

A Short Revolution:
Formal Innovation and Feminist Critique
in Lydia Davis

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IV

Abstract

This thesis explores the narrative strategies of Lydia Davis's short fiction. Based on close readings from *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* and *Can't and Won't*, I argue that Davis's textual practice has feminist significance relating to both the form and content of her stories. First, the close readings demonstrate that putting emotions in order, narrative disclosure, failed or reverse epiphanies, and acute attention to language are the trademarks of Davis's original style. Based on Ellen G. Friedman's and Miriam Fuchs's work on the subversive narrative, Davis's literary innovation conforms to the feminist notion of breaking patriarchal structures in literature. In the attempt to find closure, the story becomes a medium for reconciliation and growth. Davis carves out a fictional landscape where mystery and the inexplicable reigns. Within this landscape, she addresses feminist issues such as the mother's role, miscommunication and asexuality. Revealing how motherhood is both a source of oppression and fascination, Davis contributes to a more nuanced perception of motherhood in literature. The findings add new dimensions the work of previous researchers, who tend to assume that feminist experimental writers combine radical feminist ideas and formal innovation. Instead, Davis challenges the way we read and write stories, spreading awareness about nonlinear storytelling and inequality for women in everyday life. Based on this observation, there is reason to claim that Lydia Davis innovates the short story as a feminist battleground.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Aims, Scope and Thesis statement

Contemporary writer Lydia Davis is not afraid to expand the notion of what constitutes a story. Rather than being put into literary boxes, she thrives in the freedom of unsolved problems. In her essay “Les Bluets”, she concludes: “it was this new tolerance for, and then satisfaction in, the unexplained and unsolved that marked a change in me” (552). Two centuries earlier, the poet John Keats wrote in a letter: “several things dove-tailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in literature. . . . I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (qtd in Solnit 95). Noticeably, two hundred years apart, the two settle for accepting what they cannot know. A signature quality for much of Davis’s short fiction is the freedom of exploring a fictional landscape beyond logical reasoning. This thesis explores how her short fiction plays with dominant structures of rationality and challenges the ways in which women writers claim cultural legitimacy. The existing criticism has failed to capture the larger feminist potential involved in Davis’s textual practice and this thesis aims to address this gap.

This thesis examines two main aspects Davis’s textual practice: namely her experiment with literary form and her treatment of what one might consider feminist topics. First, the close readings of a selection of stories aim to uncover how narrative strategies such as omission, lack of causality, disclosure and epiphanies mimic a desire for structure. I will argue that these textual features problematize the underlying mechanisms of normative rationality. Davis’s extreme brevity, tightly controlled language and sensibility to quaint details and emotions challenge the notion of what a story is, at the intersection between prose and poetry. Challenging traditional forms is central to literary experimentation and feminist literature. According to feminists such as Ellen G. Friedman, Miriam Fuchs, Ellen E. Berry and Alice Jardine, the act of subverting traditional forms has sparked important debates in oppositional women’s culture. They specifically emphasize elements that have long been the cornerstone of the short story genre, such as the lack of narrative closure, the dissolution of a single authoritative storyteller and plot linearity. Secondly, several of Davis’s stories, across various collections address thematic structures of motherhood, sexuality and miscommunication between men and women. Limited analytical attention has been given to

the authorship of Davis as a way to understand contemporary relationship between gender and experiment. So, several questions arise: How does Davis employ traditional structural devices such as omission, narrative closure and the epiphany? To what extent do these narrative strategies have feminist significance and affect the short story genre as an arena for feminist experiment?

The attempt to depict Davis's narrative strategies and dominant thematic lines must take her variation and distinctive character into account. The intention of this thesis is not to read all her stories from a feminist perspective, but to celebrate her originality and contribute to more diverse readings. In order to achieve this, I attempt to discuss the relationship between her narrative strategies and developments in the short story genre. Further, I will relate my findings to the feminist conversation on experimental writing. To better understand the relationship between gender and experimental form, I consider how relevant aspects in feminist and narrative theory, along with developments in the short story genre complement each other. This thesis aims to show Davis's variety by displaying a dimension of her work which has gone unnoticed by critics.

My argument is that narrative strategies such as deemphasizing plot, lack of narrative closure and reverse epiphanies, unsettle the belief in stable meanings and what Friedman and Fuchs call patriarchal structures of rationality. Instead, Davis carves out a fictional space that illuminates what is unexplained and unsolved in everyday life. Within this space, Davis expands the fluid edges of short fiction to explore feminist topics. These stories produce a new set of criteria for how we write and read stories, beyond mere wit and entertainment value. Davis offers a new experimental unmaking of dominant structures of rationality, where the goal is satisfaction in what cannot be explained, rather than rational closure and essential truths. This feminist reading of Davis combines the formal and thematic aspects of her fiction, to show how these stories innovate the short story as a feminist battleground.

1.2 Primary Texts and Chapter Outline

The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis contains more than 200 texts. The shortest are less than a sentence long and the longest about 40 pages. Fragmental stories are a distinctive aspect of Davis's original style. It is particularly relevant to discuss the narrative techniques in "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant", "Collaboration with Fly" and "Spring Spleen". These stories are anecdotal observations and have been selected for their minimalist structure. In this sense,

they challenge conventional ideas of what a story is and what it should do. This chapter addresses narration, mood and structural features such as ellipsis, narrative closure and epiphany. Each feature is discussed in detail with relevant examples, to illustrate how Davis employs the specific narrative strategy. Several critics have already discussed narrative closure and reconciliation in relation to Davis. I will extend this discussion to address the relationship between narrative closure and the epiphany as a structural device.

In this selection of stories, the most apparent pattern is the tendency to portray narrators with enigma-like problems in stories such as “A Mown Lawn”, “We Miss You: A Study of Get-Well Letters from a Class of Fourth-Graders”, “A Second Chance” or “What I Feel”. I stress how such narrative features reveal the need for structure and the quest to understand emotions. Instead, the reflexive-introspection unravels and narrative closure becomes impossible. In the essay “Les Bluets”, on the other hand, a moment of epiphany leads the narrator to embrace what she cannot grasp. These stories demonstrate the inward investigation of a problem, revealing more about the self than solving the problem at hand. Similarly, I underline that the scope in this thesis only grasp some, but not all aspects of Davis’s short fiction.

Symptoms of miscommunication and blind spots are striking in Davis’s stories. Per Winther notes that describing the absence of narrative elements is central to minimalist fiction (133). Davis explores these gaps and her subjects often align with what Valerie Shaw calls “unwritable things” (263). For example, in “What She Knew”, the narrator is unable state why it hard for her to be a young woman (32). The retaining and yet self-ironic tone, recalls a work in Nathalie Sarraute’s *Tropisms*. The collection of short texts, published in 1938, marked a fresh direction in French literature. Sarraute describes *Tropisms* as the “interior movements that precede and prepare our words and actions, at the limits of our consciousness” (154). In this specific text, the narrator attempts to put her struggle against patriarchy into words to gain entry into intellectual and bourgeois circles. Both Sarraute and Davis abandon traditional plot elements and characterization in their individual way. When it comes to treading outside the traditional framework for the novel Sarraute comments: “I felt that a path was opening before me, a path which excited me. As if I’d found my own terrain, upon which I could move forward, where no one had gone prior to me” (157). For both, the interior movements make up the plot. As Germaine Brée states: “These sign-gestures – tone, silence, word – emanate from the turmoil, the fluctuations, the underlying impulses of sensation and emotion that accompany human encounters and overt communications” (271).

The fragment “They Take Turns Using a Word They Like” shows a similar distrust in language and illustrates the attempt to introduce nonverbal moments into the narrative. “The Seals”, published in *Can’t and Won’t* in 2014, recounts various aspects of the narrator’s grief process and reconciliation.

The stories discussed in the second chapter have been selected on the basis of their feminist themes. As feminist themes in literature are numerous, this thesis focuses on the politics of reproduction and how motherhood affects women’s lives in social, economic, artistic and inter-personal ways. Stories such as “Glenn Gould”, “What You Learn About the Baby”, “A Double Negative”, “Child Care” and “Mothers” raise questions about selfishness, personal sacrifice and illuminate a nuanced notion of the maternal role. The stories also address mother-daughter relationships. There is a significant absence of father figures and sexual diversity, which raises important questions about Davis and heteronormative ideals. The stories discussed were published in different collections in the timespan between 1973 and 2014, underlining the presence of this topic throughout her authorship. I discuss these stories in relation to the rise of the Women’s Liberation Movement and the feminist slogan “The Personal is Political”, from an essay by Carol Hanisch published in 1969. This chapter also makes references to Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* and Karl Ove Knausgaard’s *My Struggle* to develop my arguments about Davis.

The first chapter of close readings aims to uncover what narrative strategies characterize Lydia Davis’s short fiction. First, I apply narrative and short story theory to explore the innovative nature of Davis’s short stories. As various features of these theoretical fields overlap, I pay specific attention to the sequence of events, ellipsis, narration, mood, narrative closure and the epiphany. This chapter will focus on the relationship between these narrative strategies and themes of miscommunication, loss and reconciliation. This extensive study of Davis’s narrative strategies aims to reveal a nuanced overview of her playful style and non-linear storytelling. The second chapter will connect these narrative strategies to the larger conversation on feminist experiment. The focus in this chapter is dual. First, I discuss the feminist significance of Davis’s narrative strategies. Here, the close readings from the previous chapter serve to reinforce my argument. From a feminist perspective, the play with traditional forms can be interpreted as a subtle critique of dominant structures in everyday life and a mimicry of normative realism. Secondly, I analyse the strong presence, and sometimes bitter critique, of motherhood in her authorship. Central to this discussion is to what extent her stories present a critique or conform to heteronormative ideals. I aim to reveal that Davis

is difficult to incorporate into the canon of feminist experimentalists. Instead she produces a limit feminism and reinvents the short story as a feminist battleground.

1.3 Mapping the Debate

For almost 40 years, Lydia Davis has been writing stories unlike anyone else, for which she was awarded the Man Booker International Prize in 2013. She is widely considered as one of the most original minds in American fiction today, Dana Goodyear notes (par. 1). Her very short stories are at the intersection between philosophy and poetry. Yet Davis is reluctant to describe her writings as short stories, problematizing her own writings: “But that’s the trouble with any form. I can often start a serious piece of writing and immediately see the possibilities of it being a little story” (176). The stories were reassembled in *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* in 2009. The volume includes *Break It Down* (1986), *Almost No Memory* (1997), *Samuel Johnson Is Indignant* (2001) and *Varieties of Disturbance* (2007). In addition to writing stories, essays and one novel, Davis is the acclaimed translator of Proust, Blanchot and Flaubert. Most of the existing scholarly work concerns Davis’s work as a translator. Moreover, her minimalist style is often compared with Samuel Beckett or Kafkaesque parables. Both wrote fictions that were anywhere from a paragraph to hundreds of pages long, and must be important sources of inspiration, Marjorie Perloff notes (208).

Davis pays scrupulous attention to language. Consequently, Christopher Knight describes her as self-consciousness writer (527). Her curiosity and various sources of inspiration, make room for quaint details, wit and estrangement. As Colm Tóibín states: “Davis is a high priestess of the startling, telling detail. She can make the most ordinary things, such as couples talking, or someone watching television, bizarre, almost mythical” (par. 7). In an interview, Davis relates this ability to her father, who taught English at Columbia University: “People fascinated him as though they were alien creatures. I guess I was trained in that informal way always to look behind things” (531). The curiosity to look beyond ordinary things is also apparent when she notes in another interview: “If something interests me, whether it’s a piece of language or a family relationship or a cow, then I write about it. I never judge ahead of time. I never ask, Is this worth writing about?” (187).

More or less every story, whatever length, expresses a desire for order and meaning. Critics emphasize Davis’s way of analyzing and breaking things down into smaller parts, in order to understand them better. Despite her analytical approach to her subject matter, her

fiction remains sensuous. Through reasoning and calculation, the mind actively seeks to make sense of painful experiences; as Alexander proposes, to “subdue emotions through intellection” (174). However, the method fails to let the characters comprehend their relation with others, nor does it provide narrative closure. According to Dana Goodyear: “Evasion is the shadow side of overwrought explanation: dwelling on minutiae can mask a problem of unspeakable magnitude” (par. 27). Similarly, Josh Cohen adds that Davis’s fiction “does not so much resolve the enigma of desire as gives it a crystalline visibility” (514). In other words, the self-investigative method reveals problems that often unravel into incomprehension. Nettie Farris problematizes the lack of narrative closure and concludes: “the form of these narratives would be more appropriately described as problem/complication, rather than problem/solution” (128). In this sense, the self-reflexive style reproduces the same confusion it purports to describe.

When it comes to following the genre conventions of short fiction, Davis is the odd one out. Critics frequently discuss questions of genre hybridity and Davis describes herself as writer of stories, rather than short story writer (Alexander 165). Alexander places Davis, along with Raymond Carver, at center of critical debate on minimalism in literature in the 1980s. Her influence includes writers such as Grace Paley, Russell Edson, Frantz Kafka and Samuel Beckett (167). The minimalist style involves an intensive focus on language and sensitivity to rhythm, placing Davis at the intersection between prose and poetry. Even so, Christopher Ricks objects, she does not want her writings to be thought of as poems (xxi). Still, Davis is remarkably preoccupied with literary form and “delights in testing the limits of genre by formal means”, Alexander stresses (165).

Most commentary invokes Davis’s original style and critics tend to focus less the thematic content of her stories. Alexander asserts that “Davis chooses not to tackle social or political issues in her fiction”. She also describes the short story form as “a parable that does not have a moral” (174). Equally, Davis has been reluctant to identify with the feminist movement and to comment on the sexual politics of storytelling. Her reluctance to be labelled is further underlined by Knight: “Davis has carved out a singular space – minimalist, poetic philosophical, and self-reflexive – that doesn’t easily fit into the categories of short fiction generally encountered in North America” (526). Despite praise for her daring style, her literary experimentation has gone unnoticed by feminist critics.

1.4 Theoretical Perspectives on the Short Story Genre

The ability of short stories to capture the mysteries of human existence has fascinated both readers and writers of short fiction for centuries. The nineteenth century gave rise to critical interest in the genre. The pioneers Edgar Allen Poe and Brander Matthews stress the chief requisites: compression, originality, ingenuity and a touch of fantasy (Matthews 77). Today, their work is slightly outdated in relation to the modern short story, although it is still a point of reference. This thesis will mainly focus on aspects related to compression and originality; more precisely, ellipsis, narrative closure and epiphany. I will discuss the reinterpretation of these structural devices by theorists such as Charles E. May, Suzanne Ferguson, Eileen Baldeshwiler and Mary Louise Pratt.

