

## 'That Precious Oxygen of Permission': The Defiance of Convention in Carol Shields's 'Mirrors' and 'Soup du Jour'

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On 16<sup>th</sup> July, 2003, the news spread from Victoria, British Columbia to all parts of the world: Canadian author Carol Shields, née Warner and née Chicagoan, died, five years after she was diagnosed with cancer. 'Canada has lost one of its most celebrated authors,'<sup>1</sup> Rick Cluff at CBC British Columbia lamented the next morning. However, with the acknowledgment Shields had received whilst alive, her death can no doubt be described as a loss to world literature as well. Should she have been counted fortunate as one of those rare living writers that were acknowledged and read? After all, with her subject matter of 'everyday' life and 'ordinary' people, she could easily have been dismissed as too domestic and have gone unnoticed, like the largely sidestepped nineteenth-century backwoods pioneer and writer Susanna Moodie, whom Shields studied in her MA thesis, or like other such writers for whom Shields speaks up, mostly zealously in her last published novel, *Unless*.

Born in Oak Park, Illinois in 1935, Carol Ann Warner grew up in suburban Chicago, was educated at Hanover College, Indiana, went on an exchange programme to Exeter, England in 1956, where she met Canadian engineer Donald Shields, whom she married the next year, emigrating to Canada. For the next decade she became, in her own words, 'a typical woman, a typical housewife, a living statistic', wanting only 'a baby, a fridge-freezer and a car'.<sup>2</sup> She obtained what she wanted, except that instead of one child, she raised five. It was only when she was thirty-seven that her first poetry collection was published. She began writing fiction, too, and prolifically.<sup>3</sup> However, she was little known out of Canada until she was introduced to, and very well received, by a British audience. Shields's subsequent achievements were reassuring to her British editor and readers. Her 1993 novel *The Stone Diaries* both won the Governor General Award in Canada and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in the same year, and was winner of the 1995 Pulitzer Prize. Her last completed novel *Unless* was shortlisted for the 2002 Man Booker Prize. At the time of her death, she had been working on a new novel, *Segue*, which will now remain forever unfinished. Her own life was a narrative in itself, of an unknown wife and mother turned into a world-famous literary figure, of 'ordinariness' turned extraordinary.

Shields might be dismissed as too domestic and optimistic if nothing but her subject matter and plots were taken into account. She had been attacked for her characters' happy lives and happy endings. One review claimed that Shields did not 'do sadness well'.<sup>4</sup> However, journal essays as well as newspaper articles have pointed out that these attacks are only based on the superficial appraisal of her subject matter; that her techniques make her deceptively simple material rise above formulaic popular fiction for women. A glimpse at some broadsheet newspaper articles about Shields reveals a constant juxtaposition of grandeur and ordinariness: 'Mistress of Everyday Fascination', 'Mistress of Miracles and Mazes', 'The Triumph of the

Ordinary', 'Goddess of Small Things', 'Domestic bliss'<sup>5</sup>, to name but a few. The general acceptance and appreciation of Shields's everydayness is such that these titles suggest her unwavering position in the fictitious world of domesticity.

Although one of the earliest journal articles about Carol Shields is dated as far back as 1980,<sup>6</sup> academic writing about Shields did not form a critical conversation until it gradually developed in the 1990's. Most taking Shields's novels as objects of analysis, in particular *Swann* and *The Stone Diaries*, these articles have discussed the postmodernist, deconstructionist, and feminist aspects of Shields's works, her use of metabiography and 'historiographic metafiction' (Linda Hutcheon), and her own Canadianness as well as her thoughts of Canadianness. Last year, only a few weeks before Shields's death, a collection of critical essays entitled *Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction* was published, in which American, British, and Canadian scholars join together to form the first milestone in Shields criticism. However, most discussion during the past two decades seems to have focussed disproportionately on Shields's novels, and on the critical theoretical aspects of them; Shields's shorter fiction as well as her use of language in her works of any lengths seems to have been largely overlooked.

Simone Vauthier is one of the few that have explored Shields's short stories: she has analysed the language, the narrative strategies, as well as the unconventional plotting in three stories in *Various Miracles*.<sup>7</sup> One of these stories, 'Mrs Turner Cutting the Grass', has also been analysed by Clara Thomas in terms of its irony and narrative structure,<sup>8</sup> as well as by Benoit Léger in terms of the Bakhtinian polyphonic text.<sup>9</sup> The latter is a response to a partly reminiscent essay by Kent Thompson, who was a classmate of Shields at Hanover College and who published some of Shields's works as editor of *The Fiddlehead*.<sup>10</sup> Coral Ann Howells has explored the Bakhtinian carnivalesque and the breaking of generic conventions in the first and last stories of *Dressing Up for the Carnival*, namely, the title story and a story called 'Dressing Down'.<sup>11</sup> Other than these, Shields's shorter fiction has not received due academic attention.

Such neglect is hardly affordable on our part. According to Edward Eden,

Shields's career took a significant turn in the 1980's. Suffering from writer's block while working on *Swann*, Shields liberated herself from traditional realist conventions by adopting a wide variety of narrative stances in the stories collected in *Various Miracles*.<sup>12</sup>

It was first in her short stories that Shields experimented with new narrative structures which she was to employ later in her novels. While acknowledging that the spaciousness and complexity of the novel form gives a novelist ampler room to manifest his techniques and originality, story writers have often contended that, because of its concision and its focus on the moment, the short story is closer in nature to a poem than a novel. Shields seems to have first made discoveries and revelations of herself as a writer in the short story form in ways she could not in the novel form, just as a composer is revealed in chamber music in ways that he or she cannot possibly be revealed in symphonies. In the same paradoxical way that rigorous poetic forms are said to 'liberate' the poet, the precision that the short story demands seems to have given Shields more freedom for experiments, explorations, and exploits.

*Dressing up for the Carnival* was Shields's third and last collection of stories, following an elapse of 11 years after her second. Her 'discovery' by British editor Christopher Potter, her being awarded important literary prizes, and her winning international acclaim all happened in between. The stories in *Dressing up for the Carnival* demonstrate Shields's command of this art form as a refined writer. Reviewers of this collection of stories have not failed to discern Shields's juxtapositions of the experimental and the everyday. Alex Clark comments: 'Shields could be accused, falsely, of being a little bit darling; but it would be more accurate to note that she is more than usually daring. There are few writers currently at work who display such steely control of their material, such seemingly effortless range and variety.'<sup>13</sup> Laura Moss observes that in most stories in this collection, 'Shields flouts the conventions of ordinariness but she does not relinquish them.'

How exactly does Shields achieve that? This essay intends to discuss how Shields transforms the everyday, and rises above popular women's fiction, through analyses of the linguistic features of her stories. The analyses will focus mainly on two stories included in *Dressing Up for the Carnival*, both of which had been previously published in UK glossy paper magazines: 'Mirrors' in the UK edition of *Good Housekeeping*, August 1996 (pp. 193-7), and 'Soup du Jour' in *Woman and Home*, May 1996 (pp. 101-4).

To know how Shields breaks the rules of conventional popular women's fiction, we have to know first what the rules are. Therefore, it will probably be helpful to examine the general stylistic features of popular women's fiction before I go on to detailed analyses.

