her daughter. Georgianne even says to Benna, “it stinks like trains, Mom” (*Anagrams* 225). Benna describes the trains as stinking “like hell and carcinogenesis” (*Anagrams* 225). After this very sensory description of the unpleasantness of the trains, Benna says:

This is why a woman makes things up: Because when she dies, those lives she never got to are all going down with her. All those possibilities will just sit there like a bunch of schoolkids with their hands raised and uncalled on—each knowing, really knowing, the answer. (*Anagrams* 225)

Benna's reason for explaining "why a woman makes things up" in this particular moment remains ambiguous. Crucially, waiting for the train is unpleasant for Benna; they "stink like hell." Because waiting for the train is so unpleasant as compared to running for the train, like she did as a childless woman in "Invasion," the discrepancy perhaps leads Benna to feel the need to offer the only explanation she provides as to why she makes Georgianne up. Like the trains, motherhood involves unpleasantness; Benna has already told Gerard that producing an imagined child is "one of the few *decent ways*" to be a mother (italics added). The implication is that for Benna the experience of actual motherhood is too intense, too sensory. However, again here Benna's identity is irretrievably linked to children and motherhood: school children represent all the possibilities of her other lives. The representation of her other paths as schoolchildren links both Benna's desire for a child of her own and her occupation as a teacher, which is presented as entirely separate from her experience as a mother in all the stories. The actual experience of motherhood Benna could not handle. Like the trains, it would carry suggestions of "hell and carcinogenesis," but she needs to at least imagine herself as a mother, in order to prevent herself from "missing the train."

Benna furthers this point when she describes how they "are suddenly hit with a steamy, acrid smoke billowing out from underneath [the train]. People around us cough" (*Anagrams* 225). The people around her cough, experiencing the visceral nature of real parenthood in the

metaphorical train station. Benna refers to Georgianne as her “present to [herself]. [Her] lozenge of pretend” (*Anagrams* 225). Benna is safe from “coughing,” or experiencing the hardships of either real motherhood or a commitment to childlessness because of her imaginative conception of Georgianne. “Lozenge,” while meaning a cough medicine dissolved in the mouth, also means “a shield upon which the arms of a spinster are emblazoned” (OED). In other words, “lozenge” was the symbol used on the coat of arms of an unmarried and childless woman (Newton 57). Even though Georgianne is Benna’s demented way of experiencing motherhood, the child is also her shield against it, and a mark signifying to everyone else that she is a spinster. Importantly, though, the reader knows from the previous stories that these possibilities are a façade—Benna’s destiny is unchanging no matter what life she chooses.

Through the first four stories Benna’s outcome is always the same: she ends up lonely and unhappy. Only in the novella does Benna not suffer this fate, and although she seems happy with the imaginary Georgianne, she’s suffered a mental breakdown. The only stereotypical “happy ending” Benna gets is in the final story where she gets to be a mother. These rigid potential endings suggest there are only two options: an unhappy, childless ending, or a happy maternal one. While it may appear Benna has more agency than typical characters— Given Moore allows her to live a number of iterations of her life, making different choices in each— her happiness ultimately comes down to one decision with only two outcomes: whether or not to be a mother. Arguably, she doesn’t even get to make this decision because Georgianne isn’t real. Thus, Benna ends up without a child in all five stories.

Moore perhaps foreshadows Benna’s limited outcomes in her inclusion of a line from one of Robert Frost’s best-known and most misunderstood poems as an epigraph. The epigraph reads “I shall be telling this with a sigh...,” which is the first line of the final stanza in Robert Frost’s

“The Road Not Taken.” In popular culture, this poem serves as an ode to American individualism, where the narrator chooses to take the road “less traveled by” when presented with a decision, and it makes “all the difference.” Taken as a whole, however, Frost’s poem speaks to a similar interest as *Anagrams*. Although the speaker initially focuses on the choice between the two roads, the final stanza, which Moore cites in her epigraph, features the speaker telling his story to others. Although the speaker has previously stated there was no difference in the two paths, when telling the story, he insists his decision made all the difference in his outcome. The line Moore specifically cites indicates the control of the speaker over how the story is told. Given that the two roads were more or less the same, the speaker has no way to determine whether or not his choice actually made a difference in his outcome. Benna, in contrast, is allowed to take multiple roads, but Moore suggests that these choices don’t make very much of difference. Benna still only has two potential outcomes. It is in this dichotomy that Moore’s attempt at an anagrammatic structure falters. While, as Moore herself acknowledges, the anagrammatic structure of the collection emphasizes the ultimately minimal possibilities Benna has, Benna’s limited outcomes also highlight precisely what makes anagrams untenable as a model for plot. While letters are able to be rearranged to make something new, lives are not.

While Moore clearly attempts to mimic the structure of the anagram in the form of the novel, this analogy isn’t entirely successful. The final novella suggests that the first four stories were merely figments of Benna’s imagination. If the first four iterations of Benna’s life never actually existed, there is no metaphoric “word” to be rearranged into an anagram. Moreover, while the form of *Anagrams* clearly reflects its title, Moore’s attempt to connect language and identity through her use of anagrammatic structure is wobbly at best. While an anagram takes the same letters and rearranges them to make something new, Moore takes Benna, the same

character, and rearranges her in different roles, but never makes something new. Benna always ends up in the same place. While Moore continuously illustrates the flexibility of language through her punning throughout the stories, Benna's life proves not as flexible. Yes, identity may be fluid and multifaceted in a similar way to language, but with language the outcome is variable; with life, at least in Benna's case, it is not. April Bernard correctly observed this in one review, writing "Thus, these five stories are bad anagrams—which is to say, not anagrams at all—of one another. What are we to make of this? Unfortunately, I think, Moore, like her fictional counterpart, has not yet accepted that an anagram isn't an anagram if the letters don't match exactly" (Bernard 525). Moore's plots are almost the opposite of anagrams, while the pieces change in each story, the outcome remains consistent. While anagrams are a way to reorganize words, the structure of the collection actually reveals the impossibility of reorganizing life.

