Author reconstruction in Carol Shields’s
Swann

Master’s Diploma Thesis

Supervisor: Mgr. Martina Horáková, Ph.D.
I declare that I have worked on this thesis independently, using only the primary and secondary sources listed in the bibliography.

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Author’s signature
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Introduction

Lost Things by Mary Swann

It sometimes happens when looking for

Lost objects, a book, a picture or

A coin or spoon,

That something falls across the mind—

Not quite a shadow but what a shadow would be

In a place that lacked light.

As though the lost things have withdrawn

Into themselves, books returned

To paper or wood or thought,

Coins or spoons to simple ores,

Lustreless and without history,

Waiting out of sight

And becoming part of a larger loss

Without a name

Or definition or form

Not unlike what touches us

In moments of shame (Swann 313).
The poem above entitled “Lost Things” is a poem written by the fictional character Mary Swann, who is the focus of Carol Shields’s novel *Swann*, published in 1987. The novel concludes as all the attendees of the Swann symposium rely on their memory alone to re-assemble Mary Swann’s poem together, line by line, after Mary Swann’s work and possessions have been stolen, discarded or lost. Whether the loss of these belongings has been intentional, (in case of theft or discardment), or unintentional (in case of luggage lost at the airport or a damaged manuscript used for wrapping fish), it still begs the question what does being lost mean? The poem first presents inconsequential items being lost, such as a book, a coin or a spoon, yet with the loss they become “withdrawn into themselves” and return to the matter they were made from – lost from the world without a “name”, “definition” or “form”. The shape of these objects has been forfeited and they have dissipated into nothingness. Mary Swann concludes the poem with a surprising revelation, where this loss occurs “in moments of shame”. Shame is traditionally felt when one tries to steal or take what does not belong to them. In the case of the novel *Swann*, it is the shame fictional readers and critics feel when they want to claim ownership for something that is not theirs to claim. *Swann* is a novel about the many losses of the writer Mary Swann and the ways in which her collection of poetry, *Swann’s Songs*, is appropriated by her fictional readers – Sarah Maloney, Morton Jimroy, Rose Hindmarch and Frederic Cruzzi. Similarly, these readers “lose” Mary Swann’s belongings in order to support their own hypotheses in answering who Mary Swann is construing her through their own self-perception. As these readers project their life’s experience in defining Mary Swann, Shields befittingly notes that any reader of any work interprets the given text differently depending on their life’s experiences. As Mary Swann’s personal items have been lost, stolen and
discarded when they do not fit the readers’s expectations, the readers are led to focus on what gives their lives meaning, and in doing so, appropriate the author.

Carol Shields’s fifth novel embraces the reader response theory and plays with the notion of the importance of the author and the reader. Shields has amassed a considerable body of work throughout her career, spanning from poetry to novels to drama, and is certainly no stranger to questioning the novel’s form or the author’s history. Swann is a transitional novel for Shields where she fully embodies postmodern narrative techniques so as for the reader to gain a deeper understanding of the narrators.

As Shields relied on little accidents of fate and luck in life, I, too, was first introduced to the work of Carol Shields by chance. Upon reading her work, I came across various coincidences and similarities (such as the same date of birth) which made me relate to Shields - the writer, but also to Shields - the woman— a woman who had five children, lived around the world and wrote as eloquently as she did. My reading of Swann revealed a multi-layered novel that required multiple readings, each one leading me to discover something new. Upon doing some research, I discovered that Shields’s had considerable difficulty with this project, forcing her to abandon the novel half-way through, while returning to it several years later. Shields was thinking through the art form, what the genre of the novel could offer her and how she should treat it for Swann was written during a period of transformation for Shields as a writer. Shields became interested in postmodern criticism. Therefore, she challenged the formal structure of the novel and decided to use several narrative voices, include letters and even a screenplay, to offer a different structure than was common in the traditional novel form. Shields reveals:
My favourite book, I have to say, is *Swann*. When I wrote that book, I was reading a lot of postmodern criticism, which can be very damaging to a writer, but at the same time, it has this effect: it made me realize just how accommodating the novel form is… It seemed to me that the novel could be much more elastic, and it could contain more. It seemed like a big, baggy thing that I could put anything into, and I did… I felt like I could make a structure that was very different from … any novel that I’d ever read. I could do something quite different.” (*Staines* 11)

As Shields became a more recognized author, she finally chose to break free from the bonds of the traditional structure of the novel that were constricting her. Shields began to experiment with the structure of the novel, literally exploring, within the pages of the novel, the question of art, how it is made and who can make it. In *Swann*, Shields explores the relationship between the reader and the author of art, and investigates the authenticity and truth behind the author’s words. Shields’s divides the chapters in *Swann* according to four protagonists in the novel, the readers and critics of Mary Swann’s poetry, and as each of them narrates their own story, they offer different interpretations of Mary Swann’s work. The four narrators begin to ask questions about the mystery behind Mary Swann’s art. Some search for Swann’s literary predecessors that may have influenced Mary Swann despite her restrictive and domestic background, while others believe that Swann’s text should be analysed on its own, without considering external influences. As the readers of Mary Swann’s work investigate the mystery of her art, they find themselves in the poetry.

The thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter examines Carol Shields as a writer and what writing means to her. For Shields, writing is a home where she can truly be herself and where she can give voice to the voiceless. The second
chapter examines the use of literary theories in *Swann* through the perspectives of Roland Barthes’s “Death of the Author” and Michel Foucault’s “What is an Author?” Mary Swann must first die as an author to then become individually reconstructed by the reader to demonstrate that interpreting art is an ever-changing and shifting process determined by both the author and the reader. The final chapter provides a close reading of *Swann* and analyzes the fictional readers of Mary Swann’s work — Sarah Maloney, Morton Jimroy, Rose Hindmarch and Frederic Cruzzi as they view themselves through Mary Swann and her poetry. The last section of this chapter investigates how the four characters have come together at the Swann symposium while adroitly addressing the gap between appearance and reality.
Chapter I: Carol Shields as a Writer and on Writing

Shields has published over twenty publications in almost all types of literary genres ranging from novels, poems and plays, while raising five children. It can be observed that her novels have been influenced by both the literary movements of the time, as well as by her own life’s experiences, moving across continents and countries.

The following section strives to ratify Shields’s position as a writer and a woman and scrutinizes the meanings of this intersection. First, a short biography of Carol Shields and her writing life is provided. Then, Shields’s themes of domesticity, dailiness, ordinariness “whose ardent and consistently expressed feminism need not be inconsistent with domestic happiness” (Staines 3) are examined where the question of identity and relationships are explored in conjunction with authenticity and truth. Further, Carol Shields’s concept on the art of writing discussing who can make art and what art is, is established. Next, Carol Shields’s writing styles and her use of narrative voices are investigated. Lastly, Carol Shields’s influences and her literary predecessors are presented.