In the twentieth-century short story, compression is achieved by ellipsis, i.e. by omitting plot elements. The minimal dependence on plot is best illustrated by the focus on a single situation in everyday life boiling down to a crisis. Ernest Hemingway's characteristic "iceberg technique", influenced by Chekhovian idea about limiting stories, demonstrates how the right external details have the ability to reflect the complexity of inner states (May 202). Thus, ellipsis contributes both ambiguity and tension. The reader can deduce important clues from the silences and gaps in the narration, without the writer stating them overtly. From this perspective, readers are invited to interpret more freely. The technique also reveals an inarticulateness and the failure to communicate is central to Davis's stories.

Winther notes that the main challenge in establishing "minimalism" as a workable concept is to provide a set of categories that denote those hidden figures in a text. In other words; to find a vocabulary for what is not on the page. Ellipsis is particularly relevant in considering Davis's shortest stories. In the close readings, I will apply John Gerlach's work on narrative closure and Miriam Marty Clark's work on manipulating the epiphany. The question of ellipsis leads to an interesting question with regard to short story form: How do short texts preserve their sense of story? Winther suggests that the epiphany is one important source of storiness (135). He adds that minimalist stories operate with "a minimum of those building blocks we generally expect to find in the construction of interesting fiction, long or short" (133). To better understand how Davis alternates these building blocks, it is necessary to supplement theory on the short story genre with narrative theory.

Narration, causality and narrative closure are important features of what constitutes a story. On the surface of the page, Davis's shortest stories challenge the notion of what a story is. Central to this thesis is Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's threefold distinction between 'story', 'text' and 'narration', in the tradition of Gérard Genette (71). 'Story' is the succession of narrated events themselves and their participants, outside the text. I will discuss this aspect in relation to the sequence of the narrative events in Davis's stories. 'Text' is the telling of written discourse. I discuss narrative closure, causality and the story's mood based on narrative strategies such as ellipsis and epiphany in the text itself. The telling demands someone who speaks and writes. In terms of 'narration', I focus on how the narrator's perceptibility contributes to the story's mood and narrative closure. The author is responsible for the production of the narrative, its reception and communication; whereas on a textual level, interaction takes place between a fictional narrator and a fictional narratee (Rimmon-Kenan 4). I discuss the role of the narratee in "Glenn Gould" and "What You Learn About the Baby", as they are specified in these stories. Here I distinguish between Davis the author, and the fictional narrators in her stories. It is important to note that Rimmon-Kenan addresses traditional narratives, paying less attention to experimental texts. The classification is nevertheless a useful map to locate Davis's narrative strategies. Theoretical developments in the short story genre and narrative theory serve as a yardstick to trace how her stories innovate the genre. In turn, the degree of formal innovation impacts to what extent her stories are unifiable with the feminist notion of a subversive narrative.

1.5 Lydia Davis and Women Innovators

The mission to reclaim women innovators faces a twofold challenge: Recovering 80 years of women's experimental writing and moving beyond to expand the horizon for feminist discourse. The goal is not only to empower women who write, but to enable a fruitful discussion about women writers, without letting differentiation reduce women to stereotypes and victimhood. How then to talk about "the woman writer" and what is the relationship between Lydia Davis's textual practice and gender politics? As Toril Moi and Kaye Mitchell, among others, have demonstrated, "the woman writer" is a term that has been much maligned. Writers about whom the term is frequently used have themselves rejected it. And yet the term survives in critical discourse, presumably because it is thought to be useful when discussing a particular sub-set of fiction. In terms of literature, feminist critics recovered women writers by

“finding the woman in the text” and sought muted themes of women writers (Friedman and Fuchs 3). In consequence, emphasis on the author’s biography and psychology overlooked the broader achievements of narratives.

The question of authorial signature paralyzed questions on women and writing, Moi notes (259). The essay “Death of the Author” by Roland Barthes, published in 1968, provoked an intellectual tug of war in feminist theory. On one side was the reclamation of women’s literary history. On the other was the denial of the author as a figure of meaning and power. This opposition is further rooted in the conflict between essentialism and anti-essentialism, splitting second- and third-wave feminists. In fact, both illustrate a phallogocentric drive to lay down requirements for what women’s writing should be like. Moi’s inquiry is based on Simone de Beauvoir’s philosophy of “The Other”. Moi depicts the dilemma many contemporary women writers face: choosing between writing as a woman or as a universal human being (266). The aim of this the critical discussion is not to propose a cure for the theoretical malaise in feminist theory, but to rekindle questions on gender politics and literature.

Friedman and Fuchs, pioneers in feminist discussions on literary experimentation, argue that the world, and its literature, are dominated by patriarchal values such as rationality and linearity (3). In their outline, plot linearity refers to a story’s crucial conflict and the purposeful movement towards closure. Narratives are often told by a single, authoritative storyteller and contain well-motivated characters acting in recognizable social patterns. Playing with dominant forms can thus be an attack on the existing social structure and the patriarchal mastery in Western culture (4). It produces an alternate fictional space in which “the feminine, marginalized in traditional fiction and patriarchal culture, can be expressed” (4). The new fictional space is governed by multiplicity and difference. To Jardine, breaking traditional forms is in itself a way of “writing feminine” (61). Conversely, critics, men and women alike, have proposed that feminine writing has been accomplished by mainly by men. Jardine also observes a general resistance among modernist and feminist theorists to acknowledge the similarities between their projects (61). Several aspects of Davis’s textual practice, such as the play with traditional forms and the reluctance to be labelled, echo Woolf, who was dissatisfied with the novel as a vehicle to express women’s experiences (Friedman and Fuchs 4). In this thesis, I extend this argument to Davis’s fiction, exploring how she challenges dominant perceptions of storytelling, making a new contribution to the conversation on gender politics and experimental writing.

2 Experimental Narrative Techniques and the Minimalist Story.

The most striking feature in some of Lydia Davis's stories is their extreme brevity, as many contain two sentences or less. Hence, Winther suggests that minimal stories operate only with a minimum of the building blocks we expect to find in fiction (133). For Davis, as for other minimalist writers, the minimal dependence on plot has become the trademark of her signature style. The focus on everyday situations, where seemingly simple external details suggest complex inner states and a sense of what is incommunicable, shows that Davis is influenced by the Chekhovian tradition of the modern short story (May 201-202). It is, however, not possible to fully unite her style with the minimalist short story, where the lives of characters are often experienced as random and stories are open-ended in terms of theme (Winther 134-135). In this chapter I explore her narrative strategies in a selection of stories, focusing central structural devices such as ellipsis, narrative closure and the epiphany. The aim is to explore how Davis employs these traditional techniques in order to produce new ways of reading and writing stories.

Being full of contradictions, Davis's stories include a wider range of techniques beyond the plot omission and thematic ambiguity central to the minimalist story. One illustration is the sometimes elaborate and reflexive style, which makes it difficult to classify her as a minimalist writer. In fact, a single sentences may be longer than her shortest stories, as in "Betrayal":

In her fantasies about other men, as she grew older, about men other than her husband, she no longer dreamed of sexual intimacy, as she once had, perhaps for revenge, when she was angry, perhaps out of loneliness, when he was angry, but only of an affection and a profound sort of understanding, a holding of hands and a gazing into eyes, often in a public place like a café.
(316-317)

On the other hand, minimal stories such as "Collaboration with Fly", "Samuel Johnson is Indignant" and "Spring Spleen", contain a minimum of a story's building blocks and raise important questions about storiness. Rimmon-Kenan stresses a story's three principles of organization, namely temporal succession, causality and inversion, which includes narrative closure (18). Accordingly, "Collaboration with Fly" contains only one narrative event and complicates Rimmon-Kenan's definition. Though causality and closure may be the most interesting features of stories, she admits, temporal succession of narrative events is a minimal requirement for a string of events to form a story (19). "Collaboration with Fly" only

has one marker of temporal succession, namely: “I put that word on the page, but he added the apostrophe” (508). The two forms of past tense mark in fact that there is a temporal succession of two separate narrative events. In other words, a fly landing on a page is a microscopic event, but it is per definition a story.

In “Samuel Johnson Is Indignant”, traditional story elements such as the climax and the ending are pressed into one clause, adding to Rimmon-Kenan’s argument. The story lacks a sequence of events and descriptions of setting. Still, the declarative sentence represents a microscopic plot as it contains a sense of causality. In fact, “Samuel Johnson Is Indignant” consists only of one relative clause: “that Scotland has so few trees” (353). The relative pronoun “that” could be replaced with “because”, but this is not needed to make sense of the story. In this sense, the causal marker is slant, as the reader can read causality into the story. Although some might find it farfetched to call this string of words a story, I still insist that its narrow focus has a sense of unity and compression. From a grammatical perspective, the full sentence, including the title, might even be considered two narrative events. The unique focus is also in accordance with Poe and Matthews’s outline that stories must have “a single character, a single event, a single emotion or the series of emotions called forth by a single situation” (73). From this perspective, Davis is at the heart of the short story genre. While maneuvering the genre, she explores its limits and possibilities.

The story “Spring Spleen” also has the structure of an anecdotal observation made by an extradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator. Here, the observing “I” watches at a distance, from what we can assume is a window or a garden. She exclaims: “I am happy the leaves are growing large so quickly. Soon they will hide the neighbor and her screaming child” (444). The time adjunct “soon” marks the temporal succession of the two events. In terms of causality, however, the narrative events are loosely linked. On the surface, the events of this fragment have little apparent significance. Ferguson on the other hand, claims that they suggest a “deep level at which themes of profound human import are developed” (223). In this sense, the sequence of events suggests a causal link between the narrator’s contentment, the growing leaves and their ability to cover the neighbor and her screaming child. As Winther signals, thematic ambiguity is typical of the minimalist story (134-135). Davis disposes with several of a story’s building blocks, making no detail superfluous. There is a story to tell and the playful open-endedness might surprise, upset or even annoy the reader.

2.1 Narration, Impressionism and Mood

In terms of narration, Davis's work ranges from self-reflexive first-person narratives to stories where the narrative voice is almost absent. The narrators can both be extradiegetic-heterodiegetic and extradiegetic-homodiegetic. Typically, they are covert in the shortest stories, but not necessarily. According to Rimmon-Kenan, the narrator's absence from the story usually grants a higher narratorial authority and 'omniscience', though she admits this might be an exaggerated term (96). Still, the extradiegetic narrator possesses a familiarity with character's inner thoughts and emotions. This is the case in "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant", where the extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator is outside the narrated events. Yet the whole story is a subjective evaluation of Samuel Johnson's state of mind. Apart from this comment, the shortness indicates a covert narrator, as no other words reveal the narrator's perceptibility.

It is possible to imagine that an absent narrator would make the narrative events stand out, particularly when the plot is as scarce as in the stories discussed above. Nonetheless, the reflexive style steers the main focus from the tale to the teller. By a sharp narrowing of the story's plot lines, Clark points out that the remaining fragments often contain defined and quaint details of circumstantiated struggles (387). In this case, the narrator may seem more interesting than the narrative events. Not only does the narrator become more visible when other traditional elements have been omitted, the scarce details reveal the narrator's strange nature. In the title, the word "Indignant" indicates a problem, leading to a logic resolution as to why he feels this way. Conversely, the narrator only provides a quaint observation about Scotland. Whether this type of narrator can be classified as overt is debatable. It is nevertheless questionable how perceptible the narrator can be in such a short fragment. Rimmon-Kenan argues that overt narrators provide subjective definitions of characters, reports of what characters did not think or say, pass judgement and make generalizations (97-101). In terms of perceptibility, the extradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator's presence in "Collaboration with Fly" is interestingly both overt in her indifference and covert in her extreme brevity. Davis's narrators have the tendency to explicitly state the source of their struggles. Toibín notes: "Often in these stories, the woman speaking or describing or narrating has no self-protection. She is all nerves in her way of noticing. Certain things bother her, such as men (often husbands or ex-husbands), children (she can be tender, however, about babies),

animals, parents” (par. 6). This point arguably deviates from what Winther suggests about thematic ambiguity and the minimalist story (135).

Yet the deliberate open-endedness allows the narrator to portray intense impressions and observations, rather than moral fables. Similarly, Ferguson claims the modern short story is a manifestation of impressionism rather than a discrete genre (228). The modern short story and novel share the same characteristics of literary impressionism, she insists (218). These features include limited point of view, focus on inner experience, plot ellipsis, reliance on metaphor, rejecting chronology and foregrounding style (219). As I will discuss, these are all features prominent in Davis’s fiction. It is useful to consider Ferguson’s notion of literary impressionism in relation to what Baldeshwiler calls “The Lyric Short Story”. Driven by internal changes, this type of story often has open endings and the figurative language of the poem (231). This feature is particularly visible in Davis’s use of titles. One of the two clauses in “Samuel Johnson Is Indignant”, is the title. Critics often discuss Davis’s concern with language and form. Alexander points out that her extensive focus on language and attention to rhythm are suggestive of poetry (165), which might be why she is often found in the poetry sections of bookstores (Boddy 220). It is not a coincidence, Davis admits in an interview, having grown up with intense attention to the form and functions of language. Cohen suggests that this allows Davis to void any attempt to decode the hidden figures of her stories (507). As a result, Davis is difficult to categorize, because she explores the confusing the distinctions between poem and story.

According to Baldeshwiler, the chief requisite of a lyrical short story is that the narrative shifts locus from external plot to inner life. She also emphasizes the exact balance between realistic detail and delicate suggestiveness (236-237). Ferguson presents an important objection, namely that ellipsis demands a more attentive reader, “conscious of narrative technique and style as keys to meaning” (227). As the close readings show, omitted plot elements sometimes invite the reader to resonate and take part in the narrator’s quest to figure it out. In “Spring Spleen”, the two individual clauses could be reformulated: “I am happy the leaves are growing large so quickly because they will hide the neighbor and her screaming child” (444), which would crystallize the narrator’s intention and narrow the story’s meaning. The significance of this technique is not only the freedom of interpretation, but the narrator’s refusal to explain. Ferguson observes that “the reader must to some extent construct this hypothetical plot in order for the actual story to seem meaningful” (222). This

underlines that the impressionistic short story relies as much on the reader's impression to make scarce external details come alive.

The narrative events are often struggles, or simply observations that puzzle the narrator. In "Collaboration with Fly", the narrator's writing process is interrupted by a fly landing on her page: "I put that word on the page, but he added the apostrophe" (508). With almost cryptic brevity, the empty pronoun slots and the apostrophe's indication of ownership allow for a spectrum of potential interpretations. Evidently in this case, the most important narrative event is the fly's feces on her page, changing the sentence. The reader may still be amused by how something so small can change the meaning of the word. It seems like collaboration between nature's hazard and language. Davis suggests that her own poetics of fiction marks a return to "the real" and "the attempt to see and say", with reference to Beckett (qtd. in Perloff 212). In this attempt, the story's significance is perhaps not the action, but the narrator's act of observation.