### **Characteristics of Popular Fiction for Women**

Suzie Mackenzie tells us about Shields's choice of subject matter in her early career:

When she started writing, she wanted specifically to write about women, family loyalties, 'people like me': subject matter that seems conservative. Even she was afraid it was dull. 'I didn't think there would be an audience outside women's magazines.' But her interest in structure would always mark her as unusual.<sup>15</sup>

It is interesting that Shields thought she would not kindle interest outside the women's magazine readership. To the benefit of a vast number of readers, she was proved wrong. What did she do that found her territory outside popular women's fiction? What, in the first place, are the characteristics of popular women's fiction?

A magazine writer has to be sensitive to the magazine's readership. She will usually study several issues of the target magazine first before attempting to submit material. She should pay particular attention to the advertised products, the regular features, and the additional articles, suggests a how-to author for would-be magazine writers; these, the author asserts, will 'indicate the magazine's target audience', 'help pinpoint the editorial slant for the magazine', and 'reflect the perceived interests of readers'.<sup>16</sup> And the writer, with these answers at hand, should try to appeal to the targeted readership as well as the editorial slant accordingly.

The age, literacy, social standing, and marital status of the readers of a certain magazine,

however, do not say everything about them. Not only must the magazine writer know who the readers are, she must also be aware of how they read. The fact that these readers have picked up a women's magazine partially defines how a story in it should be written. Fiction slots of different lengths in magazines have been tellingly described as 'Your Bedtime Read' (ca. 2000-2500 words) and 'Your Coffee Break Read' (ca. 1000-1500 words). In other words, if a woman is leafing through the fiction section of a women's magazine, it is most probable that she has just collapsed into her bed or her couch, wanting nothing but relaxation and escape. Therefore, the magazine story writer must write in a style that will allow 'lazy', or passive, reading; the writer must also create a mock reality to which the reader can relate, and then develop it into a world of fantasy into which the reader can escape.

Shields herself, writing on the constant need of fiction to defend itself, makes a passing comment on the purpose and effect of American romance writer Danielle Steel's novels:

The 'stories' that take their roots in mythology or in our scriptures establish their legitimacy by their divine origins or ethical purpose. The novels of Danielle Steele [sic] demand their way by promising a light diversion from the serious problems that trouble us. Narratives without a ticket don't always get on the train.<sup>17</sup>

The comment is by no means negative criticism; however, it does accord with what, as we have discussed, constitutes the purpose and function of women's magazine fiction: *promising a light diversion from the serious problems that trouble us*. The fictitious world is not real, but we would like to believe that it is real whilst immersed in the read.

Stylistic traits of magazine fiction, then, centre on these two purposes: to facilitate the reading process, and to fantasise (and distort) reality by means of fiction. Walter Nash, in *Language in Popular Fiction*, enumerates several stylistic traits for typical women's magazine stories. In particular he discusses relation (bits of descriptions, usually 'smuggled' in the narrative, of appearances, settings, commonplace activities, and emotions and sensations), dialogue (its rampancy), dilation (flashing back and looking forward), syntactic clichés (adverbiality and participiality), and lexicon (the use of aggrandised words). Some of these traits will be explained in more detail in this essay, and examples will be given at appropriate places. Here I would simply like to draw the reader's attention to how these characteristics serve the abovementioned purpose of magazine stories: relation, dilation, and syntactic clichés are all designed to fill in information inconspicuously without disrupting the narrative as one coherent piece; dialogue is used to keep the narrative in a vividly interactive way, thus approximating everyday life, in which words are far more often used for conversational exchanges than for descriptive passages; aggrandised vocabulary in turn attaches false significance to the characters and their actions, thus implicitly attaching importance to, and flattering, the reader of the story. Together, these characteristics serve to facilitate passive reading, and to provide the reader with a fantasy world to which she has no access in everyday life.

Although Nash names Chapter Two, the chapter devoted to popular women's fiction, 'Woman's place: a dip into the magazines', and discusses mostly stories found in women's magazines, in particular the weekly kind, I would like to point out that the traits Nash examines

also applies to fiction of greater length. Nash himself defines this genre in Chapter One as ‘the romantic story, as published in women’s magazines and some widely-marketed paperbacks’.<sup>18</sup> Besides quoting some of the examples Nash provides, I shall also be contrasting on several occasions Shields’s stories against Eileen Goudge’s ‘Trail of Secrets’, which appeared coincidentally in the same month as Shields’s ‘Mirrors’ in another major women’s magazine—the US edition of *Cosmopolitan* (pp. 226-35). ‘Trail of Secrets’ is in effect an excerpt from a novel of the same name (Signet, 1996): *Cosmopolitan* had printed Chapter Five of the book as an independent story. Indeed it can be read as an independent story: there is nothing in the chapter that cannot be understood without knowledge of other parts of the novel. I shall therefore treat it here as a story, and refer to it as ‘Trail of Secrets’. As mentioned before, whatever the length, the ‘romantic story’ retains the same stylistic features. I hasten to add that the examples, Nash’s or mine, will be used only as contrasts, as objects of convenience, and that neither is ‘Trail of Secrets’ a polar opposite of Shields’s stories, nor am I making an attempt at a comprehensive analysis of the text.

Faye Hammill has examined how Shields broke the rules of conventional romance fiction in her novel *The Republic of Love* (1992):

The novel exhibits clear continuities with the popular romance, adopting its structures and reaffirming the importance of its subject matter. At the same time, Shields removes the love story from the realm of doctor-and-nurse books by adding a dimension of sophisticated intellectual analysis to the traditional focus on emotional and sexual experience. Just as *Swann* revises the narrative form of the detective mystery, so *The Republic of Love* revises the romantic novel, incorporating gentle parody of the genre as well as self-reflexive commentary on the language of love and the plots of love stories.<sup>19</sup>

I would like to advocate that Shields breaks as many, if not more, rules of convention with short fiction. As discussed before, the form of the short story allows one more experiment and a sharper focus, and Shields demonstrates in the stories under discussion a deviation from the conventional style of women’s magazine fiction. Although I will make mention of some of Nash’s traits, I will mostly examine in this essay the use of ‘point of view’ and ‘lexical and structural cohesion’ in ‘Mirrors’ and ‘Soup du Jour’.

### Point of View

Although published in the fiction section of major glossy paper women’s magazines, ‘Mirrors’ and ‘Soup du Jour’ hardly bear any of the traits of popular fiction. The reason for this is that they do not share the same purpose as pulp fiction: Shields’s stories do not aim at facilitation of the reading experience to create a temporary escape from reality.

It is rather difficult to sum up what happens in ‘Mirrors’; its stillness makes it read more like a portrayal than a narrative. It tells of a middle-aged couple who have foresworn mirrors in their summerhouse. They have spent more than thirty mirrorless summers together, until—‘last

night—or was it the night before?’<sup>20</sup> — they realise that they have become mirrors each for the other.