1.1. Carol Shields’s Biography

Shields was born as Carol Ann Warner on June 2, 1935 in Oak Park, Illinois. She matriculated at Hanover College in 1953 and completed her studies in 1957 with a major in English and a minor in History. Shields’s attained her teaching degree “so I would have something to fall back on, if I were widowed or divorced, or failed to find a husband” (qtd. in Werlock 9) While Shields was studying at Exeter University in England she met her future husband, Donald Shields. Upon their marriage, which was held in the summer of her graduating year in 1957, Carol Shields moved to Canada. The young couple often relocated, living in Toronto, Ottawa, Winnipeg and Victoria, as well
as being on sabbaticals in England and France. When Shields started to publish her first short stories, she also gave birth to her first three children. In 1964, the Shields family returned to Toronto after two years spent in England, and another daughter was born. In 1965, Shields won the CBC Young Writers Competition for poetry. In 1967, the family moved to Ottawa and the Shields family had their last child. In 1975, at the age of forty, Shields received her MA in English at the University of Ottawa with her thesis on Susanna Moodie’s writing. Within a year, Shields published her first novel, _Small Ceremonies_ in 1976. From 1976-1977, she was a lecturer of English at the University of Ottawa and published her second novel _The Box Garden_. The next decade saw Shields teaching at three universities in Canada and publishing three more works until in 1987, Shields published _Swann_. _Swann_ won the Arthur Ellis Award for Best Canadian Mystery the following year. Shields continued to write and in 1993, she published her most popular novel, _The Stone Diaries_, which won the Governor General’s Award for fiction as well as numerous other awards. Shields also continued her professorships at many universities across Canada, and received a number of honorary doctorates. Her final novel, _Unless_, was published in 2002. In 2003, Carol Shields died of breast cancer at the age of sixty three.

Since her death, Shields’s popularity continues to rise. Every year there are additional publications offering wider interpretations of her works and her work continues to being adapted into films. Most recently, her last novel, _Unless_, published in 2002 was adapted into a film and premiered at the Toronto Film festival in fall of 2016. Shields continues to inspire and her extraordinary work on ordinary life has ensured that her work shall never be forgotten.

Looking at the facts of Carol Shields life, it is difficult not to notice the many identities and achievements Shields managed to fulfill: a writer, an academic, a mother
and a wife. It was not always easy to combine home and writing. When considering her early writing days, Shields wrote about this period of her life that seemed to go on forever but “it was a mere twelve years, over in a flash” (*Dropped threads* 345). Despite the fact that Shields played all these important roles in her life, she considered her role as a mother her “most important work” (*Unless* 12). As such, she called herself “the mother who typed” (Lehmann-Haupt). But as someone determined to make it work and achieve something, she found the time to write, no matter how small it may have seemed: “And I didn’t write on weekends, and I didn’t write in the evening. None of this was possible. But I used to try to get that hour, just before they came home for lunch, eleven to twelve …. then I tried to write a couple of pages, that was all I ever asked myself to do” (*Unless* 4). As Carol Shields became a published author, she “used the money to pay for those two celestial beings in the dream heaven of writerly mothers: the baby-sitter and the dry cleaner” (*Unless* 4).

A writer writes about what they know and with five children, a husband and a family life of 20 years, Shields knew best about home. She knew about the ordinariness of domestic life, caring for a family and also finding the time to write. And so, Shields employed these themes in devising her plots and characters. However, she was criticized that she was merely a women’s writer — a writer writing about domesticity and the ordinary family life that could only interest women. But Shields transformed the ordinary into the extra-ordinary by portraying the importance of women and writing and giving these women a voice, a place in the world. Thus the next section, elaborates on the themes of domesticity, dailiness and ordinariness in order to show that even domestic lives are important and this environment can nurture a writing life.
1.2. Themes of Domesticity, Dailiness and Ordinariness in Finding a Home

Shields’s settings were often placed in the home. It is in the home where the everyday routines, daily chores and schedules are met and where the family gathers upon returning from work or school. Shields also explores relationships within the home whether they are familial bonds between mothers and daughters, parents and children or the relationship between a man and a woman. As these relationships are disclosed, Shields uses them to comment on the roles played by the author and reader, authenticity and truth in what is being said as well as and the voice and its absence in the text.

However current these themes may be, Shields was placed into a category of domestic writers who, by the literary community, were considered less worthy. Shields was often belittled as merely a “women’s writer” (Ellen) when she wrote about domesticity. In contrast, men who write “so-called domestic novels … are called sensitive, contemporary reflections of modern life” (Anderson 141). It is this criticism that has accompanied Shields’s throughout her writing career even though it is an obvious double standard.

In terms of plot, Shields wanted to distance herself from the classic narrative of the hero or heroine facing a crisis that must first worsen before it can be resolved. Shields considered this story line ungenuine and was more interested “in the idea of the arc of a human life, as a plot in itself. It's the only plot I'm really interested in. Plots seem quite contrived things, and I don't think writers can get away with them in the way they once did … People aren't willing to be so manipulated any more” (Thomas). In order to remain authentic, Shields preferred to focus on relatable events and settings. Shields wanted “wallpaper in my novels, cereal bowls, cupboards, cousins, buses, local elections, head colds, cramps, newspapers” (Unless 5). Whether or not these things were categorized as being too domestic was of little importance to the writer, Shields,
because she believed that these small ceremonies in the home—of setting tables and sitting down at these tables—are a significant part of family life and brings the family together. “Almost everyone I know loves to set a table … I have never read in a novel about anyone setting a table and the particular pleasure of doing that—a domestic detail, it is an offering and I feel these ceremonies are significant” (Horizons). These are the details that remain in our memories and represent home.

The home plays a critical role in a person’s development and it is in the family that one’s identity is established. As the identity is formed, one can be their true selves in the home. Even though Shields has been addressed “to do domestic ordinariness wonderfully” (Morrison), her work offers much more. I suggest that it is not ordinariness of the characters but humanness. Shields’s characters are so familiar that everyone can relate them back to a family member or friend. Some confuse this fact as being ordinary as shown when Frederic Cruzzi and Sarah Maloney discuss Mary Swann at the restaurant on the ground level of the Swann Symposium. Sarah Maloney begins “I hated like hell to admit she was so …” (Swann 276). Frederic Cruzzi fills in the word, “Ordinary? […] Mrs. Swann, in my judgement, was an ordinary woman” (Swann 276). Although Maloney was disappointed that Swann’s genius held no greater mystery, Shields suggests that being ordinary is not unfavourable. The ordinariness of Swann can be found in each of us and no exceptional education, background or life situation is required. It is this familiarity that makes the characters feel very authentic. Another factor contributing to their authenticity is learning about their daily chores and routines. Shields does not shy away from presenting the characters doing housework. Although sometimes monotonous, there is also a simplicity to housework. In Shields’s Swann, one of the characters, Sarah Maloney, feels that “there are rewards in cleaning things—everyone should know this—the corners of rooms, dresser drawers, and such …
Isn’t life simple when pared down to its purities?” (Swann 17). Shields demonstrates how the results of cleaning can yield immediate and visible results and it is this fact that make them so satisfying. Cleaning can be uncomplicated compared to the complexities of life. In addition, cleaning the house can correspond to a cleansing ritual of the mind, where a clean house is metaphorical to a clean psyche.

Another motif that Shields elaborates on is a daily routine. A routine provides structure and maintains character. Sarah Maloney of Swann comments on the redemptiveness of dailiness “dailiness to be sure has its hard deposits of ennui, but it is also, as Mary Swann suggests, redemptive” (Swann 24). Sarah Maloney loves the stability of routines and is comforted by how predictable her life is down to what meal she eats at lunch time every day. Rose Hindmarch also takes solace in her routines, “Rose is a happy woman; her routines make her happy” (Swann 134) and these routines are pleasurable and “reassure her, let her know she’s part of the world” (Swann 134). In a world where nothing is constant, Rose feels that she can count on these routines.

It is without these routines when one can become disoriented and dangerous, where “something snap[s]” (Swann 221). When one feels out of place and cannot fall back on what is inherently familiar, they can lose control and in these moments of lost control anything can happen.

