GENDER CONFLICTS IN THE FICTION OF LILIANA HEKER

In the ongoing theoretical discussion about the female *Bildungsroman* (also known as the novel of development or the novel of self-discovery), feminist critics have made note of its vitality and flexibility as a genre. It has been and continues to be an important vehicle through which female writers can articulate the complex nature of development for women in light of changing social conditions in the second half of this century. That the genre has resonance for women today stems from its markedly different evolution from the original *Bildungsroman*, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, which was modeled on and is appropriate to the life of its male protagonist. After experiencing some degree of alienation, the hero of the classical model was eventually reintegrated into a milieu whose values on the whole corresponded to his own.

In contrast, the female *Bildungsroman* has expanded to accommodate key differences in the nature of the interaction between the female protagonist and society. Yet the essence of her dilemma is her attempt to achieve a cohesive identity within a culture whose values continue to be at odds with her own. Her experience, therefore, is defined by conflict and struggle as she attempts to find her way:

> The female *Bildungsroman,* then, is traditionally a tale of compromise and disillusionment, the chronicle of a young woman's recognition that, for her, life offers not limitless possibilities but an unsympathetic environment in which she must struggle to discover a room of her own. (qtd. in Fuderer 3-4)

In discussing the contemporary female *Bildungsroman*, critics delineate two broad paradigms. The first, the apprenticeship novel, is most similar to the classical model in that development into adulthood is presented in chronological and linear fashion and shows the protagonist moving out into the world. (Abel, Hirsch, and Langland 11). Whether or not closure is possible is still, according to critics, a matter of debate.[2] The second paradigm, the awakening, represents a dramatic contrast to the first.[3] Its structure and concerns aptly reflect the contemporary woman's inability to progress in a fashion similar to that of her male counterpart. Her "awak-

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1. Maureen Ryan, *Innocence and Estrangement in the Fiction of Jean Stafford* (Baton Rouge, Louisana University Press, 1987) 14-15, qtd. in Fuderer 3-4.
2. Abel, Hirsch, and Langland see closure as possible, 11. Rita Felski in "The Novel of Self-Discovery: A Necessary Fiction?" does not, 136.
3. The awakening paradigm is discussed by Felski and Abel, Hirsch, and Langland. The term appeared originally in Susan Rosowski's study, included in *The Voyage In*, 49-68.

ening to limitations" (Rosowki 49) is manifested in this novel's more circular or episodic structure. As a result of experiencing one or more epiphanies, the protagonist moves inward toward self-recognition and, therefore, toward a rejection of the values of a male-dominant culture.

What critics underscore is the primary importance of gender issues as the heart and soul of the heroine's dilemma. Significantly, the authors of the *Voyage In* take the next logical step by linking the genre to revisionist theories of Freud: "By helping to explain some apparent incongruities embedded in female plots . . . feminist theories of gender difference enable new readings of female fictions of development" (Abel, Hirsch, and Langland 9).

Studies by feminist psychoanalytic theorists like Nancy Chodorow, Jean Baker Miller and Carol Gilligan begin with the important pre-Oedipal period because that is when key aspects of gender personality begin to develop.[4] That women universally are the primary caretakers of young children is crucial in creating pronounced gender differences in boys and girls. A girl's development of gender personality results from her attachment to a parent who is of the same sex:

> Given that she was a female child, and that identification with her mother and mothering are so bound up with her being a woman, we might expect that a woman's identification with a girl child might be stronger. . . (Chodorow 48)

As a result, mothers do not push daughters to separate. During this early period of life and until the Oedipal stage begins—around age 3 in boys, somewhat later in girls—what is most striking is the girl's continuity with her mother. Girls then carry with them throughout their lives: "a sense of self continuous with others. The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world . . ." (Chodorow 49).

In contrast, "a mother tends to identify less with her son, and to push him toward differentiation . . . " (Chodorow 49). In a boy's experience, then, difference becomes intimately linked to male gender identity: "The basic masculine sense of self is separate" (Chodorow 184).