‘Soup du Jour’ is almost equally plotless. We are shown an old couple in Dorset, Mr Graham-Sutcliffe working in his garden and later having a bath, and Mrs Graham-Sutcliffe memorising French verbs in the sitting-room. In the passages of description of the couple we learn that, after various trials and tribulations (one woman in particular, we find out), they have finally come to terms with life, and with each other. The scene changes, and we are moved ‘on to the other side of the world’:<sup>21</sup> Heather Hotchkiss, leaving an affair that happened a decade ago behind, no longer asks for more of everything, finding perfect contentment in the simple act of making soup. She sends her ten-year-old son Simon to buy a bunch of celery from the shop around the corner; Simon, however, becomes so engrossed in his obsessive counting on the way that he forgets what it is his mother requires. In a moment of magic the word *celery* comes back to the perplexed boy, for which he is ‘thunderously’ grateful, ‘thinking how he will remember it all his life, even when he is old and forgetful and has given up his obsession with counting.’<sup>22</sup>

These two stories are told in different ways from how women’s magazine stories are usually told. According to Cari Crook and Lesley Gleeson from Midland Exposure, a fairly known Leicester-based literary agency specialising in women’s magazine fiction,<sup>23</sup> ‘[t]he majority of magazine stories are told through the eyes of the main female character. First or third person is equally acceptable.’ They go on to advise would-be writers: ‘For magazine fiction stay in one character’s viewpoint throughout. Switching between characters is too confusing in a magazine short story. See all the action through one pair of eyes.’<sup>24</sup>

In Gérard Genette’s terminology,<sup>25</sup> this ‘mood’ of narrative can be called the *fixed internal focalisation*: it allows the reader access to the inside of the mind of one single person. Roger Fowler employs another set of terms and definitions;<sup>26</sup> however, his second internal mode, Type B, denotes to roughly the same sort of narrative. The point of view in popular women’s fiction persists to this focalisation throughout the narrative, because the psychological effect is to create a pseudo-confidential atmosphere. The ‘girl-to-girl’ camaraderie is exactly what many readers of women’s magazines crave. Hence the confession stories in weekly magazines such as *That’s Life*, as well as the features in glossy paper magazines such as ‘Confessions’ in *Cosmopolitan* or ‘First Person’ in *Marie Claire*.

‘Trail of Secrets’ is written entirely in the limited third-person point of view. It is the story of a privileged young woman, Skyler, who is indecisive about the proposal of Prescott, whose family and her own have been long-time friends. On the day she is supposed to give an answer to Prescott, she meets Tony, a tough mounted policeman who also happens to be a law degree holder. The two become attracted to each other, and have an unrealistically mind-blowing affair the same afternoon. After the affair comes Skyler’s epiphany: she cannot and will never marry Prescott, even though she is not in love with Tony, or not yet.

Using the third-person point of view exclusively (as there is not a single moment when we are admitted into the mind of a character other than Skyler) creates a fictitious confidential rapport between Skyler and the reader. Although the average reader of the US *Cosmopolitan* may not identify with the privileged heroine, who vacations every summer on Cape Cod and who sits in a box at the opera, no doubt many of the readers *would like* to have a best friend like her. To

pretend momentarily that Skyler is the reader's friend is to raise the reader's social status. That is how the author, or more precisely, the text, flatters the reader.

Both 'Mirrors' and 'Soup du Jour' discard this mode of a consistently third-person narration. They both pierce through to the minds of various characters, which may lead naturally to the conclusion that both stories are narrated in the omniscient point of view. However, the two stories still differ in their narrative modes. In 'Mirrors', the personal pronouns alternate between 'he', 'she', 'they', 'we', and 'you' throughout the piece. There are some obviously moralising passages, usually marked by the usage of the general pronoun 'we', or its other cases such as 'us' or 'ourselves'. Other than that, most of the narration using 'he', 'she', or 'they' are that of *internal focalisation*, although not *fixed* as in conventional popular women's fiction, but *various*, of different people. It is as though the characters are relating the stories themselves. In 'Soup du Jour', on the other hand, although the point of view can also be dubbed omniscient, our entrance into the characters' minds is not clear-cut: we see distinctively the author-narrator's entrance into the scenes. The use of 'he', 'she', 'they' seems similar, but the narrations are what the characters themselves would never provide.

That was only commenting on the general structures of the stories; within them, especially within 'Mirrors', local differentiation between passages can still be detected. It is worth noting that the story starts with the husband's viewpoint, referring to the wife as 'his wife'. In fact, she is referred to as 'his wife' five times in the story, while 'he' is referred to as 'her husband' only once. The story begins with the following paragraph:

When he thinks about the people he's known in his life, a good many of them seem to have cultivated some curious strand of asceticism, contrived some gesture of renunciation. They give up sugar. Or meat. Or newspapers. Or neckties. They sell their second car or disconnect the television. They might make a point of staying at home on Sunday evenings or abjuring chemical sprays. Something, anyway, that signals dissent and cuts across the beating heart of their circumstances, reminding them of their other, leaner selves. Their better selves.<sup>27</sup>

For two thirds of this short narrative, we are presented with what the male protagonist thinks, and are made to stay in his mind. Up until 'abjuring chemical sprays', it is possible to change every 'he' into 'I' and change the agreeing verbs accordingly, and we may well have been listening to the man himself narrating this opening. However, 'Something, anyway' indicates a turning point in the narrative: we can no longer make the man narrate simply by a few tricks of pronoun and verb exchanges. This impossibility will become clearer when we learn the unassuming ways of the man: a middle-class, middle-aged (sixty-year-old) man recently retired from his own management consulting firm, who is indicated nowhere in the story to be an amateur philosopher. The voice, from 'Something' on, becomes the narrator's. In Genette's terms, this is where the internal focalisation changes into zero focalisation; in Roger Fowler's, Type B narrative becomes Type A at the point, where the male protagonist's observations end and the author-narrator's contemplations begin.

Localised changes of focalisation, like the one within this first paragraph, also appear

elsewhere in the story. The beginning of the Paragraph 3, for example, reads: 'The need to observe ourselves is sewn into us, everyone knows this, but he and his wife have turned their backs on this need, said no to it, at least for the duration of the summer months.'<sup>28</sup> Or Paragraph 5: 'They would be disinclined to discuss between them how they've arrived at these harmonious choices in the matter of playgoing. . .'.<sup>29</sup> But more often, these changes occur across passages. Paragraph 32, for example, is a paragraph in which we hear only the author-narrator's voice:

We use the expression 'look into a mirror,' as though it were an open medium, like water—which the first mirrors undoubtedly were. Think of Narcissus. He started it all. And yet it is women who are usually associated with mirrors: Mermaids rising up from the salty waves with a comb and a mirror in hand. Cleopatra on her barge. Women and vanity went hand in hand.<sup>30</sup>

It is only obvious that these contemplations do not belong to any of the characters in the story. These are the author-narrator's observations; it is almost as if she provides herself with a break from the act of narrating. In the next paragraph she begins to describe the scene where one summer, after the husband has had a discreet affair, the couple return to the summerhouse. The man, we are told, finds comfort in the thought that he will not have to look into a mirror. The seemingly digressive paragraph quoted above, then, is the author's way of commenting on the narrative, in this case the gender association of mirrors.

The personal pronoun 'you' is also used, most extensively in Paragraphs 7-10. The passage begins: 'Walking away from their cottage on Big Circle Lake, you would have a hard time describing its contents or atmosphere [. . .] But you would very probably bear in mind their single act of forfeiture: there are no mirrors'.<sup>31</sup> The narrator invites 'you' subsequently to check various parts of the house, even the wife's face powder compact and the bottoms of the saucepans; 'your' search will be in vain. The passage ends with the very short Paragraph 10, which concludes: 'This mirrorlessness of theirs is deliberate, that much is clear.'<sup>32</sup>

When the author addresses the reader directly, one might argue that the author is attempting the 'reader involvement' technique on him or her, which, too often in magazine articles and stories, is used to achieve a sense of familiarity and closeness. However, as soon as a 'you' emerges in the limited third-person narrative of 'Mirrors', the reader becomes conscious of her own existence, and that consciousness actually functions to dissolve the world of fantasy. The protagonist ceases to whisper into the reader's ear a confidante's tale: with the author as the addresser and the reader the addressee, the main character becomes the *subject* of a one-sided conversation. The use of 'you' in 'Mirrors' in effect estranges the reader from the characters: it closes the door that leads to fantasy and escape from reality.