Home is where we live most of our lives including our daily routines and ordinariness, and it is in the home where one develops their most significant relationships. In Swann, these relationships differ narrator to narrator. For Sarah Maloney, it is her mother-daughter relationship that “is a kind of blood-hyphen that is, finally, indissoluble” (Swann 47). For Morton Jimroy, it is the relationship he used to have with his wife and now, his sense of home is lost as he is renting someone else’s home and yearns for what he used to have: “He missed the cups of strong tea she used
to bring him after dinner, and even the way she set them down – hard – on his desk” (Swann 69). Jimroy’s sense of home is lost. Similarly to Jimroy, Rose Hindmarch’s sense of home is also rented but Rose also imagines a relationship with her renter, Jean. Hindmarch “spends her Friday nights reading and waiting … She feels it important to be there if Jean needs her” (Swann 136). Rose’s most significant relationship is imaginary suspended in the aspect of what if? Frederic Cruzzi’s most significant relationship was with his wife who he had loved, “How he had loved her at that moment! More it seemed than any time in their life together” (Swann 209) but she had passed away and Frederic Cruzzi is now struggling to find his new normal, his new home.

Finding a home – a place where one belongs – does not need to be found in a building but it can be found in the writing process. In writing one can write their true feelings, reveal their identity and establish their voice. Therefore, when one’s voice is heard or, in contrast, when it is missing is an important point to consider. In Swann, not only is Mary Swann murdered, and therefore, absent, all that remains of her voice, her writing is also being gradually stolen and as such, allows for others to appropriate her. If others are appropriating Swann (in this case, the four narrators in Swann) then who can the reader of the novel, trust? Who is authentic? Shields questions the truthfulness of each narrator as they confess to shaping their stories to fit their needs. It is, therefore, up to the reader to absorb all the narrations and decide for themselves which pieces of text to adopt and which to discard. Shields uses “this exaggerated self-consciousness, along with the fragmented narration, [to] provide a postmodernist challenge to mystery conventions that call for one authoritative figure, who presents the reader with one knowable and verifiable truth” (Roy 122). Shields assumes that it is up to the reader to make sense of what is true to them instead of having someone tell them the truth. Truth
is not found in the writer but rather the reader of the text. And the writer must, in the words of Emily Dickenson, “tell the truth, but tell it slant” (*Unless* 12). Humans are imperfect and cannot comprehend truth if it is told too brightly and forcefully. Truth should be told in little pieces and indirectly, by use of multiple narrators, in forms of letters and other types of narratives for one narrator can never be trusted. Shields adopts this concept by giving the reader numerous points of view and narratives. Shields even makes Frederic Cruzzi educate the reader that, “I have found that it is sometimes better to look at the universe with a squint, to subject oneself to a deliberate distortion, and hope that out of the jumbled vision, or jumbled notes if you like, will fall the accident that is the truth” (*Swann* 193). Therefore, truth is accidental—a coincidence and one must always remain sceptical in posing questions if what the author or narrator is disclosing is truthful.

Shields doubts truthfulness and reality through Sarah Maloney when she wonders, “Ah, but what is reality? … Reality is no more than a word that begins with *r* and ends with a *y*” (*Swann* 36). Sarah continues to distrust reality when she envisions herself as a fictional character, “It happens fairly often, this sensation of being a captive of fiction, a sheepish player in my own *roman-à-clef*” (*Swann* 37). Shields reinstates to the reader that Maloney is a fictitious character and reminds them to remain objective in the reading of her text.

Shields’s themes of domesticity and dailiness provide a perfect setting for developing an identity and other significant relationships. Some argue that Shields’s characters are ordinary but they are only human. As Shields’s characters search for their home—a place where they belong, they embellish or discard some information, making the reader question the authenticity and truthfulness of the narrator. Shields, however,
gives the reader the tools to remain sceptical and to choose which piece of information to accept and which to reject.

1.3 Carol Shields’s Art of Writing

Writing is an art form reflecting what the artist is feeling inside, what the artist wants to or even needs to tell the world and Shields’s viewpoint of this is no different. Besner asserts it is important to note “how a writer’s life and her writing life communicate” (Unless 9). Shields’s stories often revolve around writers and significant persons in the literary world. Shields’s characters find their voice through their writing and Shields is interested in “the way the language comes out and goes onto the page, how you can give it voice” (Wachtel 117). It is this voice that a character finds by telling their life story and their experience through writing. Shields feels that the life story of one human being need not be any more interesting than that of another. The main plot is in the character’s internal transformation as they journey through life. Carol Shields confesses,

A human life, and this is the only plot I think that I am interested in, is this primordial plot of birth, love, work, decline and death. This is just life working away toward the end of life. What is the story of that life? Can we tell our own life story with any sort of truth at all? Of course, we know we can’t. I mean, our life stories, whether we write them or not, are a tissue of evasions, or, perhaps, enhancements. So, that story that we carry around in our head, the story we call our life, we can’t know our birth and death, but we create them somehow, imaginatively. There are other parts of our lives in which we’re quite happy to erase. There are
other parts that we want to touch up just a little bit. So what we end with is a fiction (Hole 2).

When writing about our life story, the writer can never give an accurate account of what really happened. It is impossible be objective about personal events. Due to our memory, some things cannot be recalled and sometimes, our memory does not serve well in remembering negative situations and events. Therefore, any text that is written is fiction. So the purpose of writing lies not in the plot, and not in telling the truth but rather it serves as a vessel to find a voice, where writing serves “as a form of redemption, redeeming the lives of lost or vanished women” (Staines 12). By writing about these women, their voices can be heard.

In the novel, Swann, our vanished woman is Mary Swann. Swann attempts to find her voice by writing her poems. She then travels to a publisher in the greatest of Ontario’s winter storms and passes on her poems symbolizing that her voice will be heard only to come home that night and be butchered and murdered to death by her husband who wants “to shut her up” (Swann 250). Swann’s voice, however, survives in her work. She can still be heard in her book of poems, Swann’s Songs. Yet this voice also begins to disappear. As Mary Swann’s belongings and manuscripts gradually disappear, by the end of the novel, all that remains is what is left in the readers’s minds — what they remember.

Writing does not only serve to give life to a voice, but it can also function as a cleansing ritual for the author of the written work — to take emotional inventory. Shields explains:

I think a lot about this business of art and who makes it and who gets to name the culture in our society. And what it means to make art. Without getting too pretentious about this, I think that the ability to take the words
in my head and to put them on paper has again and again rescued me from what I might think of as emotional bankruptcy. The fact that I can actually still do this has given me the sense of making something” (Shields qtd. in Wachtel 97).

Creating art gives Shields a sense of purpose in life and by putting her emotions in her writing, Shields has released these emotions onto paper as if freeing herself from them.

For Shields, art is an interactive creative process. “Art isn’t looking at something and appreciating; it is actually making. And I feel that this making that I have been privileged to do has given a centre of my life that I might not otherwise have” (Shields qtd. in Wachtel 97). Whereas Shields creates art through the process of writing, the readers of her work create an art of their own. Every reader’s interpretation is different because everyone’s life experience allowing them to interpret works of art is different. In Swann, Shields embraces this concept that art is relative by presenting four different interpretations of Mary Swann and her Swann’s Songs. As the four characters search for the answer to “Who is Mary Swann?” (Swann 128), they only discover themselves in the artist. The mystery in Swann lies not in the murder itself but rather in “the mystery of art and how it’s made from common clay” (Unless 11). Shields uses the conventions of a detective story to deliver clues revealing that no one can actually answer this question because Swann has been recreated by her readers.