The discussion of literary impressionism reinforces May's observation that the modern short story perceives experience and characters according to mood (200). For Davis, the story's mood brings an illusion of causality. The exclamation "I am happy the leaves are growing large so quickly", along with the perception that spring brings new life, might suggest growth and relief. Instead, the narrator is content with isolation, changing the mood drastically from light to gloomy. Given that Davis is an acclaimed translator of French literature, the title "Spring Spleen" could also be an allusion to Baudelaire's poem "Spleen" from *Les Fleurs du Mal* published in 1857. This aspect stresses the melancholy and bitterness further. The contrast between "happy" and "spleen" echoes someone who is forcibly annoyed, but still sees the bright side of things. Ironically, the growing leaves will not prevent the narrator from hearing the screaming child, if the screaming is the source of her nuisance. The story's mood is quickly perceived through the title and adjectives like "happy" and "screaming". Still, there are several gaps the reader must fill in. One illustration is the physical separation between the "I" and the apparent object of her frustration. How individual readers interpret the causal relations in this story, ultimately affects the perception of its mood. Is the "I" happy because she or he wants to be alone in general or does the sight of the mother and screaming child upset her? May is right to point out the priority of mood over plot, but does not discuss how the omission of traditional story elements affects a story's mood. For the microscopic stories discussed in this section, the absence of a larger frame of

story arguably destabilizes the mood, making it difficult for the reader to decipher the meaning of the story.

2.2 The End of the Story: Narrative Disclosure and Its Effects

Stories by Davis typically have a meticulous need for structure. Often they proceed via systematic analysis of a phrase, an emotion or an object. Karen Alexander has dealt extensively with the role of structure in Davis's fiction, suggesting that analysis is a compositional method (166). This method points to the self and emotions as things that elude analysis. Alexander demonstrates that the desire for structure is the backbone of the story's structural design. Characters often make use of analytic processes in attempts to come to terms with painful or confusing aspects of their lives. Alexander is right to note that the title "Break It Down", given to a collection and one of her stories, is emblematic of Davis's fiction (166). The characteristic method includes various techniques such as taking notes in "Almost No Memory" (259-261), controlling emotions in "What I Feel" (273-274) or the problem of defining equality in a marriage in "Finances" (470), to mention a few relevant examples. Moreover, the need for order ultimately crystallizes the expectation that narrative closure will take place. In this sense, the story's form and purposeful movement forward are determined by the narrator's logical reasoning.

If we consider the narrative voices isolated from the story's context, the tone is often curious, investigative and inquiring. The repeated sequences might suggest someone observing the nuisances and pleasures of everyday life with a curious and sometimes ironic eye, or simply overthinking troubles. This is also illustrated by the excessive use of the opposite binaries "right and wrong" in "How He Is Often Right" (270), and "boring and interesting" in the story "Boring Friends" (313). Similarly, the need for order is key in the microscopic story "Tropical Storm": "Like a tropical storm, I, too, may one day become 'better organized'" (520). Ironically, a tropical storm cannot become better organized, neither can the narrator control the forces of nature. In sum, the narrators use rational explanations, binary opposites and logic reasoning to make sense of their problems. The result is often comic or unsatisfactory. Yet, the focus is on language play and its inability to explain, rather than on the morality of characters or scientific facts. The method ultimately reveals a paradox

between the desire for structure and the impossibility of complete order. From this perspective, it spoofs the dominant rationalist mindset it purports to describe.

Another narrative technique that may elude obsessional behavior is the continuous repetition of words in the story “A Mown Lawn”. The story opens with: “She hated a *mown lawn*. Maybe that was because *mow* was the reverse of *wom*, the beginning of the name of what she was – a *woman*. A *mown lawn* had a sad sound to it, like a *long moan*” (314). Arguably, the wordplay has serious undertones, set by words such as “hate” and “sad”. The reader feels the tension between this woman a man, and the woman and her perception of being a woman. Again, as Perloff notes, Davis’s real subject is the question of interpreting enigmatic content (208). What may appear as meaningless repetition of letters makes perfect sense to the narrator. In a similar tone, the story “We Miss You: A Study of Get-Well Letters from a Class of Fourth- Graders” analyses the language of schoolchildren in the form of an academic study. It contains various subheadings such as “Overall Coherence” and “Formulaic Expressions of Sympathy”. Yet there is a contrast between the scholarly tone and the actual content, which is full of life. In sum, the narrator shows that something simple and common can become the object of fascination and curiosity.

Eventually, the study fails to produce a viable result and narrative closure. This confirms Perloff’s suggestion that the narrative events eventually fade away and the puzzle itself becomes the narrator’s obsession (208). Davis turns the focus away from the situation and inward towards the narrator’s reflexive nature. Farris is thus right to claim that Davis’s narrators end up with more questions than answers (122). As Siddhartha Deb points out: “Against all expectations, Davis coaxes idiosyncrasies of personality and society from a dry subject, but ultimately the writer’s intelligence and expertise are more memorable than the character studies conducted through laboratory samples of language” (par. 6). All this considered, the attempt to use language to understand the self, other people and the relationship between language and the world, surfaces as one of Davis’ recurring themes.

Gerlach is one of several critics who have questioned how minimalist short stories establish narrative closure. He asserts, according to Winther, that “a story has to achieve closure on the level of narrative for it to be experienced as a story rather than, say, a mere sketch, or a set of random impressions” (136). Winther describes the compressed form as “the impulse to forsake narrative, its linear movement, causality, suspense, and end-direction in favor of a single complex image or a series of images without causal relations”. This form allows the reader to grasp the story in one sitting, as Poe envisaged (144-145). Providing a

solution to the initial problem is a prominent sign of narrative closure (Winther 136). To complicate matters, the reader may conclude that the problem is unsolvable, which in turn produces a sense of narrative closure, Gerlach adds (8-7). Even if this aspect fails to produce closure in the traditional sense, Gerlach aims to make readers more aware of how the anticipation of closure affects the story's structure and how readers experience it (160).

Davis's only novel *The End of the Story*, along with a large number of her stories, suggests a general reluctance to find closure. Some may even interpret them as what Gerlach describes as; a set of random impressions (Winther 136). Further, the reflexive style may be problematic and cause confusion for some readers. Skeptical critics such as Alexander claim that the "excessive dependence upon ordering systems bears the risks of straying into absurdity" (172). In a similar line of thought, Cohen concludes: "Davis's fiction repeatedly carries us across an elaborate often labyrinthine logical and emotional pathway only to leave both narrator and reader in ignorance" (507). What this conclusion overlooks however, is that the lack of insight and closure are important constituents of Davis's formal innovation. As Winther appropriately points out, unfulfilled desires are an eternal source of story (141).

The twist endings in "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant", "Collaboration with Fly" and "Spring Spleen" contribute to an effect of mystery and puzzlement. They could even be interpreted as deliberate play with the reader's expectations. Even so, what Davis achieves with this short string of words is not clear cut. Although these stories answer to who, what and why, their short form conveys a mood of estrangement. One of the omitted plot elements in "Samuel Johnson is Indignant", why this man cares about the trees in Scotland, illuminates this point. Here, Davis brings imagination into play. To some readers, this observation may come as a humorous surprise. Others might find the content of this story confusing and uninteresting, as with any piece of literature. Still, it is worth considering Ian Reid's point that some surprise endings are ways to "elucidate meanings latent in the whole narrative", and not exclusively manipulative devices (60).

Nevertheless, the passage "laughter is always preceded by surprise" (628) from the story "What You Learn About the Baby", demonstrates how Davis employs humor in her stories. Knight explains, "Davis has carved out a singular space – minimalist, poetic, philosophical, and self-reflexive – that doesn't easily fit into the categories of short fiction generally encountered in North America" (526). From this perspective, it is tempting to label her playful style with Poe's term "ingenuity". Still, it may seem counterintuitive to use a 200-year-old definition to describe something that forges new ways of thinking. Also, as I

underline in this chapter, Davis goes beyond the minimalist tradition in short fiction. In the following sections, I will thus replace the term “ingenuity” by the term “formal innovation”, to designate the originality of Davis’s textual practice.

In “A Mown Lawn”, the linguistic swirl ends on a note of finality: “Let the *lawman* have the *mown lawn*, she said. Or the *moron*, the *lawn moron*”. The narrator eventually circles back to the initial letters she started with. Then, the declarative sentence presents a sense of finality and accumulating insight. In this case, the ending combines closure and open-endedness, providing an illusion of closure. Ultimately, the method of breaking things down is “a powerful, if imperfect, means for grasping them as a whole”, Alexander claims (175). With this narrative strategy, Davis signals that it might be desirable to measure the story with other criteria than the traditional sense of closure and dénouement. Hence, Davis’s textual practice develops new ways of interpretation, apart from a sense of rational closure. In turn, this observation confirms Clark’s argument that the twentieth-century short story “insists on new ways of reading as it inscribes new ways of knowing and telling” (393).

Rimmon-Kenan lists narrative closure as one of the three chief components of a story (18). Chekhov once remarked: “I think that when one has finished writing a short story one should delete the beginning and the end” (qtd. in Gerlach 63). Gerlach attempts to make readers more aware of how stories and the reader’s experience of them, are structured by the anticipation of completion in all of its various forms, in space, in time, and at the level of theme and idea. He further claims “the short story is that genre where the anticipation of the ending is always present” and this anticipation structures the whole (160). Poe contributes to this conception by accentuating the dénouement, or closure, where strands of the plot drawn together and explained to resolve matters. He underlines, “It is only with the dénouement constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence” (67). As I have already stated, it might be outdated to apply Poe’s traditional sense of narrative to Davis’s playful style. It is thus questionable whether an “indispensable air of consequence” requires a tight plot that leads to narrative closure. From this view, Davis rejecting culminating decisive endings is rather in line with the lyrical short story (Baldeshwiler 231). The sense of consequence lies not in the narrative events, but in the internal and psychological processes of the characters.

Farris suggests that Davis’s analytic method actually multiplies the problem rather than solving it. In terms of narrative closure, this implies that “without resolution of the problem, the story, truly can never end” (128). Her claim that narrative closure in Davis’s

fiction is “ceremonial” is an extension of Cohen’s argument that “the narrator turns to the ceremony in the absence of an image or revelation to resolve the story” (514). In this quote, Cohen refers specifically to *The End of the Story*. Farris on the other hand, extends his argument to all short fiction by Davis. Though her argument about “ceremonial closure” is a compelling one, it overlooks how Davis alternates and plays with the epiphany as a structural device. This aspect should be considered, largely because the epiphany affects narrative closure to a great extent. If narrative closure is “ceremonial”, as she claims, then the epiphany must be some form of ritual, as I will discuss in the following section.

2.3 The Power of Not Knowing: Epiphany and the Quest to Understand Emotions

Epiphanies represent moments of sudden insight and reveal a quest for meaning and unfulfilled desires. James Joyce’s notion of a “sudden spiritual manifestation in which the whatness of a common object or gesture appears radiant to the observer” has long been the cornerstone of our understanding of the short story genre (Baldick). Epiphanies represent a turning point in the narrative, when causality is subverted and plot elements deleted, Ferguson adds (225). In a similar line of thought, for minimalist short stories, “one unreasoning moment of longing” is a powerful synonym to describe the diffuse desire characters experience, Winther specifies (137). The narrator’s exclamation in “Story”, that: “I try to figure it out” (5), among others, appropriately illustrates this unreasoning moment of longing. Baldeshwiler stresses that the epiphany is an important structural device, as it supposed to reflect and resolve emotional complexities (236). Still, the term’s notion of ontological insight is debatable.

Clark seems justified in challenging the hegemony of the epiphany as a structuring device in the contemporary short story (387). Clark’s main argument suggests that lack of closure can be seen as an expression of disillusionment in the quest for ontological insight, formerly provided by the epiphany. In addition, Thomas M. Leitch cites examples from Melville, Hemingway and James to prove that their stories are closer to disillusionment than revealing ontological insight (Clark 388). In other words, narrative disclosure takes over the epiphany’s traditional role as a structuring device. Though her argument is a compelling one, Clark fails to explain how disillusionment creates structure, neither does she provide relevant examples. She is nevertheless right to point out that stories must be approached on new terms

when they no longer depend on the traditional epiphany to create cohesion and meaning (390). Correspondingly, innovative critics in feminist theory and the short story genre, stress the urgency to develop new and less criteria from which we can interpret literature.

Alexander, Farris and Perloff address the apparent need for structure in Davis's stories. However, neither of them consider this quality in relation to the epiphany as a structuring device. Several aspects of Davis' textual practice, such as the interrogative method, omission and absent causal markers, are particularly relevant in relation to the critical discussion on the epiphany. If the narrator's quest to solve a puzzle drives the narrative towards closure, then the reader expects a resolution. This may be more apparent here, than in a story driven by plot. Because Davis's interrogative method fails to provide the viable answers characters search for, it often leads to unfulfilled expectations. However, this is not to say that Davis abandons the epiphany as a structural device completely. Generally, the desire for structure and insight is the driving force in her stories. It is thus necessary to discuss whether these stories achieve epiphanies and a sense of closure in alternative ways.

The story "A Second Chance" explores themes of regret through a reverse structure of the epiphany. It opens with the narrator's epiphany: "If only I had a chance to learn from my mistakes, I would, but there are too many things you don't do twice; in fact the most important things are things you don't do twice, so you can't do them better a second time" (256). The narrator is clearly regretful, but recognizes the impossibility of undoing these mistakes. Davis flips the sequence of events by introducing the resolution first, and then complicating it with the narrator's reflexive reasoning. The reasoning includes a series of reflections on the things she will never get to do twice, such as getting married at eighteen, bringing a child from a first marriage into a second marriage with the same ill-tempered man. If her mother was to die a second time, she would remember to ask for a private room and not have her ashes sent in an airmail container. By this time, the reader is completely caught up in the narrator's act of interpretation. In a reasoning tone, she seems to attack the rational conception that people learn from their mistakes. Despite this critique, the quest for knowledge remains the story's structural backbone.

Each story by Davis touches a different nerve, but puzzling details tend to be in focus. Often the narrator observes, from a woman's perspective, familiar situations in domestic life, but reveals their estrangement and frustration. In his essay "On Writing", Raymond Carver made the following remark: "It's possible, in a poem or short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language to endow those

things – a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman’s earring – with immense, even startling power” (275). Similarly, objects such as the painting in “Les Bluets” or the fly in “Collaborations with Fly”, to mention some, are all made radiant to the observer. Perloff calls the effect “at once totally familiar and yet rigidly defamiliarized” (211). The objects are common, but the narrator reveals their enigma and sense of mystery. On the other hand, it is also possible to argue that the reflexive style turns the focus inwards, away from the objects that first sparked the puzzle.