Chapter 3: Margaret Atwood's Art of Surprise: *Good Bones and Simple Murders*

Unlike Moore and Egan, who utilize stereotypes, Atwood parodies these very stereotypes to make her point. Atwood's collection *Good Bones and Simple Murders*, which combines works from her 1983 short story collection *Murder in the Dark*, and her 1992 collection *Good Bones*, expertly subverts stereotypes and iconography typically associated with women. While not as explicitly linked as the pieces in both *Anagrams* and *Goon Squad*, as Sharon R. Wilson points out, it would be a mistake to view the collection as lacking structure (Wilson 18). The collection includes genre-bending works of many different types that share common themes and are all united through their variations on traditional form. All the texts included in *Simple Murders* foreground the relationship between form and content. Wilson claims them all as "postmodern metatexts" (Wilson 18). While not necessarily her most popular works, Atwood has been producing works in this style since nearly the beginning of her career. Additionally, she has always been an innovator with form. In *Good Bones and Simple Murders*, Atwood satirically remakes multiple different genres, including recipes, fairy tales, gossip columns, and diary entries, using multiple amorphous forms that are difficult to define. The collection includes poems, prose poems, flash fiction, short fiction, and just about everything in between. Above all, Atwood's variation of genre and form serve to illustrate the arbitrary nature of genre boundaries. She uses genres "not as categories, but as rhetorical strategies or social institutions" (Cooke cited in Howells, 140). Part of Atwood's expert use of parody and her use of unconventional form derive their power from her subversion of the traditional expectations of the reader to illustrate her points. Atwood herself has spoken on this phenomenon:

This summer I saw a white frog. It would not have been startling if I didn't know that this species of frog is normally green. This is the way such a mutant literary form unsettles us. We know what is expected, in a given arrangement of words; we know what is supposed to come next. And then it doesn't. (Shapard & Thomas 298-9)

Like the white frog, it is precisely Atwood's use of the unexpected and the ways in which she varies an expected form or genre that captures the reader's attention by unsettling them. Atwood often uses this blended method of writing the conventional form unconventionally to comment metafictionally on the experiences of women. Not only does Atwood parody genres, but her use of parody extends down to the character themselves, whom she often takes from popular culture. Atwood continually positions the narrator as a confessor, implicating the reader in the power dynamics the piece exposes (Cooke 223). Paradoxically, through giving narrative control to the vulnerable, Atwood creates characters that assert their powerlessness through their power of narration. Finally, Atwood continually addresses the inevitability of certain endings available to women and draws attention to this through her unconventional form in *Good Bones and Simple Murders*.

MOORE, ATWOOD, AND THE SALIENCE OF "HAPPY ENDINGS"

In her short piece "Happy Endings," Margaret Atwood more aptly illustrates some of the same points Moore is trying to make about plot and characterization. Like *Anagrams*, "Happy Endings" presents multiple iterations of the same story with the plot reshuffled. Atwood has called this structure "permutational fiction" (Nischik 214). However, in "Happy Endings,"

Atwood's form better reflects the point she and Moore are trying to make. She begins her story relatively simply:

John and Mary meet.

What happens next?

If you want a happy ending, try A. (*Simple Murders* 50)

Through these opening lines, Atwood draws the reader's attention to her role as readers and to Atwood as writer. However, through asking and then immediately answering her own question, she blurs the lines between these roles. Following the three opening lines, Atwood details six different plots, labeled A through F. Much like Moore's *Anagrams*, the characters are shuffled around with different circumstances and locations in each plot. Atwood closes the piece by highlighting that the ending is always the same: "John and Mary die." The question "what happens next?" that Atwood poses is answered both by each singular plot, and by the ending of the piece as a whole. The final sentence of this opening provides the reader with an illusion of choice, which further emphasizes Atwood's later point that all the endings are the same.

Atwood's choice of a format similar to a "choose your own adventure" game, a move that putatively leaves choices up to the reader rather than the writer, as opposed to Moore's anagrammatic restructuring of plots, better illustrates the metafictional message about the point of choice in storytelling. Like in Moore, while it may appear that Benna has choices, Atwood guides us to the conclusion that apparent choices are often merely illusory because the outcomes are ultimately the same.

In "Happy Endings," Atwood also explores the limited choice of women more explicitly than Moore. Each story contains a marriage or romantic plot. In the first plot, A, John and Mary "fall in love and get married" (*Simple Murders* 50). The characters continue on to have children,

friends, and a “stimulating and challenging” sex life, in addition to “stimulating and challenging” hobbies and “stimulating and challenging” jobs (*Simple Murders* 50). Atwood’s repetition here emphasizes the profoundly repetitive nature of the plot.

In plot B, the narrator says that John “merely uses [Mary’s] body for selfish pleasure,” because she is in love with him, but he isn’t in love with her (*Simple Murders* 51). He comes over to her house twice a week, where she cooks him dinner and then they have sex. The narrator specifies that Mary “acts as if she’s dying for it every time, not because she likes the sex exactly, she doesn’t, but she wants John to think she does because if they do it often enough surely he’ll get used to her, he’ll come to depend on her and they will get married” (*Simple Murders* 51). Not only does Mary pretend to enjoy sex with John, but while he’s sleeping she goes and does the dishes “so he won’t think she’s untidy” and puts on lipstick which he doesn’t notice when he wakes up (*Simple Murders* 51). In this version, Mary worries about John’s perception of her, and does everything in her power to ensure that his perception is a positive one. Unfortunately for Mary, it’s clear John doesn’t care enough to perceive her at all. When John finds a woman he actually likes, Madge, Mary tries to kill herself, hoping that John will come and save her. He doesn’t, and she dies. John and Madge end up married and happy. In B, Mary epitomizes the stereotype of a desperate woman hopelessly in love with a man who doesn’t care about her.

The following reshuffling, C, marks the differential between the choices available to women and those available to men. In this plot, John is older than Mary and loves her despite being married to Madge. Mary does not love with John—she loves a man closer to her age named James. James is out on his motorcycle, “being free,” but, the narrator specifies that “freedom isn’t the same for girls” (*Simple Murders* 53), and so Mary spends her Thursday evenings sleeping with John. Thus the narrator provides an excuse for Mary’s exercise of her

sexual freedom, even though she's not the member of the pair that's philandering. At the end of C, John walks in on Mary and James together, and although he has no right to be jealous, "considering Madge," he buys a handgun and shoots Mary, James, and himself (*Simple Murders* 54). The narrator briefly addresses the reader directly after John purchases a handgun, "saying he needs it for target practice." The narrator then comments: "—this is the thin part of the plot, but it can be dealt with later—" (*Simple Murders* 54). Unlike Moore, with this move to metafictional phraseology, Atwood uses her narrative shortcomings to further her point rather than distract from it. This acknowledgement positions the reader on Atwood's side by pretending to include the reader in Atwood's creative process.

In both plot B, where Mary caters to John's every sexual desire, and plot C, where Mary exercises her own sexual agency simply to find happiness, Mary ends up dead. She seems to be unable to pursue her own "happy ending" in the way that John does. Whether or not Mary exercises her agency, she ends up without a "happy ending," and so her choices aren't relevant in practice. Finally, at the end of this story, Madge, the only character left alive, "after a suitable period of mourning" (again, a female concerned with perception), marries Fred, and everything continues as in A (*Simple Murders* 54). In Atwood's versions, no female character has much choice in either B or C: the options available seem to be to get married or to die.

Anagrams also illustrates the disappointing lack of agency in choice for women, given that Benna ends up in the same position no matter which variation her life takes. However, the short plots of "Happy Endings," combined with its less detailed descriptions of characters, more aptly illustrates this female powerlessness over endings, because the different variations are juxtaposed more closely and focused structurally. Also, Atwood's direct dialogue with the reader

aligns them with her as the writer which conveys a sense of complicity in Mary's unfortunate destinies, as do the cold and unemotional descriptions of her tragic outcomes.