1.4. Carol Shields’s Writing Style

Carol Shields discusses art in her postmodern literary mystery Swann. In lieu of following the typical plot of whodunit, it is revealed in the very first chapter that Angus Swann is responsible for the brutal murder of his wife and proceeds to kill himself. The
novel does not focus on the mystery surrounding the death of Mary Swann. Alternatively, the novel uncovers another mystery and poses the question of what is art? Carol Shields comments on her strategies to pursue two mysteries in her novel when in an interview with Rachel Wachtel, she says she was interested in: “The mystery of how art gets made, how people of ordinary breadth can make works of art, and I’ve never been able to figure that out. And then there’s this little, tiny mystery going around which is the mystery of the book: the disappearing manuscripts and the theft and so on” (Wachtel 118-9). *Swann* is Shields’s first novel where she decides to fully adopt the postmodernist notion of multiple narrators and varied genres, whereas *Swann* reads more like a parody rather than being a mystery.

*Swann* does “not follow conventional mystery plots, which usually begin with the disruption of societal order through a murder or other crime, include a second and more central narrative about a detective who unravels the details of the crime, and end with punishment of the criminal and a return to the established order” (Roy 113). There is no detective trying to investigate the crime leading the perpetrator to justice, rather, the mystery is in the way literary academics appropriate Swann’s work and use it for their own gain in seeking recognition and fame. Shields makes it a parody by not using Mary Swann’s murder as the central theme of the novel but investigates the metaphorical murder of Swann as Swann’s work is lost and stolen, and as the four narrators dispose of whatever materials that do not fit their description of Swann. Roy claims that “the most investigated body of this novel thus is not Mary Swann’s physical body but the body of her literary work and reputation, on which crimes continue to be perpetuated” (Roy 123). Sarah Maloney decides to discard the rhyming dictionary that Swann used, Morton Jimroy begins fabricating literary influences Swann did not have whereas Rose Hindmarch has purchased new items that never belonged to Mary.
Swann’s memorial. Paradoxically, the reader learns that Mary Swann’s poetry, *Swann’s Songs*, has been created by the husband and wife team, Frederic and Hildë Cruzzi.

To make it a postmodern parody, Shields uses switching points of view from first-person narration to third-person narration to proximate or distance the reader from the text. First-person narration offers an intimacy to the reader as the narrator speaks directly to the reader. Shields introduces her novel in first-person narration, where Sarah Maloney describes how she has discovered Mary Swann. The following chapters are written in third-person and dissociate from the closeness of first-person, where now the reader is being told a story indirectly. The out-of-place screenplay at the end of the novel re-introduces the four characters and exaggerates the influence of the director on the audience by telling the camera what to focus on or what the director should concentrate on. The tone of the sentence in the first paragraph appears ironic where: “The director hopes to remain unobtrusive throughout, allowing dialogue and visual effects (and not private passions) to carry the weight of the narrative” (*Swann* 231). Yet a few pages later in the Director’s note, the director is told exactly what to do: “appearance and reality must be framed with silence and intensity, since it can be said to define the submerged dichotomy of the film” (*Swann* 241). Shields instructs the director on what to do and what the main theme of the film is, influencing not only the director as well as the reader of this screenplay.

Another unusual element is that Shields employs four secondary characters to speak about the central character, Mary Swann. Two characters have come to know Swann merely through reading her slim book of poems, and the other two have met Swann only briefly and impersonally. And yet, these four characters are the ones selected to offer the reader comprehensive information on Mary Swann’s life and death.
Shields criticizes literary academics in the novel when she allows the literary critics to appropriate Swann in the first four chapters but it is not until the final screenplay, at the Swann symposium, where this criticism is most pronounced. Shields points out the pompousness of Morton Jimroy, when he repeatedly corrects Willard Lang mid-speech that he has not two but three honourary degrees. The mere fact that there is a whole symposium held on account of a thin book of poems is also laughable. Perhaps most ironic is when Rose expresses, “Wouldn’t it be funny if … all sixty-seven of us…here to talk about Mary Swann’s poems, and what if – what if not a single one of u has a copy of her book?” (Swann 303). And this is the case. All the academics who have gathered to study Swann’s poetry do not even have a copy of her work. Shields suggests that these academics are only there for their own personal interests to become recognized and famous thanks to Swann.

Shields’s various writing styles and narrative techniques are in part due to her literary predecessor Susanna Moodie, where she reveals that it is through the reading of Moodie’s work that Shields came to realize how flexible the novel form can be (Susanna Moodie 18). The following section discusses Shields literary influences.

1.5. Carol Shield’s Literary Influences

Carol Shields has always loved reading. From a young age, Shields admits to having been a voracious reader when she was a child (Anderson 150). Some of the books she has loved have been The Bobbsey Twins, Anne of Green Gables, The Five Little Peppers and Tales of the Limberlost. In addition, Shields lists her literary influences as Jane Austen —who Shields went on to write an autobiography about, Alice Munro, Mavis Gallant and John Updike. In “A Conversation with Carol Shields”,
Shields explains “All of the authors I have ever read have influenced my writing. Alice Munro has shown us what the written word can do. She has been more than a model. Mavis Gallant has shown us what is possible in a fictional transaction. John Updike has been very important to me. Jane Austen has figured out the strategies of fiction for us and made them plain” (n.p.). The research a writer conducts is often in the written works they read. Through her love for reading, Shields came across the many uses of language and structure in the texts and so she used this information in her own writing.

It cannot be denied, however, that Shields was most influenced and inspired by the topic of her dissertation, Susanna Moodie. This dissertation became Shields’s first published book titled *Susanna Moodie: Voice and Vision*. In this book, Shields applies what Susanna Moodie used in her own literature. Shields discovers that Susanna Moodie’s “looseness of the form permits her to shift the narration when she chooses: sometimes she tells the story herself, sometimes a friend relates it, and sometimes the story is overheard” (*Susanna Moodie* 22). Shields practices this technique in many of her novels, primarily in *Swann*.

Carol Shields admired Susanna Moodie as a woman writer and wondered why “there is no statue of her” (“Carol Shields”) when “she wrote two very important books about Canadian pioneer life. She is an immense figure. She was from a very genteel family and came here and lived a very rough life. I can just see the statue with the big, full skirt. It would be wonderful” (“Carol Shields”). In a way, Shields comments on the plight of women writers that lack recognition although they deserve it. In Shields eyes, Moodie deserved a statue to be commemorated by.

As Shields has her literary predecessors, Morton Jimroy in *Swann* is also focused on finding Mary Swann’s. Swann’s writing is compared to “the Emily Dickenson of Upper Canada” (*Swann* 129) and so it is expected that Mary Swann’s
favourite authors would be of influence and of a good reputation. Nonetheless, the reader discovers that Mary Swann’s favourite authors are actually Pearl Buck and Edna Ferber (Swann 260). These are not well-respected writers according to the negative reaction generated by the academics. It is Jimroy’s belief that literary influences can play a significant part in establishing how an ordinary person can become an exceptional author but his quest proves futile. Failing to establish any literal connections, Jimroy desperately begins associating Swann to the works of Mother Goose (Swann 261).

The following chapter investigates two literary theories that have played a significant role in Carol Shields’s writing of Swann.
Chapter II: Carol Shields as a Theoretician

The second chapter focuses on Carol Shields as a theoretician in *Swann*. *Swann* demonstrates the importance of the reader when reading an author’s work. It does not focus on the fictional author, the unknown posthumous Mary Swann but rather on the ways in which Shields presents four interpreters of Mary Swann’s work – Sarah Maloney, Morton Jimroy, Rose Hindmarch and Frederic Cruzzi as appropriating Mary Swann. It focuses on two literary theoretical concepts presented in Roland Barthes’s “Death of the Author” and Michel Foucault’s “What is an Author” discussing how they are utilized in *Swann*. First, the two theories will be introduced briefly. Then, each essay will be analyzed as they inform the fictional world of Shields’s novel. Both theoretical concepts comment on issues related to authorship, proposing the author must symbolically die in order for the reader to reconstruct the text and become, in the process, its new author. Further, Mary Swann’s gradual disappearance in terms of her possessions and published books of poetry being stolen will be clarified.