In the story “What I Feel”, the narrator wants to control her emotions, so they are not the center of everything. Then, the method of examining her own emotional life spirals out of control. By this point, the conflict between pathos and logos boils down to a panic attack: “there is no comfort anywhere, just me alone down here, I will never calm myself enough to sleep, never sleep, never be able to go on to the next day, I can’t possibly go on, I can’t live, even through the next minute” (273). The passage depicts an intense loneliness and the destructiveness of controlling behavior. Eventually, the narrator reflects on the inability to change certain aspects of her life: “it is curious how you can see that an idea is absolutely true and correct and yet not believe it deeply enough to act on it. So I still act as though my feelings were the center of everything, and they still cause me to end up alone by the living-room window at night” (274). Characteristic of Davis, the story is structured as a series of running thoughts. At its center is the inability to let things go, rather than a traditional sequence of events leading towards closure. As Perloff suggests, the narrative events eventually fade away and the puzzle itself becomes the narrator’s obsession (208). Luring the reader’s attention into an emotional spiral, her feelings ultimately become the “center of everything” (274). This story arguably complicates Baldeshwiler’s point that the epiphany is a tool to reflect and resolve emotional complexities (236).

In more conventional short stories, the epiphany usually takes place towards the end of the narrative. “A Second Chance” on the other hand, provides the epiphany first and then the reasoning that led to the insight. The reverse epiphany breaks up the sequence of events, challenging our notion of what a story is and what it does. Clark is right to point out that stories become something else altogether and must be approached on new terms, if they no longer depend on epiphanies to create cohesion and meaning (390). Post-epiphany, she proposes to explore the problems of reflexive selfhood linguistically. For Davis, language use to better understand the self and others surfaces as the goal of a great number of stories. Even so, perhaps to Clark’s surprise, Davis’s linguistic play does not produce stories that stray into

disillusionment. Instead, the playful style and the quest for insight are closely linked, almost manically. As a result, Davis is reversing the traditional formula of the epiphany.

As the epiphany's notion of ontological insight is debatable, it is more relevant to consider her stories as imbued with a sense of wonder and mystery (Winther 138). The self-reflexive method reveals a longing for insight, answers or stable meanings. One way to approach Davis's stories, then, is that the quest for epiphany becomes the center of the story. Looking back at Farris's argument about ceremonial closure (128), the quest for epiphany becomes ritualistic rather than conclusive. In this view, the epiphany remains a powerful structural device, though it does not provide narrative closure in the same sense as traditional stories. This approach also supports Winther's argument about the quest for epiphany as a function of desire in minimalist stories (133). For Davis, the sense of mystery lies in the way characters reason and not in what they find out. This becomes apparent in Davis's striking attention to physical and linguistic detail. Towards the end of a story, the reader may ask, why is this character reasoning in this peculiar way, and not what he or she achieves.

Furthermore, the desire to compartmentalize feelings and material content is specifically discussed in her essay "Les Bluets". First, the nature of the essay requires some comment. *Poetry*, who published the text in 1973, called it an essay, but what makes this an essay and not a story is debatable. In terms of structure, the text has an extradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator, mostly overt. Then, the sequence of narrative events leads to an epiphany and turning point where the narrator learns to accept and be bewildered by the opacity of life. Once again, the narrator is in a landscape where logos reigns: "I like to understand things and tend to ask questions of myself or another person until there is nothing left that I do not understand" (552). One day her conception is challenged when learning that an abstract painting actually depicts the landscape in the French village Vétueil. To her, the discovery that an abstract painting can contain references to a real subject matter is a catalyst that sparks a series of epiphanies:

Two things happened at once: the painting abruptly went beyond itself, lost its solitariness, acquired a relationship to fields, to flowers; and it changed from something I understood into something I did not understand, a mystery, a problem. . . . Eventually I began to find answers to my questions, but they were not complete answers, and after a time I did not feel the need for complete answers, because I saw that part of the force of the painting was that it continued to elude explanation. (551)

The concluding line of the essay, "it was this new tolerance for, and then satisfaction in, the unexplained and unsolved that marked a change in me" (552) describes how a great number

of narrators are driven by curiosity and the unknown. Whereas the narrators in other stories try to make sense of quaint situations from everyday life, this essay addresses the role of enigma and the unexplainable in the interpretation of art specifically. The essay presents a clash between the need for order and art's inability to explain. Thus, the fascination with what is illogical and unexplained surfaces as a parameter through which the reader can interpret Davis's stories. As Winther explains, minimalist stories typically circle around a more or less precise moment when the aspiration for insight is experienced as unfulfilled by the character. This moment is often linked to an experience of "bafflement, an extraordinary image or scene perceived but not understood, producing a sense of enigma" (135). Hence, "Les Bluets" transcends the limits between essay and story, making it difficult to classify. In this sense, as an extension of Clark's argument, Lydia Davis invents new criteria from which we can read stories, where the ultimate goal is not rational closure, but the satisfaction, humor and mystery created in the fictional space that celebrates enigma.

2.4 Storytelling as a Vehicle for Reconciliation and Growth

In minimalist short fiction, omission tends to reveal problems of communication. Davis's playful language is ideal to study what Clark describes as "the insufficient word" and "broken conversation" (390). Sarraute coined the term *tropism* to illustrate the invisible mechanisms silences when we communicate. In chapter XI of *Tropisms*, she writes: "She had understood the secret. She had scented the hiding place of what should be the real treasure for everybody. She knew the 'scale of values'" (40). As in several of Davis's stories, Sarraute opens with an epiphany that unravels into self-reflexivity: "Everything 'intellectual'. She had to have it. For her. For her, because now she knew the real value of things" (41). The sudden insight is about the struggle to assert herself the intellectual circles of the bourgeoisie: "Nothing of what belonged to them was going to escape her: picture galleries, all the new books. . . . She knew all that" (40). Curiously, Sarraute's fragment could have been titled as Davis's story "What She Knew". The fragment clearly contains tension, but what she knows exactly is only alluded to through reflexive language play and irony. Similarly, in "What She Knew", the narrator alludes to the difficulty of being a young woman flirting with young men:

People did not know what she knew, that she was not really a woman but a man, often a fat man, but more often, probably an old man. The fact that she was an old man made it hard for her to be a young woman. It was hard for her to talk to a young man, for instance, though the

young man was clearly interested in her. She had to ask herself, Why is this young man flirting with this old man? (32)

The narrator claims that that the “she”, the main character of the story, is actually “an old man”. In doing so, the narrator hints at what she is unable to state, namely what makes it hard for her to be a young woman (32). The retaining and yet self-ironic tone, arguably recalls Sarraute’s narrator. There is a distance between the extradiegetic-heterodiegetic voice, the woman character and an opposite “they”. In both stories, the counterpart is male. For Davis, the struggle is flirting with a young man, whereas Sarraute’s narrator attempts to infiltrate the intellectual and cultural patriarchy of the bourgeoisie. For both stories, the term *tropisms* adequately illustrates the interior movements within and between characters. These invisible mechanisms challenge what Winther outlines about minimalist fiction, as they attempt to describe what is not there (133). Shaw notes:

Sometimes it is not the characters, but the author who is silent, leaving things unsaid and unexplained, partly because of the demands of the form he has chosen to work in, but also – and more importantly – because he wants to convey a view of life in which things felt but left unstated have value. . . . The short story’s success often lies in conveying a sense of unwritten, or even unwritable things. (264)

A great number of stories by Davis examine problems of communication between people in various kinds of relationships. Though Davis has multiple techniques to convey a sense of the unsayable, the self-reflexive indirect discourse dominates. The story “They Take Turns Using a Word They Like”, is one of the rare instances of direct dialogue. In its shortness, it properly illustrates the “insufficient word”: “‘It’s *extraordinary*’ says one woman. ‘It *is* extraordinary,’ says the other” (403). The extradiegetic and heterodiegetic narrator is seemingly covert and only present in the title. Yet her observation of the two women is overtly smug and humorous. In this case, the mimetic quality of direct discourse adds irony and gives the reader the impression of overhearing the conversation. The fact that Davis often writes about characters struggling find the language for how they feel makes it is questionable whether the two women are filling a void of silence. Though the observation may not have any serious undertones in this case, it remains a humorous point about language and its flaws. Perloff writes about Davis: “In the “scramble system” that is ours, their stories imply, the word can never approximate the world. And yet – each and every language event continues to yearn for such an approximation” (213). In a similar line of thought, Winther claims that for minimalist short fiction, the failure to communicate reflects a distrust in language per se (134). This becomes apparent in the final sentence of “Story”. Anxious because her husband has not

come home, the narrator exclaims: “How capable he is of deceiving me in the act and after the act in the telling” (6). In familiar style, the initial problem unravels and multiplies. As Farris notes, it is no longer the facts that are in question, but the telling of the facts and the fictionalization of reality (124). In this sense, the telling cannot be trusted, as the word fails to approximate the world (Perloff 213). These stories illustrate that although language may be flawed and insufficient, it is the most important tool characters have to solve the enigma and create meaning.

“The Seals” is a moving self-investigation of grief by someone who has lost two family members during one summer. The narrator is extradiegetic and homodiegetic, mostly overt. These factors invite the reader to make subjective judgements about her character, signaling that her grief will be the center of the story. Already in the first lines, themes of absence and the inexplicable occur. The narrator is particularly troubled by the death of her fourteen-year older sister: “Maybe you miss someone even more when you can’t figure out what your relationship was. Or when it seemed unfinished” (147). She continually attempts to define their relationship: “Why those animal-themed presents?”, “What was my place in her life?” (150). The unanswered questions mark a distance, revealing how years of complicated family history have shaped their relationship. The narrative is told in retrospect. It alternates between her earliest memories with her sister, the summer they both died, the first New Year after they died and the moment of writing in the present tense. In the moment of writing, the narrator is on a train, about to arrive at an unnamed destination. Meanwhile, indications such as “it was so many years ago” (168), indicate that she has had time to process these events.

Issues of inarticulateness between the two sisters are underlined by references to blindness and sensation, such as: “when her eyes rested on me, I wasn’t sure she saw me” and “The sensation would come over me suddenly, an emptiness, as if I didn’t even exist” (150). Though the narrator used to find talking difficult (161), she has somehow found the vocabulary to make sense of the unsayable. She exclaims: “we wouldn’t have to talk, we wouldn’t even have to look at each other, but it would be a comfort just to have her there” (158). Perhaps then, the act of talking is secondary to the internal connection between the two sisters. This demonstrates what Perloff named the failure of the word to approximate the world (213). In addition, the use of modals indicate a sense of regret. The narrator wished she had said: “Yes, there were problems, our relationship was difficult to understand, and complicated, but still, I would like just to have you sitting there on the daybed” (159). This epiphany arguably represents a turning point in the narrative. Then, a sensational closeness

replaces the verbal communication: “She would put her hand on my shoulder and let it rest there for a while, so that I felt it warmer and warmer through the cotton of my shirt. I sensed then that she did love me in a way that wouldn’t change, whatever her mood might be” (159). This simple gesture of wordless communication could be described with Sarraute’s term *tropism*. Still the attempt to introduce nonverbal moments into the narrative, a system which solely relies on language, illustrates a paradox (Brée 271). The effect is a sensibility suggestive of poetry. Sarraute relates the poetic sensibility in her texts to the limits between poetry and prose. About her own writing, she exclaims: “It’s written in prose, and yet it’s poetry, because it’s the sensation that is carried across by way of the language” (156). In this sense, though language is flawed; it is not the only tool available to communicate and make sense of reality.

As in other stories by Davis, the narrator’s interior monologue is therapeutic on a deeper level. The sister’s death sparks a series of epiphanies: “Once she was gone, every memory was suddenly precious” and “Suddenly, after she was gone, things of hers became more valuable” (156). The attempt to recreate her sister and father’s presence reflects back and reveals her own isolation and loneliness: “I still sometimes think, with a pang of longing, before I realize what I’m thinking, that some older woman I see somewhere, about fourteen years older, will take care of me” (150). The passage denotes the closeness and comfort of their relationship, but also the distance, now that she is dead. However, the closeness might also be a construct in the narrator’s imagination. Comments such as: “I don’t know if I’m remembering that or making it up” (169) and “twist the facts optimistically” (153) underline the subjective nature of her account, pointing back to the distrust in language discussed previously. This is reinforced by the narrator’s choice not to share her grief with other people: “I did not want to share her, I did not want to hear a stranger say something about her. . . . To stay with her, in my mind, to remain with her, was not easy, since it was all in my mind” (156). The various strategies discussed arguably maintain an illusion of closeness with her sister.

Presents play a central role in the story, particularly the ones given by her sister. When verbal communication and emotional connection fail, material generosity becomes an important source to understand her sister’s affection. Also, her sister was known for her generosity, preparing meals for friends and opening her house to strangers (157). Here the sister is characterized as a warm and compassionate person, which makes the reader question whether the narrator is in fact the one to blame for the failure in communication. The narrator

lives alone and enjoys having “everything the way I want it” (162). She claims the presents from her sister hint at her isolation: “A board game – there was that optimism again. . . giving me something that required another person” (161-162). The story’s title refers to her last present, a pair of white seals filled with charcoal to absorb odors in the fridge. Arguably, these presents reveal the narrator solitary nature: “I guess she thought that because I live alone, my refrigerator would be neglected and smell bad” (169). When the narrator finally comes to terms with their relationship; the seals become a souvenir of her sister. Then, the seals, being the final present, ultimately mark a sense of closure and reconciliation.

Though her father died the same summer as her sister, the latter seems to be the center of the narrator’s grief. She explains: “The two kinds of grief were different. One kind, for him, was for an end that came at the right time. . . . The other kind of grief, for her, was for an end that came unexpectedly and much too soon” (164). Again, an element of surprise unleashes a series of epiphanies, as I specifically discuss in the previous subsection. In this case, the narrator either ignored or missed occasions that could provide closure, such as learning about her sister’s illness or attending the funeral. In turn, the telling surfaces as a therapeutic tool to understand the relationship with her sister, but also with herself. This pattern is central to what Frank O’Connor claims is the short story’s focus on one character’s inner change and “an intense awareness of human loneliness” (21). Conversely, Cohen argues that the self-reflexive style ironizes and breaks down a narrative’s ability to comprehend itself and the world, revealing symptoms of depression (503). Still, the shock has allowed the narrator to see past events in a new light, which indicates growth and progress.

An important marker of closure is understanding that her sister, in turn, had a detrimental relationship with their mother: “Always needing to be right, always needing to be better than her” (151). This becomes apparent in the narrator’s reconciliation: “I felt pushed away, pushed out of her life. But her coolness was the sound of her own fear, her preoccupation with what was happening to her, not anything against me” (152). Though language may be flawed and insufficient, the telling is the only vehicle the narrator has come to terms with her emotional complexities. From this perspective, the narrator seems capable of changing certain aspects of her own behavior and lonely ways. The story ends on a hopeful note, as she is invited to join a group of strangers in the café car of the train she is taking. In this story, the reconciliation in is arguably more than a ceremonial illusion on behalf of the narrator. As the initial problem comes close to a resolution, the twist ending provides a stronger sense of narrative closure than the other stories discussed in this chapter.