Plots D and E are concerned with external obstacles to the "happy endings." In D, a tidal wave approaches, but Madge and Fred escape and again "continue as in A." In E, the narrator shifts the tone slightly. The section begins with "yes, but Fred has a bad heart" (*Simple Murders* 55) as if the narrator is in the middle of conversation with the reader. Then, at the end of E, Atwood addresses the reader directly once again writing, "If you like, it can be 'Madge,' 'cancer,' 'guilty and confused,' and 'bird watching'" (*Simple Murders* 55). This interruption draws the reader's attention to the replaceability of all of the details. It doesn't matter whether Fred is afflicted with an illness, or what hobby the widow picks up: the outcome is the same as in A. Atwood's addresses to the reader peak in plot F, which is not much of a plot at all. D, E, and F are all short plots, and their brevity, along with their outrageousness and changing ideologies, emphasizes the ridiculousness of considering plot differences as relevant to endings, since all endings are the same.

Atwood provides the reader with yet another option: "if you think this is all too bourgeois, make John a revolutionary and Mary a counterespionage agent and see how far that gets you" (*Simple Murders* 55). Atwood writes in the second person imperative here, addressing the reader directly and ironically anticipating what their response might be. She surmises that the reader may find her past scenarios too "bourgeois," as in "middle class...with qualities of selfish materialism and lack of imagination" (OED). Ironically, the previous plots have been as "bourgeois" as possible. Her point is that even if you take these unimaginative plots a step further by making the events different or more exciting, the outcome will still be the same. Atwood uses this paragraph to qualify her next point by anticipating the reader's response.

Writers realistically have full freedom to make John and Mary whatever characters they'd like, but these choices ultimately don't matter. "See how far that gets you" (*Simple Murders* 55), she challenges the reader, implying that even if they tried to counter her point by demonstrating the infinite choices writers have before the ending, they cannot argue with her conclusion that A is the only possible ending.

Atwood's strength lies in the directness of her argument, as her form illustrates her content. She begins her piece by asking a framing question ("What happens next?") and develops her text by providing different answers until she reaches her thesis at the end. "You'll have to face it," she comments, "the endings are the same however you slice it" (*Simple Murders* 55). While her form seems to be interested in choice through her use of direct addresses to the reader and the options she presents to the reader, she "is interested not in offering readers a choice between a larger number of the plot-elements, but in using a plot-branching structure to lay bare the arbitrariness and artificiality of literary decisions" (Linneman 50). At this point in the story, the reader begins to recognize the irony of the title. "The only authentic ending is the one provided here," Atwood says: "John and Mary die. John and Mary die. John and Mary die" (*Simple Murders* 55). If the only true ending is death, then there are no "happy endings" or "sad endings" because there is only one ending. Both Atwood and Moore explore what constitutes a "happy ending," especially for women, and what choices can lead there. Like Moore, Atwood argues that no "happy ending" actually exists. Regardless of what took place in the middle, the story will always in the same place; which—in Atwood's view—is death.

Atwood directly addresses exactly where *Anagrams* falters: "That's all that can be said for plots, which anyway are just one thing after another, a what and a what and a what. Now try How and Why." *Anagrams* focuses on rearranging the "what and the what," but the "How and

Why” aren’t very well developed, nor do they change throughout the stories. The reordering of the “what” isn’t particularly fruitful because there’s nothing to be yielded from it in terms of Moore’s wider point. Moore’s permutational plot is certainly clever, but beyond complimenting her theme of wordplay, fails to make a metafictional point in the same way Atwood does.

“THERE WAS ONCE”

“There Was Once” is a metafictional triumph in its critique of the fairy tale and the traditional romantic plot through unconventional modes. This fiction is set up like a dialogue among three people, with dashes separating the speakers instead of quotations marks. The piece is technically about a story being told, but the story is deconstructed even as it is being constructed, because of the respondent’s questioning of the storyteller. The three voices are the storyteller, the listener who interjects their opinion on every sentence, and a middle-aged man who has a single line. The responder objects to everything the storyteller tries to say including the setting, the heroine’s economic status, her physical description, the moralistic epithets, and the female stereotypes. The dialogic form of the story immediately draws attention to the fact that it is a fiction about the process of storytelling. “Happy Endings” focuses its emphasis on plot creation by ostensibly allowing the reader to choose the plot. “There Was Once,” on the other hand, focuses on plot creation by placing the writer as a character within the story.

At one point in the piece, the responder encourages the storyteller to “say what color” the protagonist was. When the storyteller responds that they’re unsure “what color” she was, the following exchange occurs:

—Well, it would probably be your color, wouldn’t it?

—But this isn’t about me! It’s about this girl—

—Everything is about you. (*Simple Murders* 22)

Here Atwood criticizes confluences of writer and character. The responder suggests that the writer is unable to write a character that is different from themselves. This moment also suggests to the reader that the storyteller is a woman, or the respondent presumably would've noted this difference between storyteller and character as well. Significantly, the storyteller listens to every criticism, and she adjusts her fable and characters accordingly, often in exactly the kind of subsumption of aesthetics into politics that Atwood has always opposed. As Atwood writes, political movements, once they succeed, often target writers “perhaps for...their intransigence, their insistence on saying what they perceive, not what, according to the ideology, ought to exist” (*Second Words* 204). As a result of the responder, who serves as a metonymy for those political movements, the storyteller never makes it past the first sentence.

The third character, the man, only decides to speak when he feels the need to defend his sex. The responder takes issue with the notion of a stepmother as opposed to a stepfather:

—Better. But I am so *tired* of negative female images! And stepmothers—they always get it in the neck! Change it to *stepfather*, why don't you? That would make more sense anyway, considering the bad behavior you're about to describe. And throw in some whips and chains. We all know what those twisted, repressed, middle-aged men are like---

—*Hey, just a minute!* I'm a *middle-aged*—

—Stuff it, Mister Nosy Parker. Nobody asked you to stick in your oar, or whatever you want to call that thing. This is between the two of us. Go on. (*Simple Murders* 23-4)

This interaction is revealing about the responder, and it echoes sentiments Atwood will express again later in the collection about the perils of mapping the sexes as good and evil. The phrase “get it in the neck,” reminiscent of a beheading, suggests an innocent victimization of innocent stepmothers. Atwood condemns this approach, often prominent in early feminist literary criticism, that focuses on images of women as positive female role models, believing that true equality is derived from treating bad women in the same ways that bad men are treated. The responder says, “that would make more sense given the bad behavior you’re about to describe,” suggesting that men are inherently more evil, something Atwood adamantly disagrees with (see “Unpopular Gals,” below). The responder then links this “bad behavior” to sex and deviancy when they mention whips, chains, and repression. This line also suggests that the responder knows what is to come in the story, and already has a sense of the plot before it’s been told. Finally, the middle-aged man, “Mister Nosy Parker,” feels no need to interject and defend any group until it is his own. However, he is also swiftly discouraged from participating in the conversation at all. To “stick one’s oar in” is a British phrase meaning “to insert an opinion even when not asked” (Cambridge Dictionary). Presumably, Atwood uses this phrase as a double entendre, comparing the man’s “oar” to his penis. The typical British idiom is “Nosy Parker,” not “Mister Nosy Parker” (OED). Both the addition of the unabbreviated “Mister” and the following joke emphasize the third character’s gender as a man. The responder believes he feels entitled to give his opinion, or “stick in [his] oar” wherever he wants, precisely because of his possession of a penis. Ironically, interjecting an opinion unprompted is exactly what the responder has been doing and continues to do for the rest of the story.