2.1. Essays on Authorship: Roland Barthes’s “Death of the Author” and Michel Foucault’s “What is an Author”

In *Swann*, Carol Shields raises the question of authorship in contemporary criticism. Shields’s minimizes the role of the author but rather establishes the role of the readers and their influence on the text. Shields literally kills off her fictional author to echo the symbolic death of the author proposed by Barthes in “The Death of the Author” and questions the position of the author, similarly, to Michel Foucault in his “What is an Author?”, showing how the author, Mary Swann, is reconstructed by her readers.
The reader-response approach focuses on the role of the reader in interpreting a text rather than studying the author or the content of the text. Reader-response theory affirms that the text takes on meaning through the reader. Louise Rosenblatt’s essays in this area, *Making Meaning with Texts: Selected Essays*, establish that “the reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment and a particular physical condition. These and many other moments in a never-to-be-duplicated combination determine his response to the text” (Rosenblatt qtd. in Church 72). As all these factors pertaining to the individual readers differ from reader to reader, the readers may arrive at different interpretations of the text. While the reader response theory stresses the importance of the reader and their experience, it minimizes the study of the author and the biographical approach to provide meaning behind the author’s work.

In “The Death of the Author”, Barthes complains that “the image of literature to be found in contemporary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his history, his tastes, his passions” (143). The work of literature cannot be separated from the author and all the personal details pertaining to that author play a role in their writing. Barthes rejects the notion of authorial intent and places importance on destination rather than origin (144). The origin can never truly be located for it is made up of pre-existing ideas that the author came across in their life. Thus, the focus should instead be on the multiplicity of meanings, “a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writing, none of them original, blend and clash” (146). This space holds all the meanings that are mixed up together and contradict each other. Given that there can be as many different meanings as constructed by the readers, then it can be interpreted that there is no inherent meaning embedded in the text.
Barthes asserts, “Once the author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile” (147). It becomes meaningless to try to arrive at one unified, universal interpretation. Barthes claims that “to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing” (147). In other words, the author would provide the meaning and it would not permit a personal experience of reading a text. However, Barthes believes that the essence of the meaning lies within the reader rather than its writer. To offer the reader the superior role in the text, Roland Barthes concludes his essay with a statement that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (148). Although Barthes suggested a metaphorical death, Shields took this further and to birth her readers, she brutally murdered the author, Mary Swann.

Michel Foucault elaborates on Barthes’s concept of the death of the Author. Both Barthes and Foucault aim to discredit the importance of the author. But whereas Barthes wants to activate the reader and find a place that was missing in literary theory for the reader, Foucault takes it further. At the beginning of his essay “What is an Author?”, Foucault surrenders the work to suit a higher purpose and claims that it is the text’s right to kill its author. Foucault states that “writing has become linked to sacrifice, even to the sacrifice of life: it is now a voluntary effacement that does not need to be represented in books, since it is brought about in the writer’s very existence. The work, which once had the duty of providing immortality, now possesses the right to kill, to be its author’s murderer” (141-2). Writing abolishes the signature of the author, and acts as if the author is dead. The author must be deconstructed in order to be reconstructed anew. The mystery lies more within the author’s disappearance or the gaps left by this disappearance. Foucault continues, “Instead, we must locate the space left empty by the author’s disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the
openings this disappearance uncovers” (143). So once the author has disappeared, the gaps must be examined to see what has been left behind.

Foucault, however, concludes his essay with “We would no longer hear the questions that have been rehashed for so long: Who really spoke? Is it really he and not someone else? With what authenticity or originality?” (160). Literary analysis is based on questions associated with the meaning behind what the author means and yet, these questions are not of any importance. No literary work can be authentic or original because every work is a product of a previous exposure to literature. Also, it can be interpreted differently according to the interpreter’s background. Therefore, Foucault rejects the idea of asking the questions above for they will suit no purpose. The author is not the subject of the work and so these questions will become redundant.

In contrast, Michel Foucault proposes new questions to the reader, “What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself? … And behind all these questions, we would hear hardly anything but the stirring of an indifference: What difference does it make who is speaking?” (160). Although new questions can be posed to replace the previous ones on how this text can be explored, there is no relevance to asking them. The text should stand alone and other analyses should be irrelevant to its value.

The reading process interacts between the author and the reader. It is the duty of the author to emphasize their limitations on the text. Given that everyone is “shaped by cultural, social, political and personal factors,” as Toril Moi claims, “it is authoritarian and manipulative to present this limited perspective as universal” (43). So the author’s intention is not universally given and in order to “undo this patriarchal practice of authority, we must … proclaim with Roland Barthes the death of the author” (Moi 63).
There is a need to replace the traditional role of the author so that they can be reconstructed by the reader.

In the next subchapter, Carol Shields’s death of her author, Mary Swann, will be investigated to provide a platform for Swann’s reconstruction by the readers.

2.2. The Death of Mary Swann

Swann ‘s protagonist, Mary Swann, is inscribed in the title. The title also refers to the metaphor of a Swan song— a final performance or activity before death. Shields purposefully uses this overt reference not only in the title but also as the title of Mary Swann’s book: Swann’s Songs. This was the final performance of Mary Swann, the last time that Mary’s voice was heard in her book of poems.

One might think that the premise of Swann is a bit exaggerated due to the gruesome nature of Mary Swann’s murder. Nonetheless, one may be surprised to hear what Margaret Atwood revealed in Staines’s book The Worlds of Carol Shields that those “who might consider this plot far-fetched will be interested to know that there was a Canadian woman poet murdered in this way: Pat Lowther, whose best-known collection is A Stone Diary” (6). Therefore, Shields’s basis of this novel is very real indeed.

Mary Swann’s death is reported to the reader, immediately on the first page of Swann that “Mary Swann. Also dead. Exceedingly dead” (11). Shields not only kills Swann, but brutally murders and dismembers her. Whereas Barthes disembodies the author’s voice, Shields forces Swann to undergo a brutal and violent murder. The brutality of the murder is described in Frederic Cruzzi’s in a third-person omniscient narrator who describes the murder as “Her husband shot her in the head at close range, probably in the early evening shortly after she returned home. He pounded her face with
a hammer, dismembered her body, crudely, with an axe, and hid the bloodied parts in a silo” (Swann 223). The portrayal of the murder where Mary is beaten with a hammer, dismembered and concealed in a silo exhibits that the murder was committed in an episode of rage.

The man who murders Mary Swann is Angus Swann. Angus is known to be a violent man who loses control and hacks the body of Swann into several pieces. Mary Swann’s repressive husband is “a dirt-poor farmer, an ignorant man given to rages” (Swann 42). Angus “begrudged his wife’s visit to the village library, that much was clear. He told anybody who’d listen that women had better things to do than gobble up time reading story books” (Swann 42). The time Angus’s wife, Mary, is not spending on her domestic duties is a loss of time and Angus does not support Mary’s endeavours.

The reader learns more about Mary Swann’s life on the farm. Mary Swann has a daughter who quickly left Nadeau when she had the chance. Swann writes poems that she hides under the linoleum in the kitchen so that her jealous husband cannot find them and destroy them. Angus is so jealous of her that he gives Mary just two minutes to borrow her books from the library and honks the whole time. Angus resents Mary’s talent, and perhaps his lack of talent and this jealousy is what makes Angus end Mary’s life and her future success. “It was also said he burned some of her poems in the cookstove and she [Mary] took to hiding them under the kitchen linoleum. A regular scoundrel, a monster. […] Why that man put a bullet right through her head and chopped her up into little pieces” (Swann 43). Angus does not approve of his wife’s writing because it gives her a way of expressing herself, of finding a voice. Mary Swann has things to say but Angus wants to silence her. When he finds out that Mary Swann goes to visit Frederic Cruzzi to publish her poems he becomes furious. He feels like less
of a man and that Mary is superior to him due to her poetic success and so he sentences Mary to death.