2.5 Conclusion

Davis's diverse narrative strategies are marked by several contradictions. On the one hand, her original form disposes with several of the building blocks of the short story genre such as causality, the sequence of events and narrative closure and extends the thematic open-endedness. This is central to minimalist stories such as "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant", "Collaboration with Fly" and "Spring Spleen". In turn, such narrative strategies destabilize the story's mood, making it difficult for the reader to decipher the meaning. On the other hand, "What I Feel" and "A Second Chance" have a reverse narrative structure and open with the epiphany. Then the narrators complicate matters; the initial problem multiplies and unsettles whatever insight was there. This spiral prevents narrative closure, making it difficult to draw any stable conclusions, as in "We Miss You: A Study of Get-Well Letters from a Class of Fourth-Graders" and "A Mown Lawn". An effect of this strategy is that the focus shifts from the objects or problems at hand, to the narrator's reflexive reasoning. In the extension of Farris's argument about ceremonial closure, the quest for epiphany then becomes a ritual producing a sense of mystery. Exploring the limits and possibilities of the short form, Davis ultimately carves out a fictional landscape where the inexplicable reigns.

The attempts at problem-solving in "A Second Chance" and "What I Feel" reveal that language is an important tool to communicate struggles, but also that it is flawed. In "The Seals", the act of telling becomes a vehicle to understand emotional complexities. Conversely, "Les Bluets" reveals a satisfaction in the unexplained when the narrator accepts and even thrives in what is beyond her knowledge and control. Davis's textual practice is exceptionally diverse and is inexpedient to characterize with a narrow set of parameters. These close readings have demonstrated that omission, narrative disclosure, reverse epiphanies, and an acute attention to language, are the trademarks of her original style. In sum, the attempt to use language to understand the self, other people and the relationship between language and the world surfaces as one of her recurring themes. This chapter grasps some, but hardly all aspects of her short fiction. Thus far I have suggested preliminary answers to all but the last two questions set forth in my introduction: To what extent do her narrative strategies have feminist significance and affect the short story genre as an arena for feminist experiment?

3 Expanding the Short Story as an Arena for Feminist Experiment.

Feminist critics disagree when it comes to the significance of women's experimental writing. Today, centuries of reclaiming women's literary history have left the debate on the woman writer biased. Accordingly, Moi explains that the fear of victimhood and generalization have silenced the discussions on women and writing (259). Friedman and Fuchs rekindle the conversation by celebrating those who subvert patriarchal forms to develop an alternative textual practice. Yet one might ask what is being subverted and why it is patriarchal? To Friedman and Fuchs, several textual features represent patriarchal structures of rationality. These features include a single authoritative storyteller, plot linearity, characters interacting in recognizable social patterns and the crucial conflict that steers the main character towards closure (Friedman and Fuchs 3). As I concluded in the first chapter, Davis's narrative strategies often include omission, narrative disclosure, failed or reverse epiphanies, and acute attention to language. However, this aspect has gone largely unnoticed by feminist critics, which makes Davis an interesting contribution to the conversation on women and experimental writing.

This chapter will attempt to answer the last questions put forward in the introduction about Davis's textual practice as an arena for feminist experiment. The first subsection will discuss how her narrative strategies relate to feminist experimental literature. Based on the findings in the first chapter, I will present arguments to why her narrative features break with the traditional structures of rationality that have dominated literature for centuries. The second subsection will discuss themes of motherhood and the gender politics of reproduction, based on close readings of a selection of stories. In the extension of this discussion, I ask to what extent Davis's stories criticize or conform to the heteronormative model. In the last subsection, I attempt to integrate Davis in the conversation on women and writing, exploring how she widens the spectrum to address feminist topics in everyday life, such as motherhood and parental inequality. Davis's textual practice breaks the sequence, borrowing a term from Friedman and Fuchs (3), producing a limit feminism which is not easily assimilated in rationalist frameworks.

3.1 Breaking Patriarchal Structures in Literature through Formal Innovation.

To what extent Davis's innovative textual practice is unifiable with the feminist notion of a subversive narrative is a pressing question. As no critic has discussed the relationship between Davis's textual practice and gender politics, the following discussion attempts to address this gap. Friedman and Fuchs base their work on second wave feminists such as Hélène Cixous. Cixous claimed that rigid opposite binaries are the reproduction of patriarchal belief in stable meanings, later formulated as *phallogocentrism* by Jacques Derrida (Parker 95). She coined the term *écriture féminine* as an alternative way of writing the feminine (Parker 161). Women writers who attack the existing social structure produce an alternate fictional space in which "the feminine, marginalized in traditional fiction and patriarchal culture, can be expressed" (Friedman and Fuchs 4). Similarly, Alice Jardine claims that the new fictional space of "writing feminine" is not governed by rationality, but by multiplicity and difference (61). Thus, to critics like Jardine, Friedman and Fuchs, nonlinear writing becomes a political act allied with the feminist project. Monique Wittig objects to this claim, stating that "'Feminine writing' is a naturalizing metaphor of the brutal political fact of the domination of women" (59). This discussion reveals a significant contradiction in feminist theory. A term that signifies multiplicity and difference to Jardine, Friedman and Fuchs, signifies to Wittig a difference that ties women to their victimhood. Following Simone de Beauvoir's argument about "The Other", she argues that "gender is the linguistic index of the political opposition between the sexes" (60). For Wittig, the masculine is not a gender but the general and universal. On this point, the feminist critics discussed disagree and fail to unite their views.

Then, the relationship between Lydia Davis's textual practice and feminist experiment requires some comment. To complicate matters, Davis has been reluctant to overtly identify with the feminist movement. Few writers of fiction want their work to be reduced to a political program. Accordingly, critics such as Elaine Showalter might argue that Davis eliminates her own gendered subjectivity and avoids describing her experience as a woman (Moi 3). What critics tend to overlook is that Davis's humorous language play not only contributes amusement and wit, but alters traditional structural devices central to the short story. As I argued in the first chapter, characters often cling to logic reasoning to make sense of their problems. By overtly imitating a patriarchal desire for control in her stories, Davis spoofs this rational reasoning. The meticulous obsession to find answers, cohesion and

meaning in stories such as “What I Feel”, “A Second Chance” and “We Miss You: A Study of Get-Well Letters from a Class of Fourth-Graders” arguably mimic the rationalism Friedman and Fuchs want to break down. When the method fails, narrative closure becomes ceremonial rather than conclusive, as Farris suggests (128). Though Gerlach argues that unsolved problems still provide a sense of narrative closure (7-8), his argument does not indicate that closure is rational in the patriarchal sense of the word. For the minimalist stories such as “Samuel Johnson is Indignant”, “Collaboration with Fly” and “Spring Spleen”, omission of causal markers, setting and character descriptions are central features that break with linear writing and destabilize the story’s mood. This rupture prevents the reader from deciphering the meaning of the story. Not unlike Woolf, Davis’s playful style reveals that feminist struggle in literature should be to deconstruct binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity (Moi 14). In the case of Davis, I interpret this deconstruction as the aim to produce new ways of writing and reading stories.

Given that minimalist fiction can be thematically ambiguous, Alexander may at first glance be right to insist that “Davis chooses not to tackle social or political issues in her fiction” (174). In fact, Davis’s often mysterious image seems unifiable with the apolitical. Alexander also describes the form of the short story as “a parable that does not have a moral” (174), without elaborating on her definition of morality. In this context, one might interpret morality as a message or statement with political impact. To Alexander, who does not overtly identify as a feminist critic, Davis’s analytic tone is more of a humorous absurdity, than mimicry of a patriarchal rationalism to break down these structures. Nevertheless, she is one of the only critics to have commented on the political content of Davis’s stories. Though her objection is an important contribution in this discussion, she overlooks several aspects related to Davis’s literary form and thematic content.

First, Alexander overlooks the prominent feminist thematic structure in several stories, as I will discuss in the next subsection. Secondly, she ignores the potential for meaning that lies in literary form and the conception that the parable is a text with a moral intention. Perloff on the other hand, describes Davis’s stories as “hermeneutic parables” inspired by Kafka and Beckett (200). Alexander’s stand is illustrative of the general reluctance to discuss the relationship between Davis’s formal innovation and gender politics. As the word “woman” has become theoretically ambiguous, Alexander’s statement ultimately confirms what Moi describes as “silenced questions on women and writing” (259). The critical paralysis inherited from post-structuralism made it difficult to take an interest in

women writers, let alone state that they have a political agenda, because they are women. What I argue here is not that Davis has a political agenda, but that the relationship between her textual practice and gender politics is underdeveloped by critics.

In Friedman and Fuchs's outline, they attack narratives told by a single, authoritative storyteller and contain well-motivated characters, interacting in recognizable social patterns. Although a great number of Davis's stories are told by a single authoritative storyteller, their reflexivity prevents them from acting in recognizable social patterns. As in "What I Feel", the problem multiplies and unravels. Or in "Spring Spleen", the reader might expect the narrator to be happy spring time is here, when in fact she is happy that the growing leaves will cover the neighbor and her screaming baby. Here Davis carves out a fictional space, borrowing a term from Friedman and Fuchs, in which the curiosity of the subversive observer unfolds freely. This space is not governed by rationality, but by multiplicity and difference, illuminating what is unexplained and unsolved in everyday life (Jardine 61).

Davis's fascination with unresolved problems and disclosure arguably echoes a rejection of the patriarchal belief in stable meanings. From this perspective, I assert that Davis extends Friedman and Fuchs's parameters, as she produces a new sense of narrative closure. The only way to confidently characterize her is as an innovator who forges new ways of thinking and challenges authoritative storytelling. Her narrative strategies expand the narrow spectrum, not only in dominant ways of writing, but also within feminist writing. This claim adds a dimension to her already original project. Though she claims in an interview that she does not have one and only writes about what fascinates her (9). Some may question whether playing with traditional forms can be allied with the feminist project if this is not the author's intention. Others, such as Barthes or Peggy Kamuf, discredit the author's intention altogether. Still, all fiction has ripple effects beyond the author's intention and no writer can control the outcome of their experiment, Kaye Mitchell notes (4). Likewise, experimental practice is one, though not the only, manifestation of a feminist writer (7). In this view, Davis's attempt to break traditional forms can constitute an important part of an oppositional women's culture and function as a critique of social norms. Within the innovative form, Davis explores feminist topics, which is the subject of the next section.

3.2 The Politics of Reproduction: Distraction, Regret and Sacrifice

At the risk of doing what Friedman and Fuchs call “finding the woman in the text” (3), it is important to note that motherhood occupies a central role in Davis’s authorship. Narrators frequently reflect on their role as mothers, interaction with children, absent fathers and their own mothers. Two of the main challenges in establishing “motherhood” as a workable category when discussing Davis’s stories are theoretical ambiguities and distance from reality. The past fifty years have seen a radical shift in the theorization of motherhood in feminist thought. As Paula Palmer notes, in the 1970s, theorists presented childbearing as a form of drudgery and attitudes toward motherhood were largely negative. In this view, domestic life tied women to the home, preventing them from participating in the public sphere and political life (96). Later, feminists like Adrienne Rich put motherhood at the center of sexual politics. This reinterpretation distinguishes between motherhood as an institution constructed by a patriarchal culture, and actual experience. Contrary to previous generations of feminists, Rich recognizes that childbearing has the potential for pleasure and self-fulfillment (97). Palmer is nevertheless right to point out that appalling contradictions exist between practice and theory. In sum, academic discussions have done little to improve the actual situations of mothers. Since then, conceptions about motherhood and its treatment in literature continue to change towards a more nuanced view. Davis’s short fiction, in which motherhood is neither dismissed nor idealized, is thus an important contribution to this development.

In the 1960s and -70s, the *Women’s Liberation Movement* put the female body on the political agenda, passing anti-discriminating laws regarding women’s reproductive health, education and professional life (National Women’s History Project). Davis is thus growing up and actively writing in what some might call the heyday of the women’s movement. Her first major collection *Break It Down*, published in 1986, contains reprinted versions of stories from her small collection *The Thirteenth Woman and Other Stories* from 1976. An important question then arises: To what extent is the nuanced view of motherhood in Davis’s fiction unifiable with the politics of reproduction? In any country, no matter the political system or economic status, childbearing remains a political act, because it intervenes with women’s social, economic and intellectual situation. In 1969, Hanisch published her paper “The Personal Is Political”, in which she brings so-called “personal problems” such as sex, appearance and abortion into the public arena (76). Hanisch notes that “political” is used in a

broad sense, dealing with power relationships, not electoral politics (76). In fact, systemic discrimination and Acts on equal pay were already on the political agenda. In her paper, she addresses a gap in the public debate, of what many deemed were “personal” aspects of women’s lives. Though Hanisch was the one to popularize the phrase, feminists have worked for more than a century to break this dichotomy between public and private spheres. The separation has a long tradition within discrimination of minorities, being equally relevant for other sexual minorities, as for women.

Some readers may question the link between Hanisch’s paper and Davis’s stories. The two are of the same generation, but as I mention in the introduction, Davis’s medium is artistic and mysterious, rather than political. At first glance, however, this statement presupposes a similar dichotomy that what is artistic cannot be political. First it is necessary to clarify what “political” means in this context. As Hanisch claimed, it has to do with power relationships (76). When treading into the territory of women writers and power relations, one must be aware of several pitfalls. For instance, Davis’s personal engagement is not the subject of this thesis. As I will argue in the following section, several stories incarnate Hanisch’s message, which later became an emblem of the Women’s Movement. Despite the fact that Davis is not a visible figure in the movement, her stories do bring this problematic to life. Not only does she address problems of inequality in the home, she also presents a nuanced perception of motherhood, by drawing attention to symptoms of post-partum depression and asexuality. Davis’s stories are thus an important contribution to spreading the message that personal topics are both political and literary.

In the story “Glenn Gould”, a woman writes to her friend about her new life in the countryside with a baby. The story eventually interlaces her life, that of her friend Mitch, the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* and the classical pianist Glenn Gould. The extradiegetic and homodiegetic narrator first mentions the show in the letter to Mitch. She watches it every afternoon, and knows that “he, unlike some people, would understand this” (276). The characterization of the specified narratee, Mitch, reveals Davis’s love for quirky details. For instance, “once he tried to remember everything he learned from a conversation with a stranger in order to use it to begin or develop a conversation with another stranger” (276). Hence, Mitch continuously surprises the narrator. To the narrator’s great astonishment, he reveals that both he and Glenn Gould like the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*: “I see two of my worlds coming together that I thought were as far apart as they could be” (277). Thus, Mitch’s character is a catalyzer who sparks epiphanies in the narrator. This moves the narrative

forward, which in turn deviates from Clark's point about lack of spiritual insight in the modern short story.