Ultimately, revisionist theories revalue femininity and feminine traits of intimacy, empathy and need for others by casting a different, more positive light on female gender personality while recognizing and acknowledging difficult issues:

> women's relational self can be both a strength or a pitfall in feminine psychic life, as it enables empathy, nurturance, and intimacy but can also threaten lack of autonomy and dissolution of self into others. (Chodorow 186)

The linkage made by the authors of *The Voyage In* between the female *Bildungsroman* and revisionist theorists of Freud underscores how women writers

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4. See Gilligan's, *In a Different Voice;* Miller's, *Toward a New Psychology of Women*; and Chodorow's, *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory.*

continue to expand the genre in terms of its essential definition and its thematic possibilities so that it expresses their latest concerns:

> Although the primary assumption underlying the *Bildungsroman*—the evolution of a coherent self— has come under attack in modernist and avant-garde fiction, this assumption remains cogent for women writers who now for the first time find themselves in a world increasingly responsive to their needs. It is no wonder, then, that the novel of development has become, in Ellen Morgan's words, "the most salient form of literature" for contemporary women writing about women. (Abel, Hirsch, and Langland 13)[5]

And in presenting studies on female authors from different nations, Abel, Hirsch, and Langland demonstrate how the genre reaches across national, linguistic and racial borders to encompass an international community of women writers united around the common issue of gender.

As a young girl, the Argentine writer, Liliana Heker, displayed a precocious talent for physics but ultimately made a very conscious choice of the world of literature because, as she states:

> sé que cierta locura, ciertas obsesiones, una particularísima manera de ver a los hombres y de verme a mí misma que son la materia de mi literatura, no tendrían manera de ser expresadas a través de la ciencia.[6]

Her decision led her to a period of apprenticeship at the leading literary journals of Buenos Aires where she cultivated her writing skills.[7] In 1966, at age 23, Heker published her first collection of short stories, *Los que vieron la zarza*. Well received by critics, the work is notable for demonstrating Heker's talents as a storyteller, for its perceptive portrayal of the adolescent point of view and for its focus on what is going to be the author's continuing interest in the most mundane details of life:

> tengo pasión por los ámbitos cotidianos. Diría que es una pasión crítica por lo familiar, por la vida de pareja, por las relaciones madres/hijos, por la amistad. Creo que todo aquello que constituye el mundo normal y amable que nos rodea es mucho más conflictivo de lo que normalmente se suele ver. (Frouman-Smith 110)

Zona de clivaje, 1987, is the logical extension of the author's interest in the point of view of female characters in conflictive relationships.[8] Heker's apparent

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5. Felski addresses the issue of the critique of the realist text in the conclusion to her study, 144-47.
6. Liliana Heker, personal interview, Fall 1991. This part was not included in the final version. See Frouman-Smith, "Entrevista con Liliana Heker."
7. Those journals include *El Grillo de Papel, El Escarabajo de Oro*, and *El Ornitorrinco*. See Frouman-Smith, "Entrevista," 106-7.
8. My study on the novel, "Woman on the Verge of a Breakthrough: Liliana Heker's *Zona de clivaje* as a Female *Bildungsroman*," appeared in the 1993 edition of *Letras Femeninas*, 100-12.

facility in making the transition to her first novel belies what was in reality no easy feat; the work took twenty years to complete. Started by Heker at age 21, the novel required all those years of her personal growth in order for her to be able to articulate, in the most accurate way, Irene Lauson's conflicts which are intimately related to gender:

> me propuse plantear el conlicto de Irene Lauson, en particular, en cuanto mujer . . . . Lo que más me interesaba, y tal vez es uno de los temas que más me fascina a mí, es el de la mujer en tanto ser pensante y ser profundo. (Frouman-Smith 112)

In looking at several stories in particular from Heker's first collection in juxtapostion with the novel, one can see the emergence of a coherent pattern. The governing paradigm of these stories—the awakening—yields in *Zona de clivaje* to another model, that of the apprenticeship novel. What continues to dominate both the stories and the novel is the issue of gender conflicts. In this respect, the seeds of Irene can be found in key female predecessors from *Los que vieron la zarza.*[9]

Many of the dominant themes which appear in Heker's novel have been outlined previously by J.H. Buckley in his study of the English *Bildungsroman, Season of Youth:* childhood/adolescence, conflict of generations, alienation, ordeal by love, search for a vocation and a working philosophy.[10] In *Zona de clivaje,* these concepts are shaped by the perspective and sensibility of its female protagonist, Irene Lauson, whose entry into adulthood is impeded by a dilemma already evident during her childhood—her inability to integrate her intellect and her feminine appeal into a cohesive identity. Since this issue continues to have major repercussions on her in the present, Irene may be viewed as a quintessential heroine of the contemporary female *Bildungsroman:* her overall development is characterized by conflict within the context of male-dominant culture. The novel's delineation of Irene's quest for self-understanding and self-integration incorporates vital elements from Rita Felski's study of this genre.[11]