Atwood completes the piece by attacking traditional plots and endings. The responder asks how old the protagonist is, and then clarifies “this ends with a marriage, right?” The use of

“right?” turns what would have been a declarative statement into a question, suggesting the predictability of this particular ending. The question thus becomes functionally rhetorical. The marriage plot, or marriage as the true “happily ever after,” only rewarded to the heroine after she has suffered, has dominated literature from folk tales through today, where reality television shows like “The Bachelor” make millions off of the formulaic plot (Gay). Despite the story not having been constructed yet, and ultimately never being constructed, marriage is the expected ending. The storyteller responds, “Well, not to blow the plot, but—yes.” The storyteller’s qualification about the plot emphasizes to the reader how crucial marriage is to plots involving women.

As the piece proceeds, the length of the first sentence the storyteller gets through before interruption gets shorter and shorter as they edit it. Near the end, the storyteller again begins “There was once—,” the only part of the introduction that has remained consistent throughout every iteration the storyteller has told, and the responder takes issue with even these three words: “What’s this *was, once?* Enough of the dead past. Tell me about *now*” (*Simple Murders* 24). The responder has now nitpicked so thoroughly that they end up criticizing the traditional tense and setting the storyteller deploys. Perhaps ironically, fables and fairy tales are supposed to be timeless in their morals and applications, so the responder’s point shouldn’t matter. Finally, the storyteller says “There—” and the responder interrupts, asking why it can’t be “*here,*” leaving the storyteller with no story left to tell.

The title “There Was Once” draws attention to both language and storytelling as themes of the piece. “There Was Once,” a translation of the German version of “once upon a time,” serves as a synecdoche for storytelling (Merivale 258). Whether or not the piece can be considered “flash fiction” isn’t clear: it’s a dialogue. There is no plot, per say, beyond the plot of

the story-within-the-story being destroyed. Atwood's decision to structure the piece as a dialogue distances the reader from their position as receiver of the story. Rather, Atwood is telling the reader the story of a story being told. This narrative distance she sets up allows her to make her critique about both gender expectations and traditional plots about women.

“MAKING A MAN”

Atwood's piece “Making a Man” is structured like an article out of a women's magazine, parodying a recipe. Much like Egan's Goon Squad story “Forty Minute Lunch,” Atwood parodies a form, this time the “how-to” article, typically looked down on because of its association with middlebrow women, to illustrate her point. Her use of the imperative positions the narrator above the reader and places the point of view firmly in second person. Richardson calls this form of second person that is commonly set up in the “how-to” format as the “hypothetical second person” (Richardson 29). He defines the form as having three distinct features: the consistent use of the imperative; the unambiguous distinction between narrator and narratee; and the unspecified nature of character, setting, and plot. He also notes that the non-literary books that employ hypothetical second person are often highly gender coded (Richardson 29). The form's strong association with gender coded texts is precisely why Atwood chose to utilize this form in “Making a Man.”

The story begins: “this month we'll take a break from crocheted string bikinis and Leftovers Réchauffés to give our readers some tips on how to create, in their very own kitchens and rumpus rooms, an item that is both practical and decorative” (*Simple Murders* 38). Atwood emphasizes her parodying of these stereotypically unintellectual articles by evoking images of a “crocheted string bikini,” an object that connotes women both as seamstresses and as sexual

objects interested in fashion, and “Leftovers Réchauffés,” which essentially is a dish combining many leftovers heated up together. This second image connotes women as cooks and housewives. Atwood pokes fun at the very form she is parodying here, and by choosing bikinis and basic cooking she further reminds the reader of the link between the how-to magazine article form and stereotypical conceptions of womanhood. Men, here, are merely an item used for decoration. Atwood then goes on to say that it’s nice to have one lying around “looking busy” propped in a chair “prone or erect (38). Besides the obvious phallic connotations of “erect,” Atwood suggests that men can look busy without ever actually doing anything. Even in this story where men are the objectified sex, the women are still doing all the work. Atwood then follows up with another witty reference: “Choose the coverings to match the drapes!” (*Simple Murders* 38). This proclamation again evokes the image of women as sexual objects or domestic ones. The speaker ostensibly provides the reader with decorating advice (matching coverings with drapes), but the sentence also alludes to the saying “does the carpet match the drapes?” in reference to a woman’s pubic hair.

Atwood then details five different methods for making a man. All of these techniques commodify men through references that are typically used to commodify women. The first, the “Traditional Method,” is biblical. Atwood instructs the reader to take some dust off of the ground, form it, and breath into the dust the “breath of life” (*Simple Murders* 39). The reader here, presumably a woman given the form of the article and its target female audience, is God, who has the ability to grant life. Women, are, after all, the sex more connected to creation of life. Atwood interjects to remind the reader, “please note that although men are made of dust, women are made of ribs. Remember that at your next Texas-style barbecue!” (*Simple Murders* 39). She once again draws attention to the culinary form the piece is parodying.

Domesticity reappears in the next suggestion: make a gingerbread man. The third suggestion, the “Clothes Method,” also reflects the stereotypical association of women with fashion. Atwood opens this section with wordplay: “Clothes make the man! How often have you heard it said! Well, we couldn’t agree more! However, clothes may make the man, but women—by and large—make the clothes, so it follows that the responsibility for the finished model lies with the home seamstress” (*Simple Murders* 40). Atwood draws attention here, again, to the fact that women are the ones doing the action. As the ones sewing, women carry the bulk of the responsibility.

The next construction, the “Marzipan Method,” refers to a groom on a wedding cake. Weddings, like cooking and sewing, are often considered female domains. Reingard M. Nischik reads the Marzipan Method as referring directly to the conventional large/small dichotomy, especially considering this method begins with the narrator saying “we’ve often thought that men would be easier to control if they were smaller. Well, here’s a little rascal you can hold in the palm of your hand!” (*Simple Murders* 41). Nischik identifies the large/small dichotomy as a theme Atwood often addresses in her work. She writes that the popular notion is that large is better or somehow more significant than small, and she reads Atwood’s deployment of the short form itself as a rebellion against the belief in this dichotomy. She also argues that in this specific piece, which is her parody of a form she is attempting to expose, she evokes this dichotomy to ridicule it (Nischik 79).