The *Mary Tyler Moore Show* recounts the lives of three young women making it on their own in the city. For the narrator, the show becomes a radiant object. She attempts to understand how it intervenes with her life and that of the pianist Glenn Gould: "I now feel I have a companion watching the show with me, even though Glenn Gould is no longer alive. . . . For another, the fact that this companion was so intelligent gives me a new respect for the show" (278). The narrator already had the habit of immersing herself in fictional reality before starting a family; "there was a certain intimacy and intensity to watching it alone that way, with the darkness and quiet outside the windows. I watched with such concentration that I forgot everything else and entered the lives of those characters in that other city" (280). Furthermore, this self-inquiry helps her accept disorder and selfishness in her life: "There is order in that other world. Mary says that order is possible and, since she is gentle and kind if somewhat brittle, that kindness is possible, too. The friend who comes down from upstairs and stays for supper is not so tidy, and is not always kind, but sometimes selfish, so there is also room for human failing, and for a kind of recklessness or passion" (283-284). Her chain of thoughts ultimately touches upon larger questions about solitude, having children and cultural legitimacy. In sum, the insight about the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* narrows the frame of the story, providing a sense of unity between her past and present life.

In the moment of writing however, the feeling of escape is gone. The narrator is continuously interrupted by her baby: "So I certainly can't forget where I am, or my own life" (280). The unfulfilled desire to flee her own life is not due to the baby itself, but the baby prevents her from keeping her old recreational habit. She despairs: "At the end of the half hour I am sorry the show is over. I hunger for more. If I could, I would watch another half hour, and another, and another. I wish the baby would go to sleep and my husband would not come home for dinner" (283). Mentioned briefly, her husband seems like a shadowy presence trapped in his own inarticulateness (May 213). The passage could then suggest that she seeks companionship in the TV-show because she does not get it elsewhere. In this sense, the gaps and silences hint quite explicitly at a discontentment with married life due to the couple's inability to communicate. The longing in this story is palpable, but not for a rich intellectual and professional life. In this case, what upsets the narrator the most is being interrupted when watching the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*. The narrator is either longing for the past, or an unknown future. The show then becomes a sanctuary where she escapes the present moment.

In this place, the person she used to be and the person she could be intersect. Winther is thus right to claim that for minimalist short stories, “one unreasoning moment of longing” is a powerful synonym to describe the diffuse desire characters experience (137). The narrator in “Glenn Gould”, among others, appropriately enacts this unreasoning moment of longing.

Throughout the story, the life of Glenn Gould is a source for comparison and envy for the narrator. This is vividly illustrated in passages such as: “Glenn Gould did not have children. He was not married” (280) or “He was something of a recluse, by choice. He arranged his life as he wanted it, scheduled his outside appointments as it suited him, watched television when he needed to, and was able to be selfish without hurting anyone” (284). She also compares her current village with the city she used to live in, “every building was different, every person was different....even the sky was more interesting there than it is here, because it spread out so softly behind and above the towers and the sharp upper edges of the buildings” (281). Suddenly, the narrative takes a surprising turn when the narrator learns that they have something very important in common; he also has long conversations with his friends over the phone and sought companionship in the same show as she did. Ultimately, knowing that Mitch and Glenn Gould also like the show, makes her less embarrassed (283). The new insight may even make her less dissatisfied with how her own life turned out.

Even so, the comparison strongly alludes to her unfulfilled desires and guilt. Does she regret having a baby, because she no longer can organize her life as she pleases? Or is she guilty because of her selfishness? Beneath the surface, the seemingly superficial ennui reveals doubt, obsession and repressed emotions. Arguably, her reaction can be interpreted as symptoms of post-partum depression. This topic also surfaces in the story “A Double Negative”: “At a certain point in her life, she realizes it is not so much that she wants to have a child as that she does not want to have a child, or not to have had a child” (373). However, the narrator in “Glenn Gould” does not admit these feelings to herself. In this sense, the letter to Mitch, the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* and Glenn Gould become allegorical tools to find a language to communicate her struggles. In the self-reflexive story, the narrator gets a glimpse of her own emotional life. Rather than leading to incomprehension, as critics have suggested, the story becomes a therapeutic tool. However, towards the end, the inquiry has not provided any closure. She is still trying to understand why Glenn Gould enjoyed the show, and what sort of companionship he sought with the characters. Still, the story ends on a note of finality because the narrator seems to have come to terms with the fact that Gould’s life remains

different from her own. Despite the sense of closure from this slant epiphany, it is doubtful whether the TV - show will provide her with the companionship and distraction she needs.

In the story “What You Learn About the Baby” (623-633), a newly fledged mother recounts adjusting to everyday life with an infant. The story consists of a list of observations such as, “You learn that there is less order in your life now” (627), which is a familiar trait with Davis’s reflexive narrators. She tries to make sense of the situation by structuring her experiences into a system with categories as “Don’t Expect to Finish Anything”, “Renunciation” and “Odd Things You Notice About Him”, to mention some. How to structure time surfaces as a central issue: “You learn to prepare for the baby’s waking as soon as the baby sleeps. You learn to prepare everything hours in advance. Then your conception of time begins to change. The future collapses into the present” (629). For this woman, the time-squeeze is an apparent source of frustration. Since there is no mention of a father, she could be a single mother carrying the responsibility alone. Her desire to work and write interestingly echoes Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, though the story is no lament for women’s lack of funds. Rather than money, Davis is preoccupied with the temporal aspect and how women are distracted by domestic responsibilities. In this sense, to have a room of one’s own is extended to time and the physical space for artistic growth, and this narrator has neither.

Davis approaches female readers in this story, as does Woolf. The extradiegetic and homodiegetic narrator refers to a collective “You”, as if her insight should have a didactic purpose. The collective reference raises questions about the implied reader, who might be anyone with the responsibility for a baby. Direct address also creates proximity and signals that the content is relevant to the implied reader. Linguistically however, there are no specific references to a woman reader or the pronoun “us”. No words indicate that the narrator approaches all women or women specifically. On the other hand, the presence of the “collective you” replaces a “personal I”, creating a distance between the narrator and the telling. As Susan S. Lanser notes, women in patriarchal societies are in a precarious position. Women may avoid a personal voice in fear that their work would be taken for autobiography (20). In this view, the direct reference is twofold and may either be interpreted as a sign of empowerment or oppression.

In a patriarchal culture, or even to radical feminists, infants are not a topic of literary prestige. Motherhood was previously associated with oppression, Palmer adds (95). Based on this observation, the collective reference can be interpreted as an attempt to legitimize these

narrative events as universal, and not secondary. As I discussed previously in this chapter, Wittig attacks the term “feminine writing” for ascribing to women difference, the particular and victimhood (59). In the foreword to *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, Louise Turcotte neatly summarizes Wittig’s body of thought in the phrase “A text by a minority writer is effective only if it succeeds in making the minority point of view universal” (X1). In turn, Wittig in turn points to Sarraute, who would not use the feminine gender when generalizing what she is writing about (60). The point about making the minority point of view universal demonstrates Davis’s extraordinary effectiveness and originality. In claiming the woman’s point of view as universal through collective direct address, she overturns the concepts to which we have grown accustomed.

In the investigative style familiar to Davis, the baby becomes a curious object of study. The story avoids becoming mechanical and formulaic, because the narrator pays acute attention to details that reinforce a sense of intimacy and sensibility. One example is the observation: “You are lying on the bed nursing him, but you are not holding on to him with your arms or hands and he is not holding on to you. He is connected to you by a single nipple” (627). The connection seems strangely familiar in the sense that, in one fragment, she describes both the distance and beginning closeness with her child. The passage illustrates the ability to reveal the mystery of commonplace things asserted by Carver in his essay “On Writing”. It is also interesting to consider the list in the light of a question once posed by Simone de Beauvoir: “It is a strange miracle to see, to hold a living thing being formed in and coming out of one’s self. But what part has the mother really had in the extraordinary event that brings a new existence into the world?” to which her answer is: “She does not know. The being would not exist without her, and yet he escapes her” (549). For the narrator in the story, due to various distractions, not only her child, but also her time and concentration escape her.

Furthermore, the list includes an equal amount of fascination, frustration and taboo. For instance, “He reaches to grasp the shadow of his spoon, but the shadow reappears on the back of his hand” (626). Typical of Davis’s investigative style, this passage portrays how language is a tool in the narrator’s search for meaning in everyday life. Yet, the quaint observation does not seem to satisfy the narrator intellectually: “You begin to understand paradox: lying on the bed next to him, you are deeply interested, watching his face and holding his hands, and yet at the same time you are deeply bored, wishing you were somewhere else doing something else” (631). The narrator faces the bittersweet conclusion a lot of new parents face when expectations are not fulfilled and the immanence has shifted

form. This perception is by no means Davis's alone. Today, post-partum depression is discussed more openly and occurs in literary works. However, the subject tends to remain taboo in heteronormative cultures, particularly among women. Although this story can be interpreted as a general comment on the politics of reproduction, the fragment also narrates the individual's experience of growing into the mother's role. As Deb notes; "it's a completely accurate description of most babies, but it is also an oblique comment on adulthood" (par. 5).

The parts of "What You Learn About the Baby" I have recounted so far present manifold vision of the mother's role. As Joan Didion notes, something other than an objection to being discriminated against is at work here (116). On the one hand, the themes of motherhood are clearly stated. Yet the nature of this account remains ambiguous, as the protagonist narrator seems both frustrated and immensely fascinated with the role she is taking on. Arguably, this point both conforms to and breaks with minimalist patterns of thematic ambiguity (Winther 141). One might object that Davis seems more preoccupied with the subjective and quaint details than the profoundness of the mother's role. Still the surface details can also be an expression of the narrator's quirkiness, or perhaps a distraction from the real challenge that lies ahead for these mothers. The story, despite its rationalizing form, is a vehicle that communicates the particular and unique, rather than common and generic knowledge. From this perspective, Davis contributes to a more nuanced conception of motherhood in fiction, where childbearing also has the potential for pleasure and self-fulfillment (Palmer 97).

Still, the politics of reproduction and restricted freedom are the most dominant features of the stories discussed in this section. In this sense, the stories reflect Simone de Beauvoir's argument that women are "locked into conjugal community". In her words, "her attitude to her home is dictated by this same dialectic that generally defines her condition: she takes by becoming prey, she liberates herself by abdicating; by renouncing the world, she means to conquer a world" (470). "What You Learn About the Baby" arguably echoes what Knausgaard does for large parts of *My Struggle*, namely combining the roles of writer and housewife. Changing diapers and cooking dinner, he finds it challenging to aspire creatively. However, Knausgaard writes in the first person about his struggle to find time and space to write. As a result, his confessions about domestic frustration have been praised for their candor. They have also created a great deal of controversy for reasons related to autobiography, not for challenging the father's role. In terms of literary form, Davis and

Knausgaard are nonetheless at completely different ends of the scale. Due to the fragmental nature of Davis's stories, it is difficult to note whether these women actually have the power to "change this prison into a kingdom", in the words Beauvoir (470).

A story narrates a fragment of life, from which the reader can deduce things about the whole life (Pratt 99). Accordingly, the story surfaces as a powerful means of communication of feminist ideas. This is why it is surprising that so few feminist critics recognize the potential in Davis's stories. To explain why this is beyond the scopes of this thesis. Nevertheless, Moi presents one possible explanation in her "Images of Women" critique, where she attacks the desire to portray women as good role models with which the reader may identify (7). The stories portray women as un-nurturing, disoriented, and what common conceptions might call "bad mothers". Here "the bad mother" is presented, not as evil or morally degradable, but with a pressing urgency to act the way she does. The narrators in "Glenn Gould", "What You Learn About the Baby" and "A Double Negative" confirm this observation. This unapologetic attitude is also apparent in the story "Selfish": "The useful thing about being a selfish person is that when your children get hurt you don't mind so much because you yourself are all right. But it won't work if you are just a little selfish. You must be very selfish" (441). Despite being ignored by feminist critics, Davis arguably offers a liberating and less constrained conception of the mother's role. This view also reinforces the argument that her narrative strategies represent a subtle critique of logocentric structures in literature, as well as in everyday life.

Returning to Knausgaard, Siri Hustvedt plays with the idea of *My Struggle* as a narrative of what Beauvoir famously called "becoming a woman" (88). Though their literary projects are not of the same genre, the term might be just as suitable for several of Lydia Davis's stories. In her work, Beauvoir treats gender as a cultural construct. Similarly, the narrators discussed notice how their constructed gender constrains their freedom and the inability to affirm themselves in their projects (470). In Beauvoir's words, they have become "the Other", the one who does not transcend. This realization is also expressed in the opening lines of "A Mown Lawn" discussed in the first chapter: "She hated a *mown lawn*. Maybe that was because *mow* was the reverse of *wom*, the beginning of the name of what she was – a *woman*" (314). There is thus reason to argue that both Davis and Knausgaard write about "becoming a woman". However, Knausgaard is praised for this aspect of his work, whereas with Davis, it goes unnoticed by critics.

Furthermore, Davis is equally preoccupied with actual parents as with becoming a parent. The story “Mothers” opens on a generic note: “Everyone has a mother somewhere. There is a mother at dinner with us” (65). The narrator is first outside the narrated events and marks her distance with a generic comment. Then the narrator’s attention is pointed towards the mother at the table with “us”. Despite several digressions, the narrator never leaves the topic of mothers: “Then, the mother of the hostess telephones as we are eating. This causes the hostess to be away from the table longer than one would expect” and “A choreographer is referred to afterwards, in the car. He is spending the night in town, on his way, in fact, to see his mother, again in another state” (65). Then, the attempt to say something general about mothers with words such as “everyone” and “always”, collapses into a personal account about the narrator’s own mother. From a daughter’s perspective, the narrator gains insight about a mother’s sacrifice: “They have suffered for our sakes, and most often in a place where we could not see them” (65). “Mothers” could in fact have been titled “What You Learn About the Mother”. Through an attempt to force what is particular and unique into a generic frame, the narrator ultimately gains insight about the sacrifice involved in a mother’s role.

Two pressing questions arise from the feminist significance of Lydia Davis’s textual practice: Do these stories criticize or conform to heteronormative ideals? How does the short form relate to questions of heteronormativity? Rich put forward a feminist analysis of heterosexuality in her 1980 essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”. The text presents heterosexuality as a political institution in a patriarchal system, defining it “something that has to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized and maintained by force” (648). Similarly, Wittig states “For to live in society is to live in heterosexuality” (40). For Wittig and Rich, lesbian existence is an act of resistance to this institution. The term Heteronormativity has been much discussed in recent years. It denotes the perception that to be attracted to the opposite sex is the norm and what is preferred, Nils Axel Nissen asserts. In other words, it is the notion that “people are and should be heterosexuals” (102, translation mine). Literary works are one of multiple arenas where heteronormative discourses are reproduced, but also criticized. To attack such perceptions in literature has been a common aim for the LGBTQ and feminist movements. Turcotte claims that “by not questioning the heterosexual political regime, contemporary feminism proposes rearranging rather than eliminating this system” (xi). It is thus worth asking whether the content of Davis’s stories support a rearrangement or elimination of this system.