Zona de clivaje centers on Irene's thirteen-year relationship with her former, much older, literature professor, Alfredo Etchart. In the novel's richly symbolic opening scene which introduces the principal characters and concerns of the work, Irene and Alfredo are together at a repair shop because Irene's Remington typewriter, her belated birthday gift from Alfredo, is defective. Irene's insistence on having it repaired by someone other than Alfredo is an indication of Irene's emerging independence from her lover; finally, at the crucial age of 30, she is ready to leave adolescence behind and embrace adulthood.

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9. Marta Peixoto's study on Clarice Lispector that appears in *The Voyage In,* studies the stories from *Family Ties as following the awakening paradigm.*
10. I am including those themes which directly apply to Heker's work. Buckley does mention additional ones, but as he indicates, it is atypical for any *Bildungsroman* to incorporate all of them. See Buckley, 18.
11. Felski sees the novel of self-discovery as a "quest narrative," 132.

It is also during this same episode that Irene's collision in the street with seventeen-year-old Cecilia, Alfredo's latest love interest, provides the shock of recognition that spurs Irene's growth. Like her younger rival, Irene as an adolescent was an intellectually precocious heartbreaker: "ella era una especie de mujer fatal, o mejor, ella era una adolescente depravada que rompe el corazón de los hombres adultos" (35). That Irene still delights in having a "cara de niña" defines her dilemma: she can no longer be precocious at age 30.

Significantly, writing is the means to her liberation. Irene's meditation on how she and Alfredo met, fell in love and reached an impasse puts the focus of the novel on the "process of [her] self-transformation" (Felski 136) through her recovery of language.[12] In this way, Irene empowers herself to initiate her difficult but necessary separation from Alfredo and her work towards integrating her physical and intellectual attributes.

A major theme of the classical model, ordeal by love, is *Zona de clivaje's* core issue: it frames and structures the work. Irene's relationship with Alfredo was and continues to be characterized by her loyalty in the face of his infidelity,despite Alfredo's warning to her as their relationship is beginning: "¿Sabés lo que tenés que hacer ahora? Irte ya ahora mismo. Todavía estás a tiempo. Salir corriendo ahora" (69). Her devotion calls to mind the following from a story by Brazilian writer, Clarice Lispector, which deals with women and the oppressiveness of traditional roles: "To be loyal is not a clean thing. To be loyal is to be disloyal to everything else" (Peixoto 294). By entering the liaison with her eyes wide open so as not to lose him, Irene accepts it on his terms, not on hers. She even idealizes the nature of Alfredo's sexual initiation of young women by seeing it as his mission and as a humanistic act:

> A veces pienso que entre tanta cama y tanta palabra alada, la verdadera misión que quijotescamente se ha encomendado Alfredo, es la de despertar esa *rara avis,* eso que aun duerme o se despereza debajo tanto sueño adolescente. (178)

Irene's need for affiliation is so fundamental that no matter how smart or special she is, her inability to value herself permits her to maintain this destructive connection for thirteen years. And such is the paradoxical nature of her self-deception, that her despair and jealousy—she wants to be Alfredo's "única"—pull continuously against her deep need to be in a relationship. In contrast, Alfredo's insistence on autonomy and independence goes to the heart of gender differences as articulated by feminist theorists like Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan (Chodorow 184; Gilligan 156). Thus Irene's ability finally, at age 30, to separate from an oppressive affair which has impeded her development into a mature adult, is, according to Felski, one of the defining characteristics of the female *Bildungsroman:*

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12. Felski views the heroine's use of language as an essential issue, 134.

> The structure of the novel of self-discovery is thus shaped by assumptions which are common to all examples of the genre: identity is defined primarily through gender, and development requires a process of separation from and opposition to the male sphere through this assertion of female difference. (Felski 137)

Irene's writing about her relationship is signficant for these reasons: it eventually allows her to leave Alfredo, and it establishes the novel's ties to two additional themes from the classical model, conflict of generations and search for a vocation. In Heker's work, these two concepts are intimately connected.