The author-interfered point of view is even more distinct in 'Soup du Jour'. This story does not hold on to one person's viewpoint. If any, it is the omniscient narrator's point of view that holds the story together. The story begins by telling the reader what 'everyone' is doing: 'Everyone is coming out these days for the pleasures of ordinary existence. [. . .] "The quotidian is where it's at," Herb Rhinelander wrote last week in his nationwide syndicated column.'<sup>33</sup> Then we are given sketches of various 'quotidian' scenes: a ten-year-old child sent to the grocery



store, a woman bending over her embroidery, adolescent girls staring at the colours of rainwater, young men studying soup cans. These three paragraphs do not enter the minds of any specific person: it is the author addressing the reader. And this is not a godly, impassioned author, as one would imagine is required for the 'omniscient' point of view; it is an author with all human biases and weaknesses, for she tells us what a certain columnist wrote last week and marvels at the complement of egg-white and yolk. This is an author-narrator interested in particulars. Only in Paragraph 4 do we enter a specific account of Mr Ronald Graham-Sutcliffe, and two paragraphs later one of Mrs Molly Graham-Sutcliffe. The scene changes after the transitive Paragraph 10, and we have a description of Heather Hotchkiss, and another of her ten-year-old son, Simon.

However, even with the predominantly 'he' / 'she' narrative, we do not feel we enter totally into the worlds, the hats and shoes, of the characters. The narrator's voice is ever distinct. We realise that what we hear from the narrator is different from what we would hear were the narrator to be any of the characters. The narrator provides us with insights into the characters which are not necessarily accessible to the characters themselves. When relating Molly Graham-Sutcliffe memorising French verbs, the author-narrator makes it very clear that she has certain knowledge of Molly of which Molly herself is not aware: 'Lamplight throws a spume of whiteness around her *which is more flattering than she can possibly know*. [. . .] Naturally she favours those regular, self-engrossed verbs—*manger, penser, réfléchir, dormir*—that attach to the small unalarming segments of her daily existence. She loves her daily existence, which includes, *although she hasn't thought to acknowledge it*, the pale arc of lamplight and the hooting of owls reaching her through the open window.'<sup>34</sup> (emphases mine) The author-narrator's interference is probably most obvious with the last character, ten-year-old Simon. He is introduced into the narrative in Paragraph 15:

Simon, aged ten, is in love this spring with the cracks of sidewalks, their furrowed darkness and decay and their puzzling microcosmic promise. [. . .] He knows his life depends on the memorizing of the immediate, proximate world.<sup>35</sup>

We hear the author-narrator's voice, as Simon cannot possibly say himself that he is in love with the 'furrowed darkness and decay' and the 'puzzling microcosmic promise' of sidewalk cracks, or recount the importance of his memorising the 'immediate, proximate world'. Nor can he possibly say later, when he forgets the item he has been sent to buy, '*I freeze, hug the points of my elbows, thinking hard, bringing the whole of my ten years into play.*' or, '*I say it out loud, celery*, transforming the word into a brilliantly coloured balloon that swims and rises and overcomes the tiny confines of the ordinary everyday world to which, until this moment, *I have been condemned*.'<sup>36</sup> Whereas in many third-person narratives in popular women's fiction, with every 'she' changed into 'I', the whole narrative would easily be turned into a first-person narrative, and the original narrative would not seem much altered, the narratives of the characters of 'Soup du Jour' would change considerably if they themselves were to tell the tales.

While many women's magazine stories guard jealously the fantasy world they have built by erasing the real world where the reader is situated, Shields is not afraid to acknowledge her own

and the reader's existence, wherein she constantly finds and shows forth new discoveries, transforming them into 'Various Miracles'.

## Lexicon

In 'The Quotidian Is Where It's at', Laura Moss's review of *Dressing Up for the Carnival* in *Canadian Literature* (Spring 2002), the author informs us:

In her introductory remarks at a reading at the Harbourfront Reading Series in Toronto, Carol Shields remarked on her frustration at the critics' tendencies to focus on the 'ordinary' in her works. In response to this incessant focus she read 'Soup De Jour,' [sic] a story from her recent collection *Dressing Up for the Carnival*. The parodic story begins: 'Everyone is coming out these days for the pleasures of ordinary existence. [. . .]' This is the playful beginning to a sad story about life, love, and obsessive counting. [. . .] By the end of the story we still know about all the ingredients required in the soup. This is a slow read, not because of the density of prose or the complexity of plots, but because it is best to read the stories in isolation from each other. These stories are emphatically not linked. That this is not a page-turner is its success.<sup>37</sup>

'Soup du Jour', as well as 'Mirrors', is a slow read. We do not read them for intricate plots or breathtaking action, but for the stops and turns of prose, which constitutes the contemplations on what is habitually overlooked. 'The ordinary has become extraordinary,'<sup>38</sup> the narrator announces in Paragraph 3. I shall discuss in the following pages how this is made to happen through lexical means in 'Soup du Jour'. However, as mentioned before, popular women's fiction aims to flatter the reader also by attaching false, verbal significance to insignificant daily activities. How do magazine stories do it and how is Shields different?

According to Nash, there are two ways to 'upgrade' the vocabulary in a magazine story: either '[reject] the central vocabulary item, or notional head of a synonym set (e.g. "go") in favour of a stronger or more specific member of the set (e.g. "run", "rush", "dash", "fly", "scuttle")',<sup>39</sup> or use 'metaphor in the attempt at forceful expression'.<sup>40</sup> Nash provides two short texts as examples:

In the foyer of the hotel, Andrew Campbell rose from the bench seat and Claire, shocked, stumbled forward, staring at him, disbelieving.

Kate was rooted to the spot, caught up in whirling emotions. As she tried to understand the strength of the feelings that Nick had triggered off, guilt clawed at her.

For the second text, Nash also provides his own paraphrase:

Kate, full of emotion, stood quite still. As she tried to understand the strong feelings that Nick had aroused in her, she felt guilty.<sup>41</sup>

Nash's paraphrase is much more straightforward and much easier to read than the original; however, this will not satisfy the reader of a magazine story. She demands that the story be not written in bland vocabulary (thus, perhaps, reminding her of her own prosaic life), but in a metaphorical language that is rather clichéd, so that she can both enjoy the false aggrandisement of daily activities and at the same time avoid labouring over the meanings of recondite rhetorical devices. Originality is not given priority here; in fact, we may go as far as saying that it is not exactly welcome. 'In general,' Nash writes, 'the purpose of figurative language in these stories for women is to raise stylistic energy. Rarely do we find any subtle exploitation of symbolism, any exploration of the possibilities of metaphor or patterns of imagery that inform the whole narrative.'<sup>42</sup> However, this is not the case in Shields's 'Soup du Jour'. I shall discuss two lexical aspects of the story, the mixture of everyday and elevated vocabulary, and verbal and structural cohesion. Neither of these is typical of women's magazine fiction; in fact, the linguistic specimens examined below are what distinguish Shields's stories from the vast majority of magazine stories.