From the previous discussion on motherhood and the politics of reproduction, it is possible to claim that these stories reproduce heteronormative ideals for several reasons. First, no story discussed contains any queer desire or same-sex relationships. Secondly, they mostly contain women with children. In this sense, the singular focus on the female body as a means of reproduction can be seen as conforming to the heteronormative model. Some might even claim it is ironic that a writer with so much variety in terms of style and subject matter, has so little variety in terms of sexuality and sexual relations. Nevertheless, further research and new readings might in fact reveal that Davis is a writer with interests beyond heterosexuality and the reproductive aspects of sexuality.

Apart from motherhood, the stories pay less attention to other aspects “becoming a woman”, such as their sexuality or professional life. Thus, the singular focus on motherhood can be interpreted as ignoring other sexual expressions and life choices. This is also due to the scope of this thesis. Nonetheless, the stories portray women as spiritual and intellectual beings. From a feminist perspective, the extended focus on motherhood also reflects the detrimental effects that heterosexual relationships can have on women. In consequence, the heterosexual relationships are portrayed as something the narrator-characters stumbled into, and now want to escape from. This is particularly salient in the stories “Glenn Gould” and “A Double Negative”. Accordingly, there is reason to argue that heterosexuality is neither presented as an ideal, nor the preferred choice for these women.

Based on the previous discussion on ellipsis and miscommunication, it is relevant to note that neither of the stories mention a paternal figure. In “Glenn Gould”, the father is a shadowy presence mentioned briefly. “Child Care” is one of the few stories with an apparent father figure. The extradiegetic and heterodiegetic narrator observes the father and the baby: “It’s his turn to take care of the baby. He is cross. He says, “I never get enough done.”” The baby is in a bad mood, too. He gives the baby a bottle of juice and sits him well back in a big armchair. He sits himself down in another chair and turns on the television. Together they watch *The Odd Couple*” (533). “It’s his turn” indicates that the narrator aims for equality when it comes to childcare, but the father is characterized as grumpy and lacking in initiative. As in “Glenn Gould” and “What You Learn About the Baby”, time and distraction are important factors here. Once the father finds the time to be with his child, he seeks distraction in the TV- show *The Odd Couple*. Positioned outside the narrated events, the narrator observes with irony that the two form an odd couple. Hence, the title “Child Care” is mocking his parenting style or lack thereof. The paternal figure in these stories is no patriarchal

authority, but a bleak unenterprising shadow lurking in the gaps. In sum, the paternal absence contributes to the failure to communicate and the immense loneliness many of the narrator-characters attempt to, but not always succeed in expressing.

It is debatable whether Davis's stories conform to a heteronormative model, when the other parental figure is completely or almost absent. Rich, among other feminist critics, explores the idea that women want children because their heterosexual relationships lack intensity and intimacy. They reproduce in order to re-create their own intense relationships with their mothers (636). To what extent this idea is applicable to the fiction of Lydia Davis is an object for further study. It is nevertheless worth noting that Davis portrays women in heterosexual relationships that lack passion. The narrators in "Glenn Gould" and "What You Learn About the Baby" both attempt to recreate an intimacy with their infants, though in different ways. In "Glenn Gould", the narrator's intimacy is neither with the baby or partner, but with the *Mary Tyler Moore show*. Whereas in "What You Learn About the Baby", the narrator attempts to create intimacy in the details she observes in and around her child. To some extent, these stories confirm the link between childbearing and the attempt to recreate intimacy suggested by Rich and other feminist scholars. It is however debatable whether motherhood will provide the narrators with the intimacy and connexion they search for. From a heteronormative perspective, this aspect unsettles traditional and common beliefs about motherhood.

The institution of the couple is central to the heteronormative model. However, the stories discussed in this chapter are characterized by loneliness rather than twosomeness. There is thus reason to argue that Davis portrays the detrimental effects of the heteronormative model, such as miscommunication, loneliness, guilt and parental inequality. This critique is particularly persistent in stories such as "Spring Spleen" and "The Seals", where the narrators clearly have chosen to be alone, or this is alluded to. In "Spring Spleen", the narrator is happy the leaves cover her neighbour and her screaming baby, whereas the narrator in "The Seals" feels the pressure from her family to find someone to share her life with. This narrator on the other hand, enjoys having "everything the way I want it" (162). She is also persuaded that presents from her family hint at her isolation. In sum, these stories put compulsory cohabitation on the agenda, making such pressures more visible in literature.

The narrative strategy of ellipsis makes this critique more apparent. In "What You Learn About the Baby", the gaps and silences enable the reader to make speculations about the narrator and the absent father. Similarly, in "The Seals" and "Spring Spleen", the

omission of sexual or personal relationships hints at disinterest and solitude. This view arguably supports Winther's argument that mystery and ambiguity are inherent in the short story (138). The short form is ideal for displaying human loneliness and solitude in one moment, as Frank O'Connor famously observed (19). In the case of Davis however, it does not seem like the paternal figures are excluded to create mystery. Instead, they are excluded to prove a point. The omitted details in these narratives point to a structural problem, demanding that men share an equal amount of housework and childcare. As Hanisch outlines, personal issues reveal power structures, and are thus political. Lydia Davis is far from the first to write about these topics, but her originality lies in using the short experimental fiction to do so.

It is an overstatement to claim that Davis eliminates the political regime of heterosexuality, in the words of Turcotte (xi). Nevertheless, she objects to heteronormative values by presenting their detrimental effects. This becomes particularly apparent in her nuanced portrayal of motherhood and parental inequality in "What You Learn About the Baby", "Glenn Gould" and "Child Care", to mention a few relevant examples. As I have discussed, the short story form and narrative techniques such as ellipsis are ideal for portraying "the absent father" or those who are single by choice. In addition, addressing asexuality and compulsory heterosexuality in stories such as "The Seals" and "Spring Spleen", is another important argument to support the claim that some of Davis's stories present a subtle critique of heteronormativity.

3.3 Expanding the Short Story as an Arena for Feminist Experiment

Today, some claim it is redundant to revisit the debate on women's writing and feminism. Books written by women vary across genres, top the sales charts and win prestigious literary awards. In spite of that, Hustvedt unsettles the illusion of gender equality in the world of letters. Married to fellow writer Paul Auster, she has an arsenal of encounters with sexism from the literary scene and academia. In her essay "No Competition", she examines an encounter with Knausgaard, where they discuss whether writing and its reception depend on the sex of the writer. Hustvedt confronts Knausgaard for mentioning only male sources of inspiration, to which he replies: "No competition" (83). Surprised, but not indignant, Hustvedt exclaims; "thousands of pages of self-examination apparently did not bring him to enlightenment about the woman in himself" (94-95). Hypothetically, she suggests that

Knausgaard would find the feminist qualities of his work emasculating, as these discourses often underrate the performances of women and overrate those of men (93). A survey by Goodreads from 2015 revealed that, on average, 80 percent of a woman writer's audience is female, as opposed to 50 percent for a male writer's. Though there are exceptions, these numbers indicate that a male writer's audience is "universal", whereas the female's audience is not. Reading and writing are also often regarded as passive, feminine activities. Still it is not sufficient to notice that texts by men and women are received differently, or to call attention to sexual inequality, Hustvedt objects. Men and women must become fully conscious that the gender plays an important role in our reading habits and the reception of literary works (95).

This discussion demonstrates that questions about women and writing are no longer silenced, bringing the essay "The Death of the Author" into question. Barthes criticizes the author's relation to his work "as a father to his child" (84-85). Feminists have interpreted this passage both as a rejection of the patriarchal dominance in literature and as a dismissal of the woman as an authorial figure. To illustrate this point, Nancy K. Miller sees the recognition of women writers as empowering, whereas Kamuf claims it is the reduction of a work to a signature. Moi essentially shows how the two fail to communicate and develop a critical paralysis. Moi eventually agrees with Miller, that feminists have a political duty to take an interest in women writers (262). In sum, the discussion on the female authorial signature presents the birth and death of the author as opposite binaries, which might be why it was silenced in feminist theory in the first place. To rekindle this debate, one must look beyond these binaries and accept that the female authorial signature is an intricate subject.

What then is Lydia Davis place in this critical conversation? In terms of context, Davis started publishing stories in the heyday of feminist theory. In 1973, the feminist publishing company The Feminist Press put Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper", originally published in 1892, back into print. The story was recovered by feminist critics in the following years (Lanser 415). Moreover, Davis published "Mothers" in 1986, "Glenn Gould" in 1997, "A Double Negative" in 2001 and "What You Learn About the Baby" in 2007. As I have claimed, these stories treat central feminist questions, such as motherhood, financial equality and the relationship between men and women. Yet it is surprising to find that critics have been reluctant to address this aspect. One explanation is the perception that good feminist fiction should present truthful images of strong women with which the reader may identify. Another explanation is the fear of generalization and victimization of women

writers (Moi 7). The reluctance to see Davis from a feminist perspective is thus an adequate illustration of the critical paralysis outlined by Moi.

Davis is a writer of paradox and central to her style is ignoring conventions. Yet she seems to evade literary straitjackets such as “feminine narrative” and “woman writer”. Interestingly, her treatment of personal relationships, ennui and manic obsession differs from other female experimental writers. Berry mentions writers such as Valerie Solanas, Kathy Acker, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Chantel Chawaf, Jeanette Winterson and Lynda Barry in the period 1967-1999. She groups these writers together because they share “a commitment to combining extreme content with formally radical techniques in order to enact varieties of sex, gender, race, class and nation-based experience, that these writers suggest, may only be represented accurately through the experimental unmaking on dominant structures of rationality” (1). The aim to discuss sexuality with regards to gender, race and class, brings the minimalist story back into question. With scarce plots and few external details, Davis’s stories indicate mostly a white upper middle-class background of female narrators and protagonists. However, in the shortest stories, this is not possible to deduce. It is nevertheless important to note that Davis differs visibly from other experimental writers and radical feminists. Still, as I discuss previously in this chapter, her formal strategies conform to Friedman and Fuchs’s notion of “breaking patriarchal structures” (3). The non-linear stories address both frustration and fascination with ordinary things, revealing estrangement and quaint details. This feature sets her stories apart, hence the difficulty in describing them within an existing framework.

Lydia Davis is faced with the dilemma many contemporary women writers face; to either write as a woman or as a universal human being (Moi 266). Her response to this quandary is manifold. Davis’s way of approaching feminist topics is humorous, self-reflexive and often masked in playful language. A passage from “A Mown Lawn” illuminates this point: “She hated a *mown lawn*. Maybe that was because *mow* was the reverse of *wom*, the beginning of the name of what she was – a *woman*” (314). The combination of formal and linguistic innovation, politically loaded content and everyday situations produces a limited feminism which is not easily categorized within feminist frameworks. Hence, “The Thirteenth Woman”, describes a character content with being an outsider: “In a town of twelve women there was a thirteenth. No one admitted she lived there, no mail came for her. . . no one returned her glance, no one knocked on her door. . . and yet in spite of all this she continued to live in the town without resenting what it did to her” (155). This passage can either be interpreted as a critique of women who suffer in silence, or as praise for playing by your own

rules. If seen in relation to Davis's textual practice, the passage signifies the pleasure in what is "unexplainable" and standing out. As I will discuss next, the short form is particularly suitable for a literary outsiders who enjoy breaking the rules.

Historically, the short story has been a genre with fluid edges, making it an arena for literary innovation. Pratt stresses tradition versus innovation, when contrasting the novel and the short story (99). Novels often have one single authoritative voice, dominated by an omniscient heterodiegetic and extradiegetic narrator. As novels are capable of telling a life, the need for narrative closure is inherent in the form. Short stories on the other hand, focus on one character's inner change and "an intense awareness of human loneliness", O'Connor underlines (19). The aspect of subjectivity allows a wider spectrum of narrative voices to emerge. Also, the its early status as a practice genre to earn money, gave writers the freedom to explore marginal topics (Pratt 97). As Francine Prose suggests, the story's fluid edges makes it difficult to draw the limits of the genre: "As much as we like the short story to keep its borders modest, crisp and neat, the form keeps defying our best efforts to wrap it up and present it in a tidy package" (8). A tidy package might be the closest the antonym to describe Davis's fiction. Prose's point nevertheless illustrates why Davis prefers the short form. Anything that fascinates the narrator has the potential of becoming a story, beyond conventions of narrative closure and traditional story elements. In sum, Davis's manifold perception of what a story is makes it a suitable arena to explore feminist topics and expand its parameters.

Yet some readers and critics may challenge this view by insisting that it is inappropriate to approach literature with "a political agenda", Martha Nussbaum notes (89). Such claims include Wittig's statement that "All minority writers (who are conscious of being so) enter into literature obliquely" (62). Wittig's concern is with reducing texts that attract attention to a social problem to a political program (63). When this happens, she asserts, it ceases to operate on a textual level and can no longer be regarded in relation to equivalent texts. To Wittig, the text's primary aim is to "change the textual reality within which it is inscribed" (63). Though she is right not to reduce a text to its social meaning, texts are products of social and political conditions. Wittig arguably overlooks the reader's ability to interact with texts, which is at the center of Nussbaum's concept of "The Narrative Imagination". In this concept, Nussbaum asserts the capacity of the arts to challenge conventions and cultivate our judgement and sensitivity (86-99). Literature plays a vital role in educating the citizens of the world, though it does not transform society single-handed, she

underlines (94). From this perspective, Davis's textual practice challenges conventional values of storytelling and feminist fiction. By presenting new perspectives on the short story and a critique of the institution of heterosexuality, her stories have the potential to change how people read and write stories, though this is an object for further study in reader-response theory.

In the introduction, I discuss how second and third wave feminists reproduce a patriarchal desire for stable meanings to determine how women should write (Parker 95). With this in mind, Davis's textual practice might just as well be a critique of how feminist critics have laid down requirements for women's writing and neglected those who do not play by the rules. Here, I refer to unstable meanings, what seems illogical and giving up the illusion of control. As I have discussed, a number of stories narrate the feminist message that the personal is political. Consequently, breastfeeding or domestic ennui reveal power struggles and become worthy literary subjects. Even the fragment "Collaboration with Fly" demonstrates a power relationship on a microscopic level, when the narrator notices how a fly's faeces has changed her sentence. Ultimately, Davis's unconventional stories contribute to widen the narrow spectrum in feminist fiction. Hanisch presents a similar view: "as long as we say 'you have to think like us and live like us to join the charmed circle', we will fail" (78). In other words, the feminist movement can benefit from diversity and non-conforming voices such as that of Davis.