In regard to the generational conflict, Buckley states the following:

> The loss of the father, either by death or alienation, usually symbolizes or parallels a loss of faith in the values of the hero's home and family and leads inevitably to the search for a substitute parent or creed. . . (19)

As a child, Irene found tremendous appeal in listening to her mother, Guirnalda, sing tragic songs about love, women and orphans and also tell imaginative stories, in a language that mixes *lunfardo* and Yiddish. The death of Irene's father when she was eleven leads to her idealization of him and her eventual rebellion against her mother, despite their common bond of bereavement.

As a caring and nurturing woman, Guirnalda's goals for Irene are conceived of in conventional ways—marriage and motherhood. Irene's rejection of this traditional life style, so that she may become a very different woman from her mother, can be linked to her self-deception, which leads her astray. Instead, she looks unfavorably upon mothers and children:

> Una imagen me provoca aún hoy repulsión. Señoras que hablan con Guirnalda en el camino al mercado. Yo, la nena de flequillo, colgada de su mano. . . . siento un profundo desprecio por estas fofedades que arrastran resignadamente a sus hijos. Las observo con espanto. ¿Y yo voy a ser así?, me pregunto. (79)

Her attitude can also be seen as a result of her spurning of limiting gender roles which, according to Felski, is fundamental to the contemporary female *Bildungsroman:*

> Central to the text, however, is the voiced or implicit assumption that a radical disjunction is apparent between existing social and cultural definitions of femininity and women's actual desires, but also that alternative possibilities exist beyond these constraints. (132)

Irene's disdain for her mother's values results in a denial of her authentic self–her need for a mutually caring relationship—played out through her affair with Alfredo. Her furthering of her mother's legacy through her discovery of her true vocation, writing, leads her also to realize that she and her mother both have the same goal in mind—Irene's happiness: "Qué esperaba Guirnalda de ella. *Tu felicidad,*

eso diría. Y sin embargo ella tampoco buscaba otra cosa que *su propia* felicidad" (252). In achieving a more harmonious relationship with her mother, Irene is also acknowledging the validity of her own intellectual needs.

In a pivotal, ironic episode that represents the turning point in Irene's relationship with Alfredo and where the theme of alienation is most evident, Irene, at Alfredo's request, is preparing dinner for him and Cecilia. Irene uses this opportunity to try and win him away from his young lover through traditional means: she will charm him with her physical appeal and culinary talents. Written in the language of women's magazines, the episode's not-so-subtle message addressed to the so-called modern woman regarding her attempts to have it all—looks, career and, most importantly, her man—has a particularly hollow and pathetic ring to it.

An imaginary interviewer makes inane comments while Irene prepares for her guests:

> —Que ella es, a no dudarlo, un sugestivo ejemplo de la Mujer de Hoy: independiente, dinámica y optimista— (189)
> . . . acá la vemos, sin mostrar rastros de cansancio, preparando estos exquisitos canapés, ¿nos contará la receta?, con sus propias manos, en su coqueto departamento. . . (190)

The additional detail regarding the suicide of Irene's neighbor over an unhappy love affair with a man underscores the painful but obvious truth: that Irene, like other women, continues to be oppressed by the discourse of popular culture.

As Irene begins the arduous ritual of her physical transformation in preparation for Alfredo's visit, "esa lenta ceremonia de iluminarse hacia afuera" (196), she recalls how this process began when she was fourteen and had willed herself to win over the only handsome boy at a party. That Irene at age 30 continues the same rite in order to hang onto her narcissistic lover is a painful reminder that her goals have not changed since then. The ironic result of all her torturous preparations is that Alfredo is oblivious to Irene and remains captivated by his petulant lover.

Such behavior on his part leads to an overwhelming feeling of despair on hers. She withdraws from all her usual activities, a necessary step that precedes her recovery: "This withdrawal forms a necessary part of the developmental process. . ." (Felski 135). As Irene isolates herself in her apartment and refuses to go to work, she feels terror and emptiness: "¿quién soy yo? Y la pregunta le produce terror. . . . Y un vacío sin fondo se abrió ante Irene" (220). Since for thirteen years her identity has been so intertwined with that of a man, her impending loss of Alfredo feels like a loss of self.[13] Her recovery is facilitated by her writing and by Guirnalda's visit, both of which reconnect her to her authentic self.