### **Mixed Vocabulary**

We see in 'Soup du Jour' a distinct mixture of vocabulary, which, risking confusion of grammatical terms, I would like to compare to oxymoron on a phrasal or clausal level. In most cases, the mixture consists of a juxtaposition of everyday and elevated vocabulary.

We see this right from Paragraph 1. 'People are getting their highs on the level roller coaster of everydayness,' the alleged column writer Herb Rhinelanders writes, 'dipping their daily bread in the soup of common delight and simple sensation.'<sup>43</sup> While 'everydayness' would to most readers connote mundaneness, unexcitement, Shields joins it with 'level roller coaster', which implies excitement, adventure, and risk. Although 'daily bread' may sound everyday, one cannot fail to recognise its religious connotation: 'Give us this day our daily bread' is a line from the Lord's Prayer. This very fact sanctifies the phrase, none the less because Jesus also compares his flesh and blood to bread and wine, and these latter have attained a symbolic state in the Holy Communion. However, in Shields's sentence, we find the sacred daily bread dipped into the soup (the echoing of the title and the theme will be discussed later) of 'common delight and simple sensation'. There we see a combination of the sacred and the secular, a harmonisation of the high and the low.

In the passage about Molly Graham-Sutcliffe, Shields tells of an incident in Molly's childhood: being attacked by a madwoman on a London omnibus, with a lamb chop. Shields relates: 'Molly's hat was knocked askew. She was struck on the left cheek and ear, and the precise shape and weight of the blow have been stamped on her memory'.<sup>44</sup> At mid-sentence we would have expected the blow to have been stamped on Molly's cheek and ear; however, we read 'her memory' instead when we reach the end. That makes us want to read the sentence again. The shape of a blow can be stamped, yes, but the weight of the blow, too? How can that be stamped on a surface? After more brooding we realise it may not be that bizarre: the weight could be translated into the depth of the scar. Yet the surface receiving the impression being

Molly's memory makes the reading experience of the sentence anew.

Molly develops nightmarish syndromes after the incident. However, instead of being sent to a psychoanalyst, young Molly, being born into her particular epoch and her particular family, learns 'to nurse the incident along, to touch it up with a blush of comedy.' What Molly actually does is nothing extraordinary: 'She has by now related the story to hundreds of friends and acquaintances, smoothing out its strangeness in the telling, assigning herself a cameo role of amused passivity.'<sup>45</sup> While the author uses the verb 'to nurse' to make Molly's act sound parental, 'to touch it up with a blush of comedy' is at once artistic and adolescent. By virtue of metaphorical nouns and verbs, Shields tints Molly's actual telling of the story and gives us insights into the painful self-healing of the wound of her psyche.

In the last paragraph, when Simon, Heather Hotchkiss's son, remembers the ingredient his mother has sent him to buy, the moment of epiphany arrives:

At that moment the word *celery* arrives, fully shaped, extracted cleanly from the black crack in the pavement, the final crack (as luck would have it) before the three smooth cement steps that lead up to the sill of the corner store.<sup>46</sup>

When we read 'fully shaped' and 'extracted cleanly from the black crack in the pavement', we are for a moment no longer sure whether these words describe a celery stick, or the word 'celery', the *idea* of celery. Syntactically the answer should be the idea, the word *celery*; however, commonsensically, the graphic words can only be used on a real bunch of celery. It is as though Shields plays an optical trick on the reader's mind's eye.

Another way in which Shields renders the ordinary extraordinary is through the fractional division of the ordinary, to last it throughout eternity. We are told that Ronald Graham-Sutcliffe has learnt to slow down to savour various things, including 'his bedtime whisky; now that he's allowed only one a day, he's learned to divide the measure into an infinite number of sips'.<sup>47</sup> The same infinity is applied to Heather Hotchkiss making soup, putting in different ingredients in a fixed order: 'This much she learned from her mother, who undoubtedly learned it from her mother and so forth ad infinitum.'<sup>48</sup> Again, the simple sipping of whiskey and the plain making of soup have been given facets of eternity and sanctification.

### Lexical and Structural Cohesion

The epiphany at the end of the story—Simon's remembrance of the word *celery*—is significant no less for its parallel implication. Just before 'the word *celery* arrives', in the last paragraph, the penultimate paragraph reads:

He takes a breath, pokes a stick between the squares of concrete, and begins the process of elimination. Not carrots, not onions, not potatoes. As he strikes these items from the familiar list, he experiences the same ponderable satisfaction he finds in naming such other absences as father or brother or uncle, always imagining these gaps to be filled with a leather-fresh air of possibility, just around the corner, just five minutes out of

reach.<sup>49</sup>

Simon's elimination of the wrong items for the soup ingredient—'Not carrots, not onions, not potatoes'—is compared with the absences of his male family members—no father, no brother, no uncle. However, Simon finds satisfaction rather than disappointment in naming these names: he imagines 'these gaps to be filled', that the answer is 'just around the corner, just five minutes out of reach', like the corner shop which holds that soup ingredient in store, like the very word itself that represents that ingredient. He imagines that absence will become presence when that word he seeks arrives. And indeed it does.

Such implication-charged cohesion, whether by lexical or structural means, can also be found elsewhere in the story. Take the aforementioned phrase 'dipping their daily bread in the soup of common delight and simple sensation', for example. The words 'daily' and 'soup', besides echoing the mundane act of Heather Hotchkiss's soup making later in the story, reiterates the title 'Soup du Jour', which is the French for 'soup of the day'. The phrase in the Lord's Prayer 'daily bread' is almost exchanged for 'daily soup', thus reinforcing the sanctification of the word 'soup' as well as the action of soup making, which both constitutes the subject matter and symbolises the theme of the story.

Another reiteration, *verbatim* this time, makes a subtle but significant contribution to the storyline. Two passages, rather parallel in themselves, describe how Mr and Mrs Sutcliffe have come to terms with life, transcending issues they used to think were matters of life and death:

His army years, his time in the colonial service, his difficulty with women (one in particular), his throat full of unconfessed longings—all have come to rest in a large white porcelain tub and a warm towel waiting, folded beautifully, over a chromium rail.<sup>50</sup>

In the same gregarious, self-mocking manner, she has transformed other, similarly seismic nightmares into the currency of the mundane and mild—her dozens of inconvenient household moves over the years, an agonizing child-birth that yielded a stillborn lump with a cord around its neck, the spreading, capricious arthritis in her elbows and knees, and Mr. Graham-Sutcliffe's occasional indiscretions, one in particular.<sup>51</sup>

One cannot fail to recognise the reiteration of the phrase 'one in particular' in these two passages; the exact repetition of words compels one to link these two affairs together and assume they involve the same woman. Later this assumption is confirmed when we do meet the woman, Heather Hotchkiss, who used to want more of everything ten or twelve years ago, who, 'in love with Ronald Graham-Sutcliffe, a married man old enough to be her father, would have hooted at the simple delight of soup making'.<sup>52</sup> The reader's speculation that Simon is the illegitimate son of Ronald and Heather, however, is never validated, except perhaps through the simple but subtle 'Simon, aged ten',<sup>53</sup> and this in turn points back to the very first snapshot in the tapestry of ordinary people carrying out ordinary activities towards the beginning of the story, in Paragraphs

2 and 3: 'A ten-year-old child is sent to the corner store to buy a bunch of celery'.<sup>54</sup>

Another item shown in the tapestry of 'pleasures of ordinary existence' is boiled eggs: 'and such eggs! Such yellowness of yolk! Such complementary wrap and gloss of white.'<sup>55</sup> The word 'yellowness' is repeated later in the description of the scene where Molly Graham-Sutcliffe is attacked as a child by the madwoman: 'Something about the child, the yellowness of hair, the eager wet shine of her eyes, had excited the woman's rage.'<sup>56</sup> Besides the obvious repetition, however, we also detect a faint echo between the 'gloss' of egg-white and the 'wet shine' of Molly's eyes. This linkage in a sense foregrounds the word 'complementary', for, through parallel structure and lexical repetition, the ordinariness of eggs and the extraordinariness of a child-attacker on a London omnibus are made to complement each other, not unlike the yolks and whites in eggs.