Finally, the “Folk Art Method” directly reifies men in the way society so often reifies women. Atwood describes the men doing activities that are typically considered “male,” but trivializes them in the way activities typically associated with women so often are: “They hammer with their little hammers, saw with their little saws...” (*Simple Murders* 42). Atwood

also ends the piece in the middle of a sentence, which draws attention to its metafictional quality and the experience of reading the piece.

“THE LITTLE RED HEN TELLS ALL”

The flash fiction piece “The Little Red Hen Tells All” is a parody of a fable. The original parable of “The Little Red Hen” extolls the value of individual labor and hard work. In it, a hen finds a grain of wheat. She asks the other animals on the farm to help her plant and harvest it, and they refuse. When the hen finally reaps the fruits of her labor, she asks the other animals who will help her eat her bread, and they all readily volunteer. The hen then tells them since they didn’t help her make it, they get nothing, and she runs away.

Atwood’s parody grants the hen herself control over the narrative by making her the first-person narrator. The title of the story itself, “The Little Red Hen Tells All,” foreshadows its exploration of gender. Atwood’s choice of a hen, an animal explicitly coded as female and especially concerned with both reproduction and providing, suggests the piece’s focus on gender. Additionally, the “tell all” part of the title both draws attention to the change in narration from the classic fairy tale by emphasizing its first-person nature and evokes a form—the *exposé* typically associated with gossip magazines, which tend to be viewed as reading for women. Finally, the image accompanying the piece features a half-human half-chicken with large breasts perched atop a huge egg. The images connecting the hen narrator to traditional notions of womanhood are not exactly understated. When gender is considered, the original fable is somewhat surprising, given that the hen exhibits a certain amount of greed and selfishness when she refuses to share the productions of her work. Such traits aren’t usually associated with women.

The story begins by the hen addressing the reader directly, and subsequently acknowledging the original tale about her plight: “You know my story” (*Simple Murders* 13). Then the hen challenges the authenticity of the original tale. In part, she protests the original story through her diction; her comments often diverge from what the reader may expect. For example, she includes multiple platitudes, but states none of them accurately: “keep your eyes to the grindstone”; “a gain of wheat saved is a grain of wheat earned” (*Simple Murders* 14). After that, the hen subverts expectations even more dramatically; following a pun on “who” and owls, she makes a lewd joke: “Then I’ll do it myself, I said, as the nun quipped to the vibrator” (*Simple Murders* 14). As a character typically associated with motherhood and provisions, the hen embodies an asexual archetype of femininity; so a funny sexual quip is unexpected. All of the hen’s surprising expressions highlight the first-person narration and suggest a depth to her character that remained unexplored in the original fairy tale. The hen then tells the reader about an event she claims the original tale left out. While the original tale doesn’t feature her reaction to the other animals’ rejection, this hen claims she cried “tears of chicken blood” in her nest. This moment evokes sympathy for the hen and highlights the shallow characterization of the original hen. The hen in the original parable has no qualities beyond the purpose she serves as an illustration of a lesson. Significantly, however, the scene the hen claims the original story skipped over is one where she exhibits stereotypically “female” emotional behavior by crying. Her inclusion of her crying foreshadows the end of her version of the tale, where she will behave in a stereotypically “feminine” way in her generosity.

In almost every single paragraph of this story, the hen stops to ask the reader a question. “What were my options?” she asks at one point. “So then what?” she says at another. Early in the fable, it becomes clear that the hen, unlike in the original story, is extremely conscious of others’

perceptions of her. The hen continually looks to the reader for reassurance, and she again highlights her attention to perception when she details how she “smiled in all the pictures” (*Simple Murders* 15).

When the bread has finally been baked, the hen lists all the animals that offer to help her eat it: “*Who will help me eat this loaf of bread?* I said. *I will*, said the cat, the dog and the pig. *I will*, said the antelope, *I will*, said the yak, *I will*, said the five-lined skunk, *I will*, said the pubic louse” (*Simple Murders* 15). Although a joke, the rambling list of animals continues to get increasingly parasitic, reflecting the parasitic relationship all of them want to have with the hen. This moment is also suggestive of the parasitic expectation on women to continue to produce for nothing in return, merely out of their feminine generosity.

The hen then again calls attention to the power of her narration. She says that in the original story she’s supposed to say that she put in the work “so kiss off” (*Simple Murders* 15). However, she tells the reader to not “believe a word of it. As I’ve pointed out, I’m a hen, not a rooster” (*Simple Murders* 15). This remark highlights the hen as a first-person narrator by contradicting the original fable. Coupled with her assertion that the original ending of the fable is untrue, the reminder of her gender as a hen creates a sense of the original fable as being told by men, or “roosters,” and suggests the importance of the female hen’s telling her own story instead of the original third-person point of view. The other implication of remark concerns socialized expectations of self-sacrifice for women. Through this comment, the hen highlights that the original fairy tale writes her as behaving contrary to idealized expectations that women will always be self-effacing and generous.

The hen ultimately fulfills these gender expectations, and gives all her bread, even her own portion, away:

Here, I said. I apologize for having the idea in the first place. I apologize for luck. I apologize for self-denial. I apologize for being a good cook. I apologize for that crack about nuns. I apologize for that crack about roosters. I apologize for smiling in my smug hen apron, with my smug beak. I apologize for being a hen.

Have some more.

Have mine. (Simple Murders 15)

Not only does the hen give her portion of bread away, but she apologizes while doing it. The repetition of “I apologize” emphasizes the social expectations for women to be conciliatory. A 2010 study found that women apologize significantly more than men because the threshold for actions they perceive to be offensive (and therefore warranting an apology) is much lower (Schumann & Ross 7). In Atwood’s story, the hen apologizes for a litany of offenses, including her jokes, that violated expectations of how the hen is supposed to behave. It is precisely her excess in expression in this section that underscores her performance of humility as a performance.

Atwood does not parody the fable in an effort to criticize its moral lesson, but rather the use of the specific character of the hen as a vehicle for the tale’s capitalistic message. However, the final line, “Have mine,” (*Simple Murders* 15) again reminds the reader of the hen as narrator and suggests that the hen has not entirely lost her identity. While she is self-sacrificing, the “mine” also reminds the reader of her power as storyteller who has powerfully satirized gendered expectations. Just because she ends up fulfilling them through sacrifice as she performs humility does not mean she’s particularly happy about it.

“UNPOPULAR GALS”

In “Unpopular Gals,” a series of three monologues, Atwood subverts traditional form by granting the power of narration to female characters typically considered villains. With this technique Atwood parodies the archetypal hero and his mythic quest. As she does in “The Little Red Hen Tells All,” Atwood subverts traditional female characters in fairy tales by telling the story from their perspectives in first person. She gives voices to characters, whether heroes or villains, who have been overlooked in traditional tales. The women featured in the three vignettes in this piece—the ugly stepsister, the witch, and the evil stepmother, all unnamed in their original fairy tales—are granted subjecthood in this piece in contrast to their original objecthood.