It is not only Angus Swann who has committed murder. For example, Morton Jimroy feels like he commits literary murder when he confesses “of burying Swann’s grainy likeness, keeping her out of sights and shutting her up, a miniature act of murder” (Swann 110). The act of silencing someone is an act of murder. Jimroy feels that in misrepresenting Mary Swann, he is in fact, murdering her. Therefore, it is not only Mary Swann’s husband who has murdered her but also, Morton Jimroy who is murdering her through his inaccurate depiction of Mary.

To Sarah Maloney —the first character introduced to the reader in the novel — it seems that Mary Swann is more useful to her dead than alive. Maloney is Swann’s discoverer and at this part in her life, she needs to find some purpose in her life. For Maloney, “reading Mary Swann [she discovered] how a human life can be silently snuffed out” (Swann 20). Maloney finds purpose in receiving the recognition that Mary deserves while also as Swann’s discover, getting some recognition herself.

Shields arranges that Mary Swann is dead at the beginning of the novel. This is necessary for the reader in able to reconstruct the author to their liking to answer who Mary Swann is for themselves. The following subchapter discusses how the readers of Mary Swann’s work reconstruct Mary Swann.

2.3. Swann’s Reconstruction by the Narrators

The death of the Author in the novel is complete. Or is it? Carol Shields challenges the reader, “What if the body of work is still alive and breathing?” (Swann 82). It is now up to the reader to re-create the author. In Besner, Johnson describes that “we impose an image of the author onto the text of our own making. This author-
function as Foucault calls it, precisely describes the process of author construction” (Besner 211). This author construction is what brings new life to Mary Swann.

The four characters/critics/readers of Shields’s Mary Swann are Sarah Maloney, a feminist writer and teacher, Morton Jimroy, a biographer and literary critic, Rose Hindmarch, a librarian in the small town Nadeau where Mary came from and Frederic Cruzzi, Mary Swann’s publisher. The four characters are analyzed in detail in the third chapter of this thesis. In brief, however, the four main characters reveal themselves through Mary Swann. There is something lacking in their lives and thus they fixate on the life and work of Mary Swann. As each character adopts their own theories to fit their human experience, they discard and change artefacts and as such, they metaphorically kill and recreate Mary Swann over and over again.

Sarah Maloney is the first to appear in the novel. Maloney tells the reader “In a sense I invented Mary Swann and I am responsible for her” (Swann 30). Sarah invents Mary Swann and so she feels she can decide what belonging to Mary Swann is appropriate and what is not. Rose Hindmarch gives Maloney two items belonging to Mary: a notebook and a rhyming dictionary. Whereas Rose prized the rhyming dictionary and considered Mary Swann’s notebook useless, Sarah discarded the dictionary but kept the notebook, “‘A diary!’ I breathed, unable to believe this piece of luck” (Swann 45). Maloney felt the dictionary would threaten Swann’s credibility as a poet, “I stopped at the first roadside litter box and dropped it in. Then I headed straight for the border” (Swann 46) and that was not the image Maloney wanted others to know about Swann.

When establishing the Nadeau Local History Museum, Rose Hindmarch takes only a few items from Mary Swann’s home and buys the remainder to fit a certain vision she had of Mary Swann and her life. As Mary Swann’s memorial room takes
shape, Hindmarch “watched with joy, with creative amazement, as the room took shape, acquiring a look of authenticity and even a sense of the lean, useful life that had inhabited it. Yes, Rose could imagine the figure of Mary Swann bent over the painted table scratching out her poems by the light of the kerosene lamp. (The Table had been repainted, and the kerosene lamp she found at a rummage sale in Westport.)” (Swann 163). Hindmarch’s look of authenticity was one she makes up, with a newly painted table and a purchased lamp that never even belonged to Mary Swann. Hindmarch feels guilty about this misrepresentation but “a notice would be a distraction and that it might inject a hint of apology, of insufficiency. (The charm of falsehood is not that it distorts reality, but that it creates reality afresh)” (Swann 163). Hindmarch’s justification is that a sign would detract attention from the display looking real. Therefore, the display will re-create a new reality. Shields compares the memorial room to how Hindmarch re-creates reality by lying about she and Mary being great friends.

Morton Jimroy is a biographer and searches for Mary Swann’s literary predecessors. Morton is an academic and finds himself at a standstill in life. He wishes to draw less attention to himself and his writer’s block and finds solace in another writer, Mary Swann. If the unknown writer Mary Swann can become a woman of importance in the literary world, Morton Jimroy can also rise to fame. Jimroy seeks to establish parallels between Mary Swann and Emily Dickinson and other literary greats. Jimroy hopes to find how Mary Swann became such a glorious poet only to discover, “the poems and the life of Mary Swann do not meld” (Swann 108). Lacking convincing material, Jimroy feels defeated. “Even with the background material and critical commentary, this will be a thin book. A defeat. Jimroy is now thinking in terms of a long article” (Swann 109). Jimroy has failed to find some eventful incidents in Swann’s life apart from her death that he fabricates facts to desperately try to prove Swann’s
worth when he begins “making a few additions and notations with a freshly sharpened pencil. It is highly probable that Swann read Jane Austen during this period because…” (Swann 119). If Morton Jimroy, a biographer, who should always be searching for the truth, can simply modify the truth then how can his authority be trusted? Shields broadens this question to all biographers, historians or writers: if the truth can be so easily manipulated then whose writing can we trust? Shields returns to the notion that the writer cannot always be trusted.

The most controversial is the chapter with Frederic Cruzzi, where it is revealed that many of Mary Swann’s poems in Swann’s Songs have been composed by Frederic Cruzzi and his wife, Hildë Cruzzi. The reader is shocked to find out that Hildë Cruzzi used the paper bag of Swann’s poems to dispose greasy fish bones. Upon discovering that half of the poems were illegible, Frederic and Hildë “puzzled and conferred over every blot, then guessed, then invented” (Swann 222-3). This fact makes it even less likely that Mary Swann was the true author of her poems but in lieu, she shares authorship with Frederic and Hildë Cruzzi, who pieced together, invented and even “improved” Swann’s poems.

Shields does not excuse the characters for their false portrayals of Swann. Instead, Shields comments on the awareness of the characters in their appropriation. They sense that there is something wrong. Sarah Maloney does not feel right when she “took notes, feeling like a thief but not missing a word” (Swann 42). Sarah feels like a thief. Morton Jimroy feels “the sense of shame was surprisingly poignant, and the fact that it was genuine gave Jimroy a perverted stab of pleasure” (Swann 106). Jimroy feels shameful. Rose Hindmarch actually asks for forgiveness, “Forgive me, forgive me. Forgive me the sin of untruthfulness” (Swann 152) for her sins. Even Frederic Cruzzi upon finishing his transcription of Mary Swann’s poems, acknowledges his guilt, “or
perhaps a wish to make amends, convinced them that they owed Mrs. Swann an interpretation that would reinforce her strengths as a poet” (Swann 223). Maloney, Jimroy, Hindmarch and Cruzzi know they are appropriating Mary Swann’s work but they do it anyway. They feel justified in doing so perhaps due to their close relationship (real and imagined) with Mary Swann. As the characters in the novel create and destroy evidence of Mary Swann’s life, Johnson professes in Besner that the text exists in the mind of the reader where “Swann parodies and undercuts the pretensions of its critics, revealing an academic power-play that manifests itself at several textual levels in recurring acts of appropriation” (Besner 212). Carol Shields not only presents this truth to the reader but she overemphasizes this in a parody, whereas the author is not only dead and then reconstructed by her critics but also what little was left of the author, progressively begins to disappear.