Mr and Mrs Graham-Sutcliffe, or their respective approaches to life, are also made at times to seem complementary. 'Modern roses do not interest Mr. Graham-Sutcliffe,' the narrator tells us. 'They remind him of powder puffs, and of periods of his life that now strike him as being unnecessarily complicated.'<sup>57</sup> Mrs Graham-Sutcliffe, however, 'has a hearty respect for those paragraphs in a full life that need reworking.'<sup>58</sup> Molly, just as she smoothes out the strangeness of her childhood accident in the telling of it, also makes a conscious effort to write off other nightmares in her life, whereas for Ronald, the incidents seem to fade of their own accord and write themselves off.

The phrase 'paragraphs in a full life' is an example of Shields's linguistic or prosodic vocabulary. In 'Dying for Love', another story in the collection, the narrator gives the accounts of three women—Beth, Lizzie, and Elizabeth—on the verge of suicide for their loss of love. Yet they resolve to live in the end, each of them catching hold of a life-affirming thought, slender as a handrail. The following short paragraph ends the story: 'Not that this is much of a handrail to hang on to—she knows that, and so do I—but it is at least continuous, solid, reliable as a narrative in its turnings and better than no handrail at all.'<sup>59</sup> This comparison comes from one who admits that, other than reading and writing, other than undertaking the 'business of a woman' (Isak Dinesen), 'I mostly walk around and think about narrative, about the telling of stories [. . .]'.<sup>60</sup> That the life-giving thought each of the three characters hangs on to can be likened to a narrative in its turnings, and not in its completion, reinforces the theme of the story, which is both the fragility of life and the solidity and reliability of a frailly hopeful thought. In the very same way, 'Soup du Jour' finds a linguistic parallel to its theme:

There is a verb, she's found, to match every unpardonable act, and every last verb can be broken down until it becomes as faultless and ordinary and innocently inquisitive as that little sleepy English infinitive: to be.<sup>61</sup>

Molly, nodding over her French verbs on her sofa, has worked all conjugations down to one English verb that signifies mere existence. Molly, Ronald and Heather have all gradually stripped away the masks of life's excitement, ecstatic or destructive, and have arrived at life itself.

Transformation is the key concept of the story. As Molly transforms French verbs, her horrid childhood tale, and other nightmares, ten-year-old Simon also transforms the word *celery*:

The boy's gratitude [for the word coming back to him] is thunderous. He almost stumbles under the punishment of it, thinking how he will remember it all his life, even when he is old and forgetful and has given up his obsession with counting. He says it out loud, *celery*, transforming the word into a brilliantly coloured balloon that swims and rises and overcomes the tiny confines of the ordinary everyday world to which, until this moment, he has been confined.<sup>62</sup>

Even Simon, with his ten tender years, finds a way to transcend the petty concerns of everyday life, and at the same time discovers significance in the seemingly insignificant. The mention that one day Simon may be old and forgetful at the end of the story points back to the beginning, where Ronald, his alleged father, tends the garden and soaks in the bathtub, having given up many of his obsessions. The circle is completed: with this linkage Shields accomplishes the semantic and structural cohesion with the longest textual distance in between in the story.

'Mirrors', being already very unconventional in its subject matter of a middle-aged couple foreswearing mirrors, does not manipulate its lexicon in the same unusual way as 'Soup du Jour'. In fact, because of the eccentricity of the protagonists, we see towards the beginning of the story a linguistic pull in the opposite direction in the description of this couple: 'Otherwise, they are not very different from other couples nearing the end of middle age. . . ' 'Their political views tend to fall in the middle of the spectrum. Financially, you might describe them as medium well off, certainly not wealthy.'<sup>63</sup> 'Middle' and 'medium' seem to be the key words here. What Shields disharmonises semantically, she seems to try to balance lexically, so that the couple may not appear too 'deviant', so that the readers may still identify themselves with the protagonists.

If there are linguistic 'oddities' in the story, two paragraphs should certainly be nominated:

Each day they spent at the cottage became a plotted line, the same coffee mugs (hers, his), the comically inadequate paring knife and the comments that accrued around it. Familiar dust, a pet spider swaying over their bed, the sky lifting and falling and spreading out like a mesh of silver on the lake. Meals. Sleep. A surprising amount of silence.<sup>64</sup>

We see here another prosodic metaphor: the couple routine becoming a *plotted* line. Twice in the paragraph Shields uses an appositional structure with one incongruous item in the list: coffee mugs, knife, and *comments*, and then again meals, sleep, and *silence*. The other paragraph, which constitutes one of the moralising passages in the story, reads:

The simplicity of glass. The preciousness of silver. Only these two elements were needed for the miracle of reflection to take place. When a mirror was broken, the glass could be replaced. When a mirror grew old, it had only to be resilvered. There was no end to a mirror. It could go on and on. It could go on forever.<sup>65</sup>

We find here the echo of the complementariness of the yolk and the egg-white in 'Soup du Jour'.

The ad infinitum motif as expressed in the never-ending mirror is also used in 'Soup du Jour'. Everyday entities, whether a mirror, a bedtime whisky or the act of soup making, are given significance and eternity. When the simplicity of ordinariness marries the preciousness of extraordinariness, it seems that the combination can go on forever.

Those examples perhaps do not amount to a large body of lexical deviance in the story; however, we must keep in mind that in typical popular women's fiction we usually find none. While pulp fiction texts aim at giving the reader as little work as possible, using tried-and-tested, clichéd syntax and lexicon, and slipping in information in unobtrusive ways, Shields's texts require—undauntedly *demand*—meticulous brainwork.

### Other Possible Aspects for Discussion

Due to the limited space of the present essay, there are linguistic aspects that I have not discussed so far. I will give a concise description of two of them: dialogue and dilation. These and other aspects will require a longer, more specific discussion devoted solely to them.