Atwood highlights the problem of identity and subjecthood almost immediately. In the fifth sentence of the first vignette, the evil stepsister narrates in first person: “I hardly know how to say *I*, or *mine*; I’ve been *she*, *her*, *that one*, for so long” (*Simple Murders* 6). The speaker then goes on to say that the only name she has ever been given is “ugly stepsister,” with the emphasis on “ugly.” Any identity that she has in the story has been defined by her physical appearance. Rhetorical questions mark her conversations with the reader: “You think I didn’t hate their pity, their forced kindness?”; “You wonder why I stabbed the blue eyes of my dolls with pins and pulled their hair out until they were bald?” (*Simple Murders* 7). Given the ubiquity of her original story, the stepsister can anticipate what the reader thinks about her. The stepsister’s monologue explicitly parallels herself and the reader: “Everything you’ve ever wanted, I wanted also” (*Simple Murders* 7). Usually, the reader aligns themselves or identifies with the hero, but the stepsister’s narration not only rationalizes her behavior, previously deemed “evil,” but also forcefully aligns the reader with her through her use of second person in her remarks.

The second monologue is delivered by the witch, a conglomeration of characterizations of the witches from multiple different fairy tales. She is the witch from Grimm's Hansel and Gretel ("cooking and eating children"), the witch from Rapunzel ("Rapunzel, whatever that is"), and Diana of Ephesus, the many-breasted god of fertility ("Hell, I used to have breasts! Not just two of them. Lots") (*Simple Murders* 8, 9,8). The witch's references to breasts illustrate yet another double standard for women: that of the supernatural woman. "Ever wonder why a third tit was the crucial test, for women like me?" (*Simple Murders* 9). In the fifteenth and sixteenth century the "devils mark" or "witch's mark" was a third nipple found somewhere on a woman's body that was considered proof of witchcraft. The nipple was theoretically used to feed her familiar (Garrett 37). However, the fertility goddess Diana was also multi-breasted (Wilson 31). There seems to be a pattern throughout history of connecting the concepts of more than two breasts and supernatural powers. The witch explains that people used to pray to her for fertility, and even make sacrifices to her for a good harvest. However, now when she eats a few children, she's seen as a villain. The witch illustrates the importance of the context in determining her status: sometimes her multiple breasts and powers make her holy, while in other eras they define her as a villain. Her behavior hasn't changed; only the connotations of her supernatural abilities have. Powerful men are seen as within the expectations of normality, but powerful women must have an association with the supernatural whether negatively or positively. People are no longer willing to barter with her, or to make sacrifices to her, while the women simply try to "munch up [her] fecundity without giving anything in return" (*Simple Murders* 9). Like the little red hen, she is expected to sacrifice merely out of her duty as a woman.

The final monologue, delivered from the perspective of the stereotypical evil stepmother, is perhaps the most telling. She opens by addressing the double standard for men and women:

“It’s true, there are no evil stepfathers. Only a bunch of lily-livered widowers, who let me get away with murder vis-à-vis their daughters” (*Simple Murders* 9). The stepmother, like the ugly stepsister, demonstrates an awareness of her fame. She also addresses the double standard with a reference to Cinderella, reminding the reader that Cinderella’s father allowed her to be treated horribly by her stepmother and did nothing to intervene, yet he is not remembered as a villain. The stepmother’s use of “lily-livered” connotes stereotypes of not only women, but men as well. She also seems to suggest that men who don’t live up to the bravery and strength of the male archetype suffer far fewer consequences than women who fail to fulfill their archetype of the passive but caring mother.

The stepmother argues that she gives the protagonists their hero story, for without her they would just do housework their entire lives, and then have “dutiful wife” engraved on their headstones (*Simple Murders* 10). She’s really doing them a favor, she argues, because through her torments they can have their hero story and meet a prince while she gets all the blame. She does not appear to be seeking sympathy, and she seems quite fervent in her belief that “God knows all about it. No Devil, no Fall, no Redemption. Grade two arithmetic” (*Simple Murders* 11). The stepmother realizes that she is actually far more important to the plot than the hero. She then delivers what is arguably the most famous passage in the story:

You can wipe your feet on me, twist my motives around all you like, you can dump millstones on my head and drown me in the river, but you can’t get me out of the story. I’m the plot, babe, and don’t ever forget it. (*Simple Murders* 11)

The stepmother refers to ways society has historically dealt with women considered evil, such as drowning them in attempts to discover if they were witches. Because she produces an attack, not a defense, instead of aligning the reader with herself like the ugly stepsister does, the stepmother's use of second person places the reader in the role of the perpetrators of the crimes against her. The stepmother's colloquial diction makes the reader like her. She's casual in her tone but strong in her assertions, and she's borderline flirtatious when calling the reader "babe." Most of the slang Atwood uses in this story involves popular references to women, including her employment of "Gals" in the title. The stepmother's use of "babe," a term often used to diminish women, places her in a position of power above the reader, as she assumes the role of storyteller and plot creator.

Atwood makes no attempt to exonerate these women for their wrongdoing or to prove they are stereotypically "good women." In fact, all three confess their acts of villainy. The stepsister admits to trying to throw her sister out the window, the witch admits to eating children, and the stepmother to torturing her stepdaughter. The women's admissions of their crimes end up implicating the reader in their confessions.

Atwood has spoken about her long-standing interest in female villainy. In her lecture "Spotty-Handed Villainesses," she addresses her attraction to it:

I have always known that there were spellbinding evil parts for women...I was taken at an early age to see Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs...Never mind the tedious housework-is-virtuous motif. Never mind the fact that Snow White is a vampire -- anyone who lies in a glass coffin without decaying and then comes to life again must be. The truth is that I was paralyzed by the scene in which the evil queen drinks the magic

potion and changes her shape. What power, what untold possibilities! (“Spotty-Handed Villainesses”)

Early on, it seems, Atwood had the ability to see a character from an unconventional vantage point. When asked once if she had a “feminist agenda,” she replied: “I’m perfectly in favor of women being human beings, but that comes with risks. It means, for instance, if they’re human beings, they’re not perfect--no human beings are.” (Atwood in an interview with Gruss 61).

Because of this, Atwood sees recognizing female villainy as a feminist act:

But female bad characters can also act as keys to doors we need to open, and as mirrors in which we can see more than just a pretty face. They can be explorations of moral freedom -- because everyone's choices are limited, and women's choices have been more limited than men's, but that doesn't mean women can't make choices. Such characters can pose the question of responsibility, because if you want power you have to accept responsibility, and actions produce consequences...If there's a closed-off road, the curious speculate about why it's closed off, and where it might lead if followed; and evil women have been, for a while recently, a somewhat closed-off road, at least for fiction-writers (Spotty Handed Villainesses)

“LET US NOW PRAISE STUPID WOMEN”

Remarkably little prose poetry existed in Canadian literature before Atwood (Wilson 20), and she has consistently explored the genre over her career. “Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women” contains multiple intertextual references that pay homage to its form as a prose poem.