2.4. The Disappearance of the Dead Mary Swann

After Mary Swann has been re-established, Swann’s manuscripts, photographs, personal belongings begin to disappear again. At first we hear of Buswell cancelling his speech at the final Swann symposium because his notes were stolen (27). This is repeated in the final chapter of the screenplay when Buswell notified the steering committee that “his notes had been stolen. Stolen!” (Swann 262). Not only the crime of appropriating Swann’s work is being committed but there is also someone stealing Swann’s belongings. Sarah Maloney comes to realize that Mary Swann’s notebook, the one she does not want anyone else to use as referential material, is missing. “It was Mary Swann’s notebook, which I keep on a bookshelf over my bed. I had not seen it there for several days” (Swann 28). Sarah did not want anyone to see the notebook but then she discovers that it is lost. When Sarah discovers that Mary Swann’s notebook is
lost, Brownie reminds Sarah that “You can’t say it’s really lost … Not if there’s a copy in the archives” (*Swann* 39). Sarah rebukes, “A copy’s not the same thing. As you know perfectly well” (*Swann* 39). The question of authenticity is raised again where there can only be one true notebook.

In the second chapter of the novel, Morton Jimroy has a habit of stealing possessions of Mary Swann’s. It is as if he feels as the real creator of Mary Swann in his biography and therefore, he feels privy to Swann’s belongings. He steals from the Nadeau Local History Museum (the clearer photograph of Mary Swann) as well as Mary Swann’s fountain pen the Parker 51 from Swann’s daughter, Frances. In addition, Shields uses some mock robberies such as when Morton Jimroy loses his suitcase where he had the stolen photograph, “He does, though, suffer intermittent worry over the photograph of Mary Swann. It had not been a good idea to bring it. It cannot be replaced and is one of only two known photographs of her in existence … The loss of the photograph would be serious, tragic in a sense, if indeed it is lost” (*Swann* 78). It is ironic how guilty Morton Jimroy feels about losing an item he himself stole. Shields playfully makes the photograph reappear only to be stolen again at the Swann Symposium. During the introductory speech in the final chapter, the lights go out and Morton Jimroy loses hold of his valuable suitcase. When the lights go on again, Morton Jimroy panics, “My briefcase! All my notes for the symposium, my talk, the program, everything! I had them in my briefcase. My papers. And a fountain pen, a very valuable fountain pen. It was right here! Someone must have picked up” (*Swann* 254). Where in the first situation Jimroy’s suitcase shows up, in the screenplay, Jimroy’s suitcase and Swann’s possessions that Jimroy has previously stolen are ultimately stolen again.

At the end of Rose Hindmarch’s chapter, Rose discovers that not only has Morton Jimroy stolen the photograph in the Museum, now her copy of *Swann’s songs* is
missing when “the little book isn’t in its usual place under her magazine rack” (*Swann* 157). Each character in the novel is losing *Swann’s Songs* as well as Swann’s personal items.

In the fourth chapter, Frederic Cruzzi’s last four copies of *Swann’s songs* and Mary Swann’s file are stolen when a robbery takes place in Frederic Cruzzi’s home on Christmas Eve, the night Frederic Cruzzi goes to attend a Christmas party. So Cruzzi, just like Maloney, Jimroy and Hindmarch have had all of Swann’s possessions stolen.

The underlying mystery of the novel *Swann*, therefore, lies in the identity of the thief that keeps stealing all of Mary Swann’s items. Shields foreshadows the identity of this character when speaking about who purchased Mary Swann’s property “a young man from the States who bought the place as a weekend retreat, has at least had the fences repaired and a new roof put on the house” (*Swann* 159). Shields reveals that the new owner is a man and both Jimroy and Cruzzi are Canadian not from the States, which points to Brownie, Maloney’s friend, who, like her, is American.

When talking to Frederic Cruzzi about Brownie Sarah Maloney describes that “he’s in the rare book business and he says that’s the norm that books, especially paperbound books just…disappear” (*Swann* 281). It comes to no surprise to the reader when Sam Brown, “aged thirty, earning his living as a dealer in rare books” (*Swann* 13) is actually the thief. Maloney has characterized him that “he’d cheat his own granny to make a buck. He cares for nothing” (*Swann* 15). Brownie wants to make money and after discussing Mary Swann with Maloney, he feels that he can make a lot of money on this mysterious poet.

Maloney realizes that Brownie is the thief when she speaks to Frederic Cruzzi, “Brownie would never lose a book. He’s in the business, rare books. Books—(she stops to think)—books to Brownie are holy. Other things he’s careless about, but books, well,
with book’s he’s…” (Swann 304). Maloney stops in mid-sentence as she figures out how blind she has been the whole time. The reader has come to suspect Brownie with all the hints Shields has delivered in the novel and so it comes as no surprise when Maloney calls Brownie to ask about his whereabouts and Brownie’s secretary responds that he is at a symposium (Swann 305).

Although Shields disambiguates that the thief stealing Mary Swann’s books and personal items is Sam Brown, Shields predicates the blame on all the characters. It is not only Sam Brown who has robbed Mary Swann of her poems and identity, it is also Sarah Maloney, who has deprived the readers about the rhyming dictionary; Morton Jimroy who has stolen Mary Swann’s items from the Nadeau Museum and Swann’s daughter, but also invents a literary past that Mary Swann never possessed; Rose Hindmarch who has reinvented Mary Swann’s friendship and Mary Swann’s display; and no less has it been Frederic Cruzzi who has written and transcribed most of Mary Swann’s poems. Mary Swann’s identity has long been stolen by the four critics and readers of her work—long before Sam Brown began stealing Mary Swann’s possessions.

Mary Swann is “dead. Exceedingly dead” (Swann 11) and yet, Swann’s voice is being heard as she is reconstructed by her readers. The final chapter, Swann, investigates the five chapters in Swann titled “Sarah Maloney”, “Morton Jimroy”, “Rose Hindmarch”, “Frederic Cruzzi” and “The Swann Symposium”.

35
Chapter III: Swan Song: A Close Reading of Swann

Carol Shields’s Swann is Shields’s first book, where she fully adopts the postmodern switching of narrative views and styles and asks the question of what is art and who can create art and the role of the author and the reader.

Swann has four different narrators, each of whom has a vested interest in the life of the eponymous poet and cannot, therefore, be relied upon. Shields employs two female characters and then two male characters, from a female’s and male’s point of view, to compose the first four chapters of the book. The final chapter is written as a screenplay where all of the four characters interact with each other in order to resolve who Mary Swann is (what the role of her as an author is) and what the role of the readers of Mary Swann’s poems play in creating the art of writing.

The four characters in Swann: Sarah Maloney, Morton Jimroy, Rose Hindmarch and Frederic Cruuzzi have come to understand Mary Swann through their own circumstances and experience. It is their unique background that allows them to interpret Mary Swann’s poems. The following sections will explore these characters to illustrate the relationship that each reader has to the author.

3.1. Sarah Maloney

The first chapter of the novel Swann is titled Sarah Maloney. It is the only chapter that is written in the first-person narrative and as such, it is the closest the reader has to understand Mary Swann. First-person narration establishes an intimacy between the narrator and the reader as if the narrator was speaking directly to the reader. Shields does provide, however, a short switch to third-person narrative to distance the reader from this intimacy, so the reader does not forget that the character is fictional. Regardless, there is a parallel between the writer, Sarah Maloney, and Mary Swann and
this bond is showcased by Shields’s narrator, Maloney, to speak to the reader in first person. As Sarah Maloney discusses her relationship with her mother, it becomes evident that she has a similar mother-daughter relationship with Mary Swann, forming a protective motherly bond becoming “Swann’s watchwoman, her literary executor, her defender and loving caretaker.” (Swann 31) As her protector, Maloney swears to defend Swann against all those trying to use Swann for their own means.