#### *The Use of Dialogue*

It is very rare to see a magazine story with little or no dialogue. According to Nash, '[d]ialogues are indispensable to magazine tales, the readers of which would certainly echo Alice's question, "What is the use of a book without pictures or conversations?"'<sup>66</sup> He goes further to analyse this element of magazine fiction:

The dialogues of magazine fiction are in most cases *duologues*, representing exchanges of information between two persons, with no other party in attendance—though occasionally a child, a servant, a rival, will be allotted a minor role in the script. These duologues, ostensibly mimetic of everyday speech, are in many ways quite unlike naturally-occurring conversation. [. . .] [T]hese fictional conversations are in fact designed solely to promote the narrative.<sup>67</sup>

We see this clearly in 'Trail of Secrets'. Skyler and Tony have a drink together before ending up in Skyler's father's flat: over the drink is where most of the dialogue in the story occurs. The dialogue is indeed a duologue between Skyler and Tony. In their conversation, we learn important facts which shall later justify their affair: that they have both been riding horses as long as they can remember; that neither is afraid to take chances; that Skyler is an adopted child of her wealthy parents, having been abandoned as a baby; that Tony has a law degree but is happy being a mounted policeman. With these facts surfacing in Skyler and Tony's conversation, we are led to believe that fate has drawn these two soul mates together.

Furthermore, the dialogue in 'Trail of Secrets' is abundantly adorned with participiality (part of syntactic clichés, one of the common traits of magazine fiction described by Nash). To give but a few examples:



Skyler, unsettled by the direction in which this conversation seemed to be drifting. . . (Paragraph 63)  
Sensing her withdrawal, Tony said admiringly. . . (Paragraph 64)  
Embarrassed, Skyler shrugged. (Paragraph 65)  
. . . he asked evenly, his gaze growing more keen. (Paragraph 70)<sup>68</sup>

The author of magazine fiction, if we remind ourselves, must sneak in as much information and as unnoticeably as possible, but she must also not in any way strain the reader's mind while doing so. Therefore, she reduces the main clauses, and squeezes information necessary for the promotion of the narrative into the participle phrases.

On the other hand, the scarcity of dialogue in 'Mirrors' and 'Soup du Jour' may seem most striking. I counted seven occurrences of direct speech and three of direct thought in 'Mirrors'. Direct speech in the story consists of the following:

1. 'But how can you possibly shave?' (people asking the husband)
2. 'By feel,' (the husband's answer to 1)
3. 'Oh, I suppose I could look down and see what I look like, but I'm not obliged to take in the whole panorama every single day.' (the wife on the advantage of mirrorlessness when one is not slender)
4. 'Hello, us.' (the husband to himself and his wife reflected in the mirror of a restaurant)
5. 'We don't have a mirror at the cottage,' (the wife to their daughter)
6. 'Oh.' (the daughter's reaction to 5)
7. 'You remind me of someone,' (the wife to the husband when they first met)

Those lines make up all the dialogue there is in the story. Except for the mother-daughter exchange (5 and 6), these conversational exchanges are not written in the form of dialogue. They hardly promote the narrative, since we find no essential facts that would determine the course of the story or the fate of the characters.

In 'Soup du Jour', not a single line in quotation is to be found. The total absence of dialogue itself signifies defiance to the convention of popular women's fiction.

### ***Dilation: Tenses in Play***

A typical magazine narrative starts in the middle of a story, and then fills in the information about the heroine's past and future in the immediately following paragraphs. Nash proposes three reasons for the essential role of dilation:

But in a woman's magazine story, the Dilation is a conventional and almost obligatory element, and this for three reasons: first, it is the easiest way to give the reader the background to the story, when limited space, or possibly lack of skill, prevents the gradual, allusive communication of supplementary detail through dialogue; second,

because it has its own dialogic value, principally in representing the heroine's communings with herself; and third, perhaps the most important reason, because it is a repository for moral comment.<sup>69</sup>

Logically, the stylistic traits corresponding to the first two reasons should be tense auxiliary verbs and free indirect speech. Any reader of women's magazine stories will know that the past perfect tense (*had DONE*) as well as the past future tense (*would DO*) are rampant in these tales. (Two examples from Nash: 'She had known, but momentarily forgotten, that another son did exist. Emily had told her about him. He had left Cranmere under a cloud, sent packing by his father. [. . .]' 'I thought of Harry, dear understanding Harry, who would be so pleased that this had happened. We still had many problems to face, but face them we would—as a family! [. . .]')<sup>70</sup> 'Moral comment' is not an exclusive feature in popfiction; however, while more serious writers attempt to reveal truth as they see it, truth is never supposed to get in the way of optimism in magazine fiction.

In 'Trail of Secrets', the first two paragraphs start with Skyler helping her friend Mickey showing Mickey's niece and nephew around New York; then, typically of a magazine story, Paragraphs 3-12 dilate. In these paragraphs we learn that Skyler has just graduated from Princeton, that she was training for a horse show, that Prescott, her boyfriend of five years has just proposed, that she is unsure of marriage, and that she is supposed to give him her answer the same day. The dilation gives us the heroine's position along the time axis: whence she has come, where she stands, whither she is bound. *Hads* and *woulds* become essential in these dilative paragraphs. From Paragraph 3 to Paragraph 12 of 'Trail of Secrets', these tense auxiliary verbs add up to:

<i>had</i>	20
<i>would / were going to</i>	8

We can also find cases of free indirect speech:

[SKYLER THOUGHT:] But what had she said that was so terrible? He should have given her more warning! Asking her out of the blue to marry him, what did he expect?

[PRESCOTT HAD TOLD SKYLER:] They wouldn't have to set a date for the wedding; it could be years from now, if she liked. He'd just feel better knowing they were engaged.

[SKYLER THOUGHT:] Oh, why did Prescott have to go and mess up a good thing? She loved him, there was no question of that. . .<sup>71</sup>

As is obvious, the use of tense auxiliary verbs and free indirect speech provides an easy way to provide background information, as the author need only lay down a few passages in the present tense and fill in as much information as she wants in between.

Miraculously, 'Mirrors' does not use *had-done's* or *would-do's* to look back to the past or forward to the future. The story exhibits an interwoven pattern of the present and past tenses:

Paragraphs 1-15: present (description of the mirrorlessness in the couple's summerhouse)

Paragraphs 16-31: past (how the couple worked on the house, how they taught their children about the mirrorlessness)

Paragraphs 32: present (moralising)

Paragraphs 33-37: past (his affair in his late forties)

Paragraphs 38-40: past (her interior monologue / moralising from her viewpoint)

Paragraph 41: past (first meeting of husband and wife)

Paragraphs 42-47: present (his interior monologue / moralising from his viewpoint)

Paragraphs 48-49: past ('last night—or was it the night before? . . . [they] had become each other, at home behind the screen of each other's face')

Only from Paragraph 16 does the story shift into the past tense. Yet what we learn about the couple's past does not read like dilation; instead, facts surface gradually, constantly pushing the narrative forward. Having almost no plot, the story does not use dilation as a means to fill in essential background information.