Poetry as a form has traditionally been seen as more appropriate for women writers than the male-associated novel; which is highly ironic, considering the first novels in English were actually written by women, although these novelists were suppressed for almost two centuries in literary history. The title of Atwood's poem is most obviously a reference to James Agee's 1939 novel *Let us Now Praise Famous Men*, which itself refers to a line in the Old Testament: "Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers that begat us" (Ecclesiastes 44.1).

Atwood opens the poem with an em dash before the first line: "—the airheads, the bubblebrains, the ditzzy blondes: the headstrong teenagers too dumb to listen to their mothers" (*Simple Murders* 37). The following lines continue the list, each one beginning with "all." The repetition of "all," the spacing between each item after the first four, and the lack of capitalization give the beginning of the poem a list-like aesthetic. The only capitalized words in the first stanza are "Big Hair," parodying the stereotype of such women as shallow and obsessed with appearance. The only thing important enough about dumb women to capitalize is their hair.

The second stanza switches from listing the archetypes of stupid women to addressing the reader: "*They don't live in the real world*, we tell ourselves fondly" (*Simple Murders* 59). If "we" includes the reader, which the use of first-person plural often suggests, the narrator is implicating the reader in the negative view of these women. The vagueness of "we" here is key: the reader wants to be part of the "we" because she doesn't see herself as one of the stupid women. Atwood takes the cliché "they don't live in the real world" and flips it. While the statement appears to be criticism of the women disguised as a metaphor, Atwood means the statement literally. She explains that stupid women can't live in the real world because "such women are fictions" (*Simple Murders* 59). These women now become the story themselves, "composed by others, but just as frequently by themselves" (*Simple Murders* 59). Atwood implicates the women in their

own stereotyping, suggesting that they achieve agency through performing as if they have none. The stanza ends with the argument already examined in “Unpopular Gals”: if there were not stupid women, just like if there were no villains, no stories could exist.

The third and fourth stanzas allude to the biblical parable of “The Wise and Foolish Virgins,” which features ten virgins, five of whom are “wise” and five “foolish.” All the women await the arrival of a bridegroom, but only the wise virgins bring enough oil to keep their lamps lit. In the original, the virgins who failed to keep their lamps lit did not get to go to heaven because they were unprepared. Atwood’s third stanza details how boring the “Wise Virgins” are as characters. The fourth stanza features the “Foolish Virgins” and all the exciting plot events that are triggered when their lamps go out (climbing through windows, mistaken identities, chase scenes). While the third stanza contains several sentences, the fourth stanza is one long sentence, broken up only by occasional semicolons and commas. The fourth stanza contains ten instances of “and” in its one extended sentence. The form of the stanza reflects the foolishness of the virgins, as if they forgot how to end a sentence along with their oil. Additionally, the existence of only “Wise” or “Foolish” Virgins draws a strong binary, emphasized by the capitalization of these adverbs; all women have to be one or the other. Atwood ends the fourth stanza by saying that none of the plot events could happen if “these girls hadn’t been several bricks short of a load” (*Simple Murders* 60). Not only is the narrator’s use of “girls” demeaning, but Atwood takes the pejorative “a few bricks short of a load,” meaning dumb and entirely unintelligent and takes it even further, replacing “a few” with “several” which carries a connotation as meaning more than “a few” (Meriam Webster). Atwood’s pejorative slang contrasts with the traditional biblical story. This is merely the first of multiple biblical references showing how engrained the archetype of a dumb woman is in Western culture.

After a page break, Atwood refers to the Bible with Eve in the Garden of Eden, whom she calls “the Eternal Stupid Woman” (*Simple Murders* 61). The narrator once again implicates the reader, mentioning how much “we” enjoy hearing about Eve (*Simple Murders* 61). Atwood takes aim at men for creating the stereotype of the “dumb woman,” women for upholding it (although she seems to believe they have limited choice in the matter), and at us for enjoying this archetype. She again draws attention to the fictional nature of the icon of the “stupid woman”

as she listens to the con-artist yarns of the plausible

snake,

and ends up eating the free sample of the apple from

the Tree of Knowledge:

thus giving birth to Theology (*Simple Murders* 61)

The narrator is entirely facetious when she refers to “the plausible snake,” suggesting that no person should actually believe the creation myth. The original story in Genesis is dependent on the stupid woman, and “Knowledge” and the field of “Theology” would not exist without her. The “she” used in the next lines “or as she opens the tricky gift box containing all/human evils” (*Simple Murders* 61) refer to Greek mythology’s Pandora instead of Eve. In the next stanza, “she” is Little Red Riding Hood. Atwood’s reference to all these women using a singular “she” reflects their objectified positions as icons used to further plots rather than as developed characters. It also emphasizes the reoccurrence of the “stupid woman” character throughout storytelling, from ancient Greek myths, to the Bible, and to fairy tales ancient and contemporary works. The narrator then assures the reader, “We know! We know! And we know wolfishness

when/ we see it!/ Look out, we shout at her silently, thinking of all the smart things we would do in her place” (*Simple Murders* 61). The narrator makes sure to include the reader in this collective voice.

However, Atwood then takes this inclusion of the reader in “we” further implicate the reader in the propagation of this stereotype. She writes: “Let’s face it, she’s our inspiration! The Muse as/fluffball!/and the inspiration of men, as well” (*Simple Murders* 62). “Our” includes the reader in the role of writer, creator, and storyteller, while the addition of “the inspiration of men” suggests that the narrator is speaking specifically to female writers. The final stanza of the poem begins “*Hypocrite lectrice! Ma semblable! Ma soeur!*” (*Simple Murders* 62). These lines allude to the final line of Baudelaire’s poem “Au Lecteur,” which reads “— Hypocrite lecteur, —mon semblable,—mon frère!” Significantly, Atwood changes “lecteur,” “reader,” to its female form and “frere” to “soeur,” or what was originally “my brother” to “my sister” (Nischik 8-9).

Atwood addresses the reader directly here (albeit in French). She also calls the reader “ma soeur,” “my sister”, blurring the demarcations between the female reader, the female writer, and the stupid women they discuss. The narrator’s previous uses of “we” distinguish the reader and writer as markedly different from the stupid women, but this line calls the reader a hypocrite and suggests they are not as distanced as they might think. Nischik notes that any author “writing in the genre of the prose poem is heavily indebted to Charles Baudelaire” (8). However, Baudelaire has more recently been associated with patriarchal binaries and has been deemed by some a misogynist writer because of his male perspective (Merivale 105). The final lines of the poem, “Let us now praise stupid women,/ who have given us Literature” (*Simple Murders* 63), reveal that reader, writer, and subject are one and the same. The female writers of literature are also the stupid women whom the narrator has been describing. Throughout *Simple Murders*,

Atwood focuses on women as both the subject and the writer of stories, especially fairy tales, and readily acknowledges that women as writers can help to support their own oppression through propagations of stereotypes, like the dumb woman. However, her wider point seems to be that these distinctions between women (smart and dumb, good and evil, selfish and generous) are a tool of the patriarchy to distract women from their own larger victimizations.