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13. See Miller, chapter 8, "Ties to Others."

Significantly, the novel ends with Irene finding the will to defy Alfredo by being disloyal to him at last. She takes a lover, a necessary act to sever her ties to her dependent relationship while signaling her openness and receptivity to other men. This step has positive implications regarding Irene's ability to progress without Alfredo while acknowledging his legacy as her mentor: "el amor con que él la preparaba para la vida, . ." (280).

This rupture also serves as a revealing parallel to Alfredo's break with his former professional mentor, Enrique Ram. Alfredo's sexual conquest of Ram's wife is not only a cruel, immature and insensitive act, but it is also an additional indication of how Alfredo remains stagnated in his emotional development. In contrast, Irene's affair with another man is a significant step in her progress toward maturity and authenticity. Finally, she is learning to "tomar toda esa carga pavorosa sobre sí misma; aceptar sus años. . . " (280).

Several of the stories in *Los que vieron la zarza* concern women whose awakening stems from the realization that their values are at odds with the culture at large, and this, as a result, directly affects their personal relationships, particularly with men. "Awakening, in other words, is a metaphor which suggests an essentially dualistic and disjunctive conception of experience" (Felski 141).[14]

Outwardly, "Los que viven lejos" is the story of a traditional, sensitive young woman, Cristina Bonfati, and her journey to fulfill her mission as a teacher. When viewed in light of its format and the protagonist's connection to Irene and other female protagonists within this collection, its importance stands revealed in a more profound way. In mediating on behalf of those who need her, Cristina becomes a spiritual mother to her students. Her journey, then, is a symbolic voyage towards her understanding of who she is and what she values.

The location of the story in a harsh and primitive environment where education is not valued or easily obtainable and where male/female roles could not be more clearly differentiated is significant. It relates to Cristina's awakening to the ways of the world as rooted in conflict and to the nature of experience as based on not only, as Felski indicates, "the primary duality of male/female . . ." (141) but also on an opposition between the "haves" and the "have-nots." Cristina's interaction within this traditional patriarchal society where existence is reduced to its most essential level accentuates her isolation and, therefore, her affinity for "los que viven lejos." The title then serves as a metaphor for the marginalized: women and children without voices, power or means.

Cristina's encounters with two male figures who, as the voices of authority and bureaucracy, do not value any connection to others provoke in her a reaction against

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14. While using Rosowski's term, I am incorporating ideas from Felski's model. I see coincidence of meaning in that both critics emphasize how a female protagonist moves inward toward self-recognition due to conflict with her culture.

her responsiblities because they are not consistent with her innermost convictions.[15] This clash is played out through Cristina's principal task: she must recruit and maintain a certain quota of students or she will lose her class. This is according to the rigid school official who is guided by the maxim, "El reglamento es el reglamento" (22). Señor Mosquera, a powerful landowner, warns her to not recruit in the land of "los que viven lejos" by crossing the dividing line into Estanque Grande because, "no es lugar para mujer sola" (11). Although his words are meant to intimidate and limit her, they ultimately have the opposite effect. Their more immediate result is to lead to her awareness of two different kinds of worlds:

> Después, cuando el tiempo continuó transcurriendo, esa zona volvía a ser la parte de los que viven lejos, y no se lograba a distinguirla con nitidez. Una tierra confusa e intrincada donde, quizá, la gente vive de algún modo inconfesable y tremendo y mejor no pensar en eso. Como si el mundo estuviera cortado en dos por el Estanque Grande y nosotros, los de este lado, los del lado de la escuela, y el puesto de policía,y las propriedades de los Mosquera, y las vías . . . no tuviésemos derecho a pensar en ello. (12-13)

Cristina's willingness to enter the forbidden terrain becomes a significant and symbolic act that points to the transforming power of her awakening. By not playing by the rules of male-dominant culture, Cristina manifests an "ethic of care" (Gilligan 73) which is particularly revealing juxtaposed with Señor Mosquera's view of the children as "estos animales" (9).

The protagonist's movement toward self-discovery and authenticity is based on her ability to recognize her own deficiencies as she experiences several illuminating moments. This is evident in the incident with her student, Rosaura, whom even kind Cristina has difficulty liking: "Cara de india. . . Imposible quererla" (18). One night, Rosaura appears naked and frightened at Cristina's doorstep, seeking the latter's protection. It is then that Cristina discovers the reason for her student's unruly behavior: she has been prostituted by her mother due to the family's economic desperation. Cristina grows in her compassion by unhesitatingly embracing and protecting the girl. Ironically, Señor Mosquera expresses his moral outrage toward the eight-year-old whom he calls a "degenerada": in his view, she has dared to violate patriarchal norms.