As 'Soup du Jour' consists of several scenes, or several descriptions of scenes, it is written predominantly in the present tense, with past tense passages, similar to those in 'Mirrors', in the accounts of Molly's and Heather's pasts. The present perfect tense is used several times to signal the changes that have occurred in the characters' lives. The usage of adverbial phrases signalling the immediate past in the first three paragraphs functions to give the reader a sense of imminence: "The quotidian is where it's at," Herb Rhineland *wrote last week* in his nationwide syndicated column.<sup>72</sup> Or, 'All at once—it *seems to have happened in the last hour, the last ten minutes*—here is no stone, shrub, chair, or door that does not offer arrows of implicit meaning or promises of epiphany.'<sup>73</sup>

In the address Carol Shields gave at Hanover College, her alma mater, in September 1996, she used a green disk as a visual aid, which she almost snapped to pieces as she went along, demonstrating how various restrictions could deprive us of the materials in our narrative cupboard and leave us unsatiated with our constant hunger for narratives. Shields advocates fervently for 'that precious oxygen of permission'<sup>74</sup> in order for fiction to breathe freely outside the precincts of convention. That is precisely what 'Mirrors' and 'Soup du Jour' have achieved: they have inherited the frame of women's magazine fiction yet have broken some of its generic rules. Instead of offering the reader a mere escape to a fictional resort, the stories thrust in front of the reader 'reality' as the author understands it. Instead of serving themselves to be consumed as disposable entertainment, the stories demand mindful reflections on the language used and reflections on 'reality', the characters' as well as the reader's own. I would like to close with the following quotation from Geoffrey Leech and Michael Short's *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic*

*Introduction to English Fictional Prose*, which I think happens to sum up what Shields's stories accomplish: '... to be truly creative, an artist must be destructive: destructive of rules, conventions, and expectations. But in this sense, creativity of the writer also requires creativity from the reader, who must fill in the gaps of sense with an associative logic of his own.'<sup>75</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rick Cluff, in interview with Carol Sabiston, a long-time friend of Shields, in 'The Early Edition', CBC Vancouver, July 17, 2003, consulted May 27, 2004 <[vancouver.cbc.ca/clips/Vancouver/ram-audio/bc\\_shields2\\_030717.ram](http://vancouver.cbc.ca/clips/Vancouver/ram-audio/bc_shields2_030717.ram)>.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Ellen, 'Interview: Human Shields', *The Observer*, 28 April 2002 pp. 10-11, 13-14, consulted May 18, 2004 <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,6000,706290,00.html>>.

<sup>3</sup> Her early novels include as *Small Ceremonies* (1976), *The Box Garden* (1977), *Happenstance* (1980), and *Swann* (1987); in addition, she also published two collections of short stories in her early career, *Various Miracles* (1985) and *The Orange Fish* (1989).

<sup>4</sup> As quoted in Ellen and Mackenzie.

<sup>5</sup> These articles appeared respectively in the following newspapers: *Financial Times*, 22 Jul 2003, 13; *Independent*, 29 Jan 2000, 9; *Guardian*, 29 Jan 2000, 40-5; *Guardian*, 23 May 1998, 6-7; *Sunday Times*, 3 March 1991, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Malcolm Page, 'Small Ceremonies and the art of the novel', *Journal of Canadian Fiction* 28/29 (Montreal, 1980) 172-8.

<sup>7</sup> Simone Vauthier, 'On Carol Shields's "Mrs Turner Cutting the Grass"', *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies* 11.2 (Spring 1989) 63-74; "'They Say Miracles Are Past" but They Are Wrong', *Prairie Fire* 16.1 (Spring 1995) 84-104; 'Writing about Writing: Carol Shields's "The Journal"', ed. Georgiana M. M. Colville, *Contemporary Women Writing in Canada and Quebec* (Lewiston, New York, and Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 1996) 331-47.

<sup>8</sup> Clara Thomas, 'Stories like Sonnets: "Mrs Turner Cutting the Grass"', *Prairie Fire* 16.1 (Spring 1995) 79-83.

<sup>9</sup> Benoit Léger, 'Traduction littéraire et polyphonie dans "Mrs Turner Cutting the Grass" de Carol Shields', *Studies in Canadian Literature/Etudes en littérature canadienne* 20.1 (1995) 16-28.

<sup>10</sup> Kent Thompson, 'Reticence in Carol Shields', *Room of One's Own* 13.1/2 (1989) 69-76.

<sup>11</sup> Coral Ann Howells, 'In the Subjunctive Mood: Carol Shields's *Dressing Up for the Carnival*', *Yearbook of English Studies* 31 (2001) 144-54.

<sup>12</sup> Edward Eden, Introduction, ed. Edward Eden and Dee Goertz, *Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction* (University of Toronto Press, 2003) 6.

<sup>13</sup> Alex Clark, 'Sapphire and Steel', *The Guardian*, 5 February 2000, consulted May 23, 2004 <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/generalfiction/0,6121,132596,00.html>>.

<sup>14</sup> Laura Moss, 'The Quotidian is where it's at', in *Canadian Literature* (Vancouver, Spring 2002) 194.

<sup>15</sup> Mackenzie, 'The Triumph of the Ordinary'.

<sup>16</sup> Sharon Sorenson, *How to Write Short stories*, 3rd ed. (USA: Macmillan, 1998) 119.

<sup>17</sup> Carol Shields, 'Narrative Hunger and the Overflowing Cupboard', ed. Eden and Goertz 26.

<sup>18</sup> Walter Nash, *Language in Popular Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge 1990) 4.

<sup>19</sup> Faye Hammill, 'The Republic of Love and Popular Romance', in ed. Eden and Goertz 62.

<sup>20</sup> Carol Shields, *Dressing Up for the Carnival* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000) 80.

<sup>21</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 167.

<sup>22</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 171.

<sup>23</sup> Midland Exposure closed in 2003 due to the relocation of one of its agents.

<sup>24</sup> Cari Crook & Lesley Gleeson, 'An Introduction to Women's Magazine Fiction', *Writers Mirror* vol.2 issue 2, May 2000, consulted 1 June 2000 <<http://www.manninweb.co.im/writer/tutorial/wrime05.html>>.

<sup>25</sup> Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cornell University Press, 1980) 188-92.

<sup>26</sup> Roger Fowler, *Linguistic Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) 127-47.

<sup>27</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 67.

<sup>28</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 68.

<sup>29</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 68.

<sup>30</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 76-7.

<sup>31</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 69.

<sup>32</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 70.

<sup>33</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 162.

<sup>34</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 165.

<sup>35</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 170.

<sup>36</sup> The original to be found in *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 170, 171.

<sup>37</sup> Moss 194.

<sup>38</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 163.

<sup>39</sup> Nash 48.

<sup>40</sup> Nash 49.

<sup>41</sup> Nash 48-9.

<sup>42</sup> Nash 50.

<sup>43</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 162.

<sup>44</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 166.

<sup>45</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 166.

<sup>46</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 171.

<sup>47</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 164.

<sup>48</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 168.

<sup>49</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 171.

<sup>50</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 165.

<sup>51</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 167.

<sup>52</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 169.

<sup>53</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 169.

<sup>54</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 162.

<sup>55</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 163.

<sup>56</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 166.

<sup>57</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 163.

<sup>58</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 165.

<sup>59</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 53.

<sup>60</sup> Shields, 'Narrative Hunger and the Overflowing Cupboard', ed. Eden and Goertz 19.

<sup>61</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 167.

<sup>62</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 171.

<sup>63</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 68.

<sup>64</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 73.

<sup>65</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 78.

<sup>66</sup> Nash 29.

<sup>67</sup> Nash 31.

<sup>68</sup> *Cosmopolitan*, US Edition, August issue, 1996, 230.

<sup>69</sup> Nash 27-8.

<sup>70</sup> Nash 24, 28.

<sup>71</sup> *Cosmopolitan*, US Edition, August issue, 1996, 226.

<sup>72</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 162.

<sup>73</sup> *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 163.

<sup>74</sup> Shields, 'Narrative Hunger and the Overflowing Cupboard', ed. Eden and Goertz 34.

<sup>75</sup> Geoffrey N. Leech & Michael H. Short, *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose* (English Language Series, No. 13, London and New York: Longman, 1981) 29.