Writers who look beyond conventions, such as Davis or Sarraute, are often reluctant to identify with the feminist movement. This observation supports Mitchell's claim that female experimentalists face a manifold problem of representation, reception, influence and community (5). In consequence, the relationship between gender politics and experiment remains imbalanced and underdeveloped. The intention is not to read all of Davis's stories from a feminist perspective, but to ensure that the readings are as manifold as her textual practice. Interestingly, the stories with the strongest feminist interpretations in this thesis, are perhaps the least innovative ones in terms of literary form. In other words, her textual practice remains mysterious and evades every attempt to be categorized, making her position in the conversation on women and writing is interesting and new.

3.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I argue that narrative strategies such as lack of causality, narrative disclosure and reverse epiphanies, unsettle the patriarchal belief in stable meanings. Such features of microscopic plots ultimately expand and innovate traditional structural devices. In the long term, this may contribute to the development of new criteria by which to judge stories, apart from their sense of narrative closure. Instead, Davis carves out a fictional space in which the curious observer unfolds freely, illuminating the mystery in everyday life. Within this space, she expands the fluid edges of the short story to explore feminist topics. The stories discussed address nuanced aspects of motherhood, such as regret, distraction, sacrifice and fascination. Thus, Davis contributes to the feminist claim that the personal is political. This discussion raises questions about heteronormativity and the short story. In this thesis, the most apparent features are heterosexual relationships, childcare and to some extent asexuality. Some may object that an experimental writer as Davis has so little sexual diversity in her stories. It is thus possible to claim her stories indicate a continuation of the heteronormative model. Still, stories such as “Glenn Gould” and “What You Learn About the Baby” unsettle the belief that motherhood provides an intimacy women often lack in heterosexual relationships. Paternal absence further underlines the failure to communicate and an immense loneliness for the narrator-characters. In the stories “Spring Spleen” and “The Seals”, this solitude is portrayed through the pressure on women who have chosen to be alone. Based on the close readings, there is reason to claim that Lydia Davis presents the detrimental effects of the heterosexual relationship.

This discussion is not an attempt to label Davis as a “woman writer”, but to display her diversity. In fact, several stories with feminist themes, have the strongest sense of narrative closure and a traditional narrative structure. This confirms the difficulty in characterizing her narrative strategies. Instead, her textual practice produces a limit feminism which is not easily incorporated into traditional frameworks. I have suggested that these stories criticize requirements for women’s writing, celebrating not playing by the rules. In addition to breaking patriarchal structures in fiction through formal experiment, Davis contributes to a more nuanced perception of a mother’s role and parental inequality in literature. In doing so, she expands the short story genre as feminist battlefield and raises an important critique of the heteronormative model.

4 Conclusion

This thesis has presented a feminist interpretation of a selection of short stories by Lydia Davis. It specifically examines how Davis expands the short story as an arena for narrative experiment, while drawing attention to detrimental effects for women in heterosexual relationships. This includes various aspects of the mother's role, in addition to compulsory sexuality and cohabitation. I have argued that Davis's literary innovation not only concerns her formal style, but the ability to produce a more nuanced perception of motherhood in literature. My aim has been to show her variety and display a dimension of her work which has gone unnoticed by critics. In the first chapter, I explored what narrative strategies characterize Davis's playful style and how she employs traditional structural devices such as omission, narrative closure and the epiphany. In the second chapter, I discussed the feminist significance of these narrative strategies and how her textual practice affects the short story genre as an arena for feminist experiment.

In the exploration of a selection of stories of various length and content, some tendencies have been proved pervasive. Davis's stories tend to open with an initial problem, indicating that a solution will take place. Throughout the narrator's reflexive reasoning, the problem unravels and multiplies. This disables the sense of narrative closure in stories such as "A Mown Lawn", "We Miss You: A Study of Get-Well Letters from a Class of Fourth-Graders", "A Second Chance" and "What I Feel". The two latter reverse the epiphany, which takes place in the opening rather than at the end of the story. With every attempt to categorize, emotions unravel and unsettle the insight of the initial epiphany. Breaking the traditional structures of a story, Davis carves out a fictional landscape where mystery and the inexplicable reigns. Within this landscape, she addresses feminist issues such as unequal power relations, the mother's role, miscommunication, and asexuality. Although these stories focus on heterosexual love and emphasize sexual reproduction, they still present some of the potentially detrimental effects of heterosexual relationships. Storytelling then surfaces as a vehicle for reconciliation and growth, rather than narrative closure. Typically, features of formal innovation and feminist topics are not salient in same stories. As a result, the combination of formal and linguistic innovation, politically loaded content and everyday situations produces a limit feminism which is not easily categorized. Instead, Davis innovates the short story as an arena to break patriarchal structures in literature.

The first chapter examined how Davis's narrative strategies challenge traditional elements in the short story genre. The close readings support Knight's claim that "Davis has carved out a singular space – minimalist, poetic philosophical, and self-reflexive – that doesn't easily fit into the categories of short fiction generally encountered in North America" (526). This chapter examined the narrative strategies behind this claim and added new dimensions by discussing their effects. The most pertinent findings related to how Davis alternates ellipsis, narrative closure and the epiphany. Consisting of a few sentences or less, stories such as "Collaboration with Fly", "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant" and "Spring Spleen" lack a traditional sequence of events and descriptions of setting. The effect, typical of lyrical short stories, is that these narratives shift locus from external plot to inner life. A unique focus allows elements such as the climax and the ending to be pressed into one clause. The narrative technique of omission then destabilizes the mood, making it difficult for the reader to decipher the meaning of the story. This argument reinforces May's claim that the modern short story perceives experience and characters according to mood (200).

Davis's characteristic method of analyzing things and emotions revealed narrative disclosure. First, the need for order sets up the false expectation that closure will take place. Instead of being solved, problems unravel and become the center of the narrative. Here the self-reflexive, extradiegetic and homodiegetic narrators play an important part. The sense of consequence lies not in the narrative events, but in the internal and psychological processes of the characters. This is particularly striking in stories such as "A Mown Lawn", "Betrayal", "What I Feel" and "A Second Chance". The two latter reverse the structure of the traditional epiphany, giving up the illusion of control. By presenting the epiphany first, the narrator's reflexive reasoning unravels and unsettles the insight. The quest for knowledge is thus the story's structural backbone, even when epiphanies are slant or unfulfilled. Davis's essay "Les Bluets" specifically discusses the desire to compartmentalize emotions with a sense of wonder and mystery. Puzzled by a painting, the narrator learns to accept and be bewildered by the opacity of life. The concluding line "it was this new tolerance for, and then satisfaction in, the unexplained and unsolved that marked a change in me" (552) describes the driving force of the unknown. In sum, Davis unsettles the traditional cornerstones of the short story genre, such as narrative closure and the epiphany. She invents new criteria from which we can read stories, where the goal is a fictional space filled with humor, mystery and enigma.

Based on this discussion, Davis's narrative practice may be described as the attempt to use language to understand the self, people and the relationship between language and the

world. Her playful style often reveals what Clark describes as “the insufficient word” or “broken conversation” (390). Stories such as “What She Knew” and “They Take Turns Using a Word They Like” illustrate such invisible mechanisms of communication. The failure to communicate reflects a distrust in language per se, Winther claims (134). This is visible in the final sentence of “Story”: “how capable he is of deceiving me in the act and after the act in the telling” (6). Conversely, in “The Seals” the act of storytelling is a means for reconciliation and source of mystery for the narrator. Grieving the loss of her sister, the interior monologue brings the narrator closer to acceptance. Davis reveals that language may be flawed and insufficient, but it is the most important tool to solve enigmas and create meaning. The close readings demonstrate that narrative disclosure, failed or reverse epiphanies, and acute attention to language are the trademarks of Davis’s original style. These aspects arguably add new dimensions to the epiphany’s ability to reflect and resolve emotional complexities in a story (Baldeshwiler 236). Hence, Davis explores the limits and possibilities of the short story genre. Her curiosity makes her textual practice innovative, abandoning the traditional sense of narrative closure and the perception that epiphanies bring forth universal insight.

The second chapter examined the feminist significance of Davis’s narrative strategies. The close readings showed that the feminist significance is manifold and relates both to the form and content of her stories. In this thesis, I argue that her literary innovation not only concerns her formal style, but a nuanced perception of motherhood and critique of the heterosexual relationship in literature. The first subsection examined to what extent features of narrative disclosure and reverse epiphanies were unifiable with Friedman and Fuchs’s notion of breaking patriarchal structures in literature (3). I asserted that Davis alternates their parameters to not only signify nonlinear stories, but a textual practice that is nuanced and that gives up the notion of control. Davis produces a new sense of narrative closure by reversing epiphanies, celebrating mystery and letting the story be a vehicle for reconciliation and growth. She carves out a fictional space in which the curious observer unfolds freely. The fascination with unresolved problems arguably echoes a rejection of the patriarchal belief in stable meanings. In doing so, Davis forges new ways of thinking and challenges authoritative storytelling.

Motherhood and the relationship with mothers are frequent topics with Davis. The stories "Glenn Gould" "What You Learn About the Baby" "A Double Negative" specifically address the politics of reproduction. Recounting how mothers are restricted to aspire creatively, the stories illuminate narratives of “becoming a woman”. By addressing the

struggles of newly fledged mothers, these stories recall the feminist motto that what is personal is political, first coined in a paper by Hanisch. Again, the act of storytelling surfaces as a means to understand the current emotions. This point includes absent fathers, lack of time to read and write, and the difficulty in creating intimacy with an infant, often symptoms of post-partum depression. The narrator in “What You Learn About the Baby” makes a direct address to a collective “you”. I interpret this as an attempt to make the narrator’s experience universal, contrary to experimental writers such as Sarraute, who does not use the feminine gender to generalize what she is writing about (Wittig 60). Arguably, the strong presence of feminist themes reinforces the argument that Davis’s experimental form is breaking patriarchal structures in literature.

Whether these stories conform to or critique heteronormative ideals is a central question. On the one hand, they could be interpreted as a continuation of heteronormativity, as they contain mostly heterosexual relationships and emphasize the reproductive aspects of sexuality. However, the way Davis depicts these relationships reveals a critique of the institution of heterosexuality. Narrator-characters in stories such as “Glenn Gould”, “What You Learn About the Baby” and “A Double Negative”, learn that having a child deprives them of their artistic freedom, mostly because the paternal figures are completely absent or absentminded. The frequent use of ellipsis reinforces this argument. Thus, the mothers seek both distraction and intimacy in the relationships with their infants. Their intense longing is illustrated by one narrator’s obsession with the *Mary Tyler Moore show* to escape her life. This narrator’s distraction is in contrast to another’s fascination with the peculiar details of her child, underlining the nuanced view. The stories complicate the notion of intimacy between mother and child by presenting motherhood not only as a patriarchal institution, but as a source of fascination and intimacy. The mothers are portrayed as un-nurturing, disoriented, and what common conceptions might call “bad mothers”. Their descriptions are not evil or morally degenerate, but they have a pressing urgency to act the way they do. This unapologetic attitude is also apparent in the story “Selfish”. In addition, issues of communication and intimacy are subjects in “The Seals”. Problematized here is not a specific heterosexual relationship, but the compulsory notion of the couple. Despite being ignored by feminist critics, Davis arguably offers a liberating and less constrained conception of the mother’s role and reveals the detrimental effects of heterosexual relationships.

In the conversation on women and writing, Davis is faced with Moi's dilemma of eliminating her gendered subjectivity and writing as a universal human being. Her response is

twofold. On the one hand, particularly “What You Learn About the Baby” shows that Davis attempts to unite her gendered subjectivity and the universal perspective through the collective pronoun “you” and the mother’s experience. On the other hand, Davis seems reluctant to identify with the feminist movement, at the risk of reducing her writings to a manifesto. The movement has in turn been equally reluctant to discuss her work. Yet the strong presence of feminist themes and formal innovation illustrate that Davis’s dilemma is highly relevant. Throughout this thesis, I have come closer to the conclusion that Davis does not eliminate her gendered subjectivity. Instead, she expands it and attempts to make a female gendered subjectivity universal by displaying its diversity and innovative forms.

This thesis has been inspired by an ambition to investigate stories that exceed the normative and rational. Due to her language play and narrative disclosure, Davis can strike many as a confusing writer. Commonly, her stories produce more questions than answers. It is the reasoning itself and not the final answer that are in focus. Then, the short story surfaces as a vehicle to understand emotions and problems. Moreover, Davis conforms neither to the short story genre nor to other feminist experimental writers. This might be one explanation to the feminist disinterest in her work. Yet the close readings show that her textual practice has feminist significance because the playful style challenges conventional storytelling. In other words, Lydia Davis’s combination of formal experiment and feminist themes offers useful knowledge about the relationship between gender politics and the experimental form.

In further research, it might be relevant to examine how dreams and intertextuality influence her original work. For instance, the collection *Can’t and Won’t* contains stories in the form of retold dreams. Also, intertextuality and Davis’s work as a translator are closely linked, as the most relevant aspects are her rewritings and interactions with Proust and Kafka. Future research on Davis’s narrative strategies should also include more focus on characterization. Lanser has worked extensively on the feminist narrative and point of view. A central question is to what extent Davis differs in describing male and female characters. Similarly, Proust makes no difference in the way he describes male and female characters (Wittig 61). The stories discussed in this thesis have revealed a male and paternal perspective that is characterized by apathy and inequality. Nevertheless, Davis’s story “Break It Down” is an ideal object for further study, as it includes the male perspective on a sexual relationship. However, this discussion is beyond the scope of this thesis.

I have stated that Davis’s narrative practice differs from that of other feminist experimental writers. The difference lies in Davis’s combination of formal innovation and

feminist struggles in everyday life, as these aspects rarely occur in the same story. Her emphasis is thus on diversity and avoiding labels such as “woman writer”. Other feminist experimental writers on the other hand, share a commitment to combining extreme content with formally radical techniques. Their aim is to enact varieties of gender, sex, race, class, and nation-based experience that, they suggest, may only be “represented” accurately through the experimental unmaking of the dominant structures of rationality (Berry 1). A close reading that compares and contrasts Davis with writers such as Valerie Solanas, Kathy Acker, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Chantel Chawaf, Jeanette Winterson and Lynda Barry might reveal interesting parallels and differences between the projects of these various authors. In addition, a more detailed comparison and contrast with Woolf could offer useful insight into this topic, and reinforce my argument further. As with Woolf, Davis’s playful style reveals that the goal of feminist struggle should be to deconstruct binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity (Moi 14). Based on the close readings and discussions in this thesis, Davis merits to be incorporated within the still-emerging postmodern canon of feminist experimental writers.

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