Cristina's struggle to elicit cooperation from even her most difficult students in order to form a cohesive group is achieved during the turning point of the story. It happens on a day that begins ominously, in the form of a heavy rainstorm. Forced to continue together into the evening, Cristina and her students finally become a unified community that symbolically withdraws from its oppressive environment.

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15. Felski states, "The novel of self-discovery articulates the conviction that the primary obligation of women is a recovery of a repressed identity and a consequent refusal of social and communal responsibilities which do not accord with internal desires" (135).

Sitting together with candles against a background of thunder and darkness, the students bond together as they generate an atmosphere of joyfulness which eradicates most prior differences, even among the most resistant of students. This transformation awakens Cristina to her inner strength via her power to inspire others. Together they win the game of numbers and thus emerge with a small, albeit temporary victory. Yet the more enduring moral lesson is accomplished by both teacher and students alike in their ability to learn from one another.

The story that gives its title to the collection is one that Heker feels is essential to her development as a writer. In "Los que vieron la zarza," Heker discovers a major theme that she articulates in the following way:

> es un tema obsesivo en mí aquél en que mis personajes se proponen una meta que está por encima de sus posibilidades. No me importa que consigan o no esa meta, me importa esa lucha que emprenden con algo que es más fuerte que ellos. (Frouman-Smith 111)

And because the story also concerns day-to-day matters occurring in family life, it powerfully illuminates the issues of conflict between men and women. Here Irma, the loving and devoted wife of Néstor, undergoes a dramatic transformation into a woman who questions the validity of her husband's ambition because of the fact that her goals no longer coincide with his. Her sudden awareness of the limitations of their relationship unexpectedly leads to an abrupt ending of their marriage and their way of life.

The change illustrates the dichotomy between male and female values. During nine years of marriage, Néstor has focused obsessively on a boxing career, a sport that is a metaphor for the sometimes destructive tendencies of men: "él va a llegar a campeón a cualquier precio; si no, no vale la pena vivir" (71).[16] Irma, in her sudden refusal to continue to be supportive of his unsuccessful career, manifests her concern over its adverse effects on her family.

Néstor's rigid vision vis-a-vis his profession also influences his view of gender roles. The consequences are most evident in his relationship to his son, Rubén: he is very critical of his son's rejection of boxing and embracing of soccer, a sport the father considers unmanly.

Irma's move toward self-understanding and authenticity as a result of her conflicts with her husband leads, as in Cristina's case, to her discovery of her inner strengths. As Felski indicates, "female self is frequently envisaged as an authentic centre which has accrued layers of false consciousness, . . ." (141). This change causes Irma to act out of character which is most evident in her dramatic confrontation with her husband. This is a very crucial scene and the turning point of the story.

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16. According to Miller, "It [the dominant society] holds up narrow and ultimately destructive goals for the dominant group and attempts to deny vast areas of life" (47).

Like Cristina, Irma rejects narrowly conceived principles of patriarchal culture because she feels the human cost is too great.

In contrast, Néstor remains adamantly and selfishly entrenched in his ambitions the same way Alfredo stagnates in the old issue of infidelity and the male figures from "Los que viven" relentlessly support oppressive values at the cost of the children's future.

The ending of the story confirms the divergent paths Néstor and Irma have chosen to take. When Néstor finally realizes how to win in the ring, he consciously throws away his chance for success. This action may be viewed as an expression of rage toward his wife for her withdrawal of support: "Y tuvo que joderla a ella. Y me hice odiar por mi hijo" (79). Ironically, Néstor's suicide prevents Irma from ever uttering her intended words of regret over their conflict. Unyielding to the bitter end, he is never able to expand his perspective beyond his own narrow goals.

"Casi un melodrama" is a pithier, more enigmatic variation on the situation presented in "Los que vieron la zarza." Edith, a traditional wife and mother married for fourteen years to Miguel, is no longer willing to accept the status quo in regard to her husband's unrelenting pursuit of a second career as a writer. "Catorce años escuchando tac tac tacatac detrás de una puerta, los feriados" (123). For Edith, Miguel's indifference towards the family causes her to regard his presence as intolerable.