Female subjectivity and its inherent ambivalence have been a constant focus in Atwood's work and have received extended critical attention (Cooke 224). I have focused on Atwood's presentation of the female experience in *Good Bones*, but the collection focuses just as heavily on representing men through different variations in form. Coincidentally, after I had selected which pieces in *Good Bones* to analyze, I discovered that Patricia Merivale had grouped these works together under the theme "Women and Story." Merivale sees these works, with the addition of "Women's Novels," "Bad News," and "Gertrude Talks Back," a piece narrated by *Hamlet's* Gertrude, as connected "by the patterns of metatextually gendered art, here exemplified in images of vocalization: 'news,' 'tells all' ... 'skip the description,' 'let us praise'" (Merivale 257). Merivale sees this group of works, which are mostly from the beginning of the original *Good Bones*, ("Happy Endings" is from *Murder in the Dark*), as following a rhyme-scheme-like organization, of A BB CC A. "Bad News" and "Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women" function as the As, the most demonstrably poetic of the group, bookending the focus on the theme of women, storytelling, and perception. "Gertrude Talks Back" and "The Little Red Hen Tells All" are the B's, similar in their written confessional-like form and basic ideas. "Unpopular Gals" and "There Was Once" complete the pattern as the C's, both focusing on fairy tales, storytelling, and women's places in both. I view this pattern slightly differently. The pieces can also be sorted by their methods of unconventionality. "The Little Red Hen Tells All," "Gertrude Talks Back," and

“Unpopular Gals” all subvert presumptions through unexpected narrators while “There Was Once,” “Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women,” and “Making a Man” achieve their metafictional quality through parodies of form rather than character.

All of Atwood’s texts in *Good Bones and Simple Murders* are defamiliarizing, and they caution against a single point of view. She uses intertextual references to familiar stories, allusions to pop culture, and parody to illustrate her points, often through satire. Her tendency to blend what seem like contrary forms and ideas serves as an argument against the power of binaries. While Egan and Moore both attempted to create their own original forms (the PowerPoint chapter of *Goon Squad*, and the entirety of *Anagrams*), Atwood creates her own forms through the inversions, combinations, and deconstructions of already existing genres.

Conclusion

Egan, Moore, and Atwood are all concerned with what constitutes a “happy ending” for a woman. Each collection presents complicated women and their subsequent redemption. What’s surprising about *A Visit from the Goon Squad* and *Anagrams*, however, is the conventional nature of these “redemptions” in such unconventional works. The very notion of Betty Friedan’s famous “The Feminine Mystique,” (while not without its problems) in its simplest form, was the idea that women were supposed to be fulfilled entirely by the role of suburban housewife and mother (Nischik 112). In works that are so fascinated with both subverting traditional practices and the endings available to women, two of the collections suggest a rigid expectation (the aforementioned “feminine mystique”) for what constitutes an ending where a woman is redeemed. The very texts that argue against a single story ultimately end up perpetuating the view of a single happy ending for women: motherhood.

In *Goon Squad*, the female characters embody different archetypes of women: the gold-digger, the manic pixie dream girl, and the bitter child star. These women are not particularly likable, and while never telling their own stories in first person, their flaws are evident through their behavior: Sasha steals and lies; Mindy stays with a man who she hates for his money; and Kitty Jackson dates an evil dictator and drinks herself into oblivion. While their paths may be different, the women’s redemption is always the same: motherhood. The women mourn their adventurous years before children as “lost time” (Egan 91). While the characters may abscond from their original stereotypes in their endings, their redemption merely places them within another archetype: the woman as finally fulfilled and happy in her role as a mother.

In *Anagrams*, motherhood and endings are an even more prominent theme throughout each story. The point of the book’s unconventional form is to illustrate that no matter what

decisions Benna makes, she can only achieve one of two endings. The only one of these two endings where she is not miserable, is when she has reached such a level of delusion as to be imagining a fake child that she can mother. Benna only achieves redemption through this twisted form of motherhood.

Atwood is the only writer of the three who directly challenges the traditional redemption arc. Atwood challenges the motherhood ending through intertextually referencing and parodying fairy tales—a form that was, perhaps ironically, traditionally passed down orally from mothers to their children (Nischik 78). The stories Atwood parodies primarily feature “bad” women, often mothers, as the catalysts to redemption. She even addresses the concept of redemption directly, when the stepmother asserts her importance as a part of the plot, arguing “No Devil, no Fall, no Redemption. Grade two arithmetic” (*Simple Murders* 11). The stepmother speaks of the fairy tale heroine as achieving “redemption” here. By placing the “villain” as the narrator, and making her someone who is already a mother, Atwood satirizes the very concept of motherhood as “redemption.” Woman on woman cruelty, cruelty from the mother specifically, is necessary for the redemption rather than motherhood itself being the redemption. The figures Atwood does associate with motherhood, like the little red hen and the multi-breasted witch, or goddess of fertility, aren’t blissful in their roles as mothers; in fact, they’re unhappy with the expectations of sacrifice placed upon them due to their roles.

Perhaps Egan and Moore rely on motherhood as a happy ending as one of the conventional aspects at interplay in their experimental texts. Given their interest in endings, however, choosing motherhood as ending as one of their traditional elements diverges from their goal of accurately depicting women’s experiences. Motherhood, of course, is a goal for some, and a happy experience for many, but there are also multitudes of women for whom that is not

the goal, and for whom the experience is difficult. Also, motherhood is rarely the end for women. Most women who become mothers do so in the first half of their lives. Situating motherhood as “the end” does a disservice to the stories of the rest of these women’s lives.

The first two texts occasionally falter in Egan and Moore’s choice of traditional aspects in both the tropes they utilize and the traditional endings they provide their characters. Atwood, in contrast, parodies the stereotypes she uses—in part to illustrate that motherhood is not always the happy ending it’s expected to be. However, all three works experiment with blending unconventional aspects of text, like form, genre, and narrative perspective, with traditional aspects of text to illustrate their point. Egan’s subversion of traditional form works to replicate the effects of men’s perception of women. Moore’s anagrammatic structure illustrates her point that the choices provided to women are often merely illusions (whether or not she succeeds in arguing this point is debatable). Finally, Atwood inverts popular forms, icons, characters, and stories that are familiar to the reader. Atwood then uses these inversions to highlight the position of women within stories.

All three women also work within different forms. These forms vary so widely, they lack the cohesion necessary to unite them under a single definition. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is the closest work to a novel, but it is a novel broken up into thirteen discrete units that are interrelated. *Anagrams* is an attempt to mimic a novel with short forms, linked by a wider overall structure and ultimately resolved by a novella, but her attempt at novel status are precisely where Moore fails. Finally, Atwood operates within a collection of short prose and poetry.

While their success at using antimimetic narrative to argue a specific point varies, these writers’ subversions of mainstream literary tradition operate in ways that fundamentally question

the patriarchal binary. The studied forms of experimentation and innovation open the door for future writers to continue experimenting against the binary in new ways.

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