Edith's altered perspective towards her marriage leads her to confront her husband. She rejects her former life by refusing to grant him his request for peace, so he may continue as before. Instead, she insists that he leave. In doing so, Edith demonstrates her unwillingness to compromise over his failure to fulfill his obligations as a husband and father.

Edith's change in behavior dramatically illustrates how her ethics do not accord with those of her husband. While sincere in encouraging him to pursue his writing career full-time, she is adamant about refusing Miguel's offer of financial support. Edith's unusual choices which appear to benefit her husband over herself and her refusal to explain them cause bewilderment in her family. As Felski indicates, "Speechlessness . . . often operates as an index of authenticity; the heroine's silence serves to convey the intense and complex nature of female subjectivity . . ." (143). Outwardly it seems she pays a high price for her liberation: "Edith sintió a través de las paredes, el odio de sus tres hijos" (131). Yet her actions lead to a catharsis, evident in an illuminating moment. Unlike the dramatic finale of "Los que vieron la zarza," the drama here centers on the internal changes Edith experiences once Miguel leaves: "De pronto, daba la impresión de haberse puesto muy alegre; joven: resplandecía" (127). Her transformation into a woman with a sure sense of herself and her principles makes her prior life an impossibility.

Despite a lapse of twenty-one years between the publication of Heker's two works, there is a striking commonality of experience among the four female pro-

tagonists. Gender conflicts, then, persist as a primary issue, despite external changes for women.

All four characters travel a similar journey in their quest to become whole. The linking element is their need to separate from an oppressive relationship or situation due to a difference in values from men. Painful as the process of separation may be, it, at least, results in profound and positive internal growth. That women opt for unorthodox alternatives that do not seem logical within the context of patriarchal society, stems from, according to revisionist theorists like Jean Baker Miller and Carol Gilligan, their distinctive ethos which does not take into account the criterion of material success. In contrast, what Felksi indicates as being a general characteristic of the female *Bildungsroman* is certainly applicable to the male characters in all four Heker works: "Male figures are frequently portrayed in a one-dimensional pursuit of rational and material goals at the expense of alienation from feeling; . ." (143).

Part of the importance of revisionist theories resides in their explanation of the origin of women's particular development which results in a valuing of affiliation. But as Chodorow and other theorists have pointed out, and what is certainly illustrated in the works under discussion, is that this need to connect to others often allows women to be overly tolerant of oppressive relationships. (Cristina is the exception here.) Significantly, the mother-child bond, so crucial to the pre-Oedipal stage, continues in importance during adulthood. Cristina's role as spiritual mother to her students is the story's moral core from which all important developments are derived. Irma's and Edith's dissatisfaction with their marriages is directly related to their concern for their children. Irene's bond with her mother facilitates her entry into adulthood through her discovery and acknowledgement of their shared talent.

That Cristina's, Irma's and Edith's transformations seem especially dramatic must be attributed to the nature of this particular paradigm in which "an awakening to limitations" takes place in an "unconventional time frame" (Abel, Hirsch, and Langland 11-12) in contrast to the chronological progression of the apprenticeship novel. The evolution of all three protagonists to a point where they can challenge the values of a male-dominant culture is a substantial feat, especially in light of the more traditional and, therefore, confining era in which these developments occur. Their accomplishments, no doubt, establish a foundation for Irene whose possibilites for achieving a more meaningful adulthood certainly are greater twenty-one years later.

That separation is a fundamental and common element to the experience of these women does, in no way, contradict their valuing of affiliation. It does serve to underscore how, as Chodorow has indicated, women's inner object world is richer and more complex and, as such, incorporates a profound appreciation for a greater variety of relationships beyond male/female ones.[17]

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17. See Chodorow regarding the greater complexity of women's inner-object world in connection with her discussion of the results of the feminine and masculine Oedipal complex, 68-71.

Given that the act of women seeking a different adulthood is viewed as problematical within patriarchal culture, the female *Bildungsroman* will continue to serve as a relevant format for women writers. By including works from many different nations, the authors of *The Voyage In* highlight certain universal issues that women experience, while not minimizing the significance of cultural differences. Thus, the theoretical debate proceeds as women embrace the richness and variety of their lives.

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