Sarah Maloney introduces herself on the first page when she describes herself as “a feminist writer and teacher who’s having second thoughts about the direction of feminist writing in America” (Swann 11). She points out that her friend Brownie, “accused [her] of having a classic case of burn-out,” (Swann 11) because there are moments when Sarah feels like she does not want to talk to anyone. It is here that Shields switches to the third-person narration to say that “Mostly Ms. Maloney is a cheerful woman, ah indeed, indeed! And very busy!” (Swann 11). Shields amusingly adopts the third-person to notify the reader to be careful to trust what Sarah Maloney says and to remain sceptical. Shields contradicts Maloney saying that she is cheerful only to reveal that Maloney feels “the cool spectre of loneliness that stretches ahead for me” (Swann 58) making the reader question Maloney again.

Sarah Maloney is unsure of how to lead her life and so when she is proposed to, she cannot envision a life with someone else for she has yet to discover who she is. To aid in this process, Maloney hides in a cottage on a lake in Wisconsin and escapes there, where she marvels in the simplicity of domesticity, “There are rewards in cleaning things—everyone should know this—the corners of rooms, dresser drawers, and such … Isn’t life simple when pared down to its purities?” (Swann 17) and it is in this domestic setting, where things seemed simple that Mulroney found Mary Swann’s poems, Swann’s Songs.
In lieu of finding herself, Sarah decides to refocus her problems and unhappiness on the tragedy that beheld Mary Swann. Sarah decides that she will protect Mary from those that see Mary Swann as “a farmer’s wife, uneducated. It’s said in the Nadeau area of Ontario that she spoke haltingly, shyly, and about such trivial matters as the weather, laying hens, and recipes for jams and jellies” (Swann 18). Mulroney promises to prove that Mary Swann was so much more than “just” a housewife.

Sarah Maloney points out that “it was only after she was killed that someone, an oddball newspaper editor named Frederic Cruzzi, put together and printed her little book, Swann’s Songs. Poor Mary Swann. That’s how I think of her, poor Mary Swann, with her mystical ear for the tune of words, cheated of life, cheated of recognition” (Swann 18). Maloney projects her own feelings and transfers this need for recognition and protection that she never had from her mother to Mary and appropriates her. Sarah Maloney refers to Mary Swann as “my” Mary when she says, “My Mary’s unearthly insights and spare musicality” (Swann 18) as if the writer that Sarah Maloney has never met has become Maloney’s possession. When Morton Jimroy attempts to borrow Mary Swann’s notebook, Sarah Maloney firmly opposes with: “Mary Swann’s notebook is mine” (Swann 28). Maloney reaffirms her possession of Swann. Maloney gets upset when someone does not agree with Swann’s ingenuity as she “tend[s] to get unruly and defensive” (Swann 18), for example about the opinion of Willard Lang who Maloney describes as “the swine, believes absolutely that Swann will never be classed as a major poet” (Swann 18). Maloney feels like she has something to prove.

In her personal life, Sarah Maloney is lost. She is searching for a home, a place to be herself: “This was home. And it seemed I was someone who needed a home … I’d made a discovery: my life was my own, but I needed a place where I could get away from it” (Swann 21). Although Sarah Maloney had a home in the physical sense, there
was still something lacking. She chose to cling on to Mary Swann’s book of poems as if it was her child placing Maloney in the role of her mother. In a sense, Mary Swann was the child that Sarah Maloney never had.

Sarah Maloney’s well-established relationship with her mother and her desire to become a mother is a recurrent theme. “Mary’s poems are filled with concealed references to her mother and to the strength and violence of family bonds” (Swann 50). Sarah Maloney sees her most important relationship in her life, the mother-daughter bond in the text that Mary Swann writes. Maloney reveals:

Clever men create themselves, but clever women, it seems to me, are created by their mothers. We want to please our mothers, emulate them, disgrace them, oblige them, outrage them, and bury ourselves in the mysteries and consolations of their presence. When my mother and I are in the same room we work magic on each other: I grow impossibly cheerful and am guilty of re-imagined naïveté and other indulgent stunts, and my mother’s sad, helpless dithering becomes a song of succour (Swann 47).

Sarah suggests that this bond has a way of changing character, where in her mother’s presence, Sarah changes her nature and attempts to please her mother while at the same time Sarah’s mother is equally transformed. It is this bond that aids in her interpretation of Mary Swann’s poems “It is my belief that between mothers and daughters there is a kind of blood-hyphen that is, finally, indissoluble” (Swann 47). Sarah’s opinion on the mother-daughter relationship is heightened when Sarah adds “This reinforces one of my life theories: that women carry with them the full freight of their mothers’ words. It’s the one part of us that can never be erased or revised” (Swann 48). Maloney seeks to understand the impact Mary Swann’s mother has had on Swann
and in her writing. When Maloney cannot find more information on Mary Swann’s relationship, she decides to create her own and adopt a mother-daughter relationship to Mary Swann. In a sense Maloney feels like a mother to Mary Swann as if she gave birth to her. She quickly retracts this notion though. “In a sense I invented Mary Swann and am responsible for her. No, too literary that. Better just say I discovered Mary Swann” (Swann 28). Maloney is concerned on how people may react if she uses a word that claims ownership of Swann and so she quickly replaces it with discovers. Maloney continues that “In truth, no one really discovers anyone; it’s the stickiest kind of arrogance even to think in such terms. Mary Swann discovered herself … how did she do it? (Swann 31) Sarah Maloney has not been able to find herself and so she wonders on how Mary Swann was capable of doing it through her writing. As Maloney searches for herself, she explores the life of Mary Swann “where in those bleak Ontario acres, that littered farmyard, [she found] the sparks that converted emblematic substance into rolling poetry? (Swann 31). Maloney dreams of writing about something meaningful and believes that Mary Swann has already accomplished what Maloney dreams of accomplishing.

Maloney projects her feelings of underappreciation in the male dominated literary world and attaches this resentment to the work of Mary Swann. Maloney feels that her male counterparts want to benefit from Mary Swann’s literary fame. “Willard Lang … is capable of violating her for his own gain, and so is the absent-minded, paranoid, and feckless Buswell in Ottawa. Morton Jimroy means well, poor sap, but he’ll try to catch her out or bend her into God’s messenger or the handmaiden of Emily Dickinson” (Swann 31). All of these men want to become famous through Mary Swann and would like to use Mary Swann’s work to advance their own means. Sarah Maloney feels she is the only one who can protect the innocent, in this case, Mary Swann.
Sarah Maloney continues to explain that “a man like Morton Jimroy wouldn’t be bothering with her if he didn’t think that she was going to take off. Willard Lang wouldn’t be wasting his time organizing a symposium if he didn’t believe her reputation was ripe for the picking. These guys are greedy. They would eat her up inch by inch. Scavengers. Brutes. This is a wicked world, and the innocent need protection” (Swann 32). Sarah Maloney believes that these men are trying to take all the credits away from the women. It is important to note that Sarah Maloney’s relationships have not been happy ones. Curiously enough it was not that the men have behaved poorly. Sarah Maloney’s father died of bone cancer and then Maloney left her husband of three months. Maloney, in turn, has pushed them away. It appears that Maloney’s serious attachment to her mother has prevented her from establishing other serious relationships. Maloney has tried to prove her importance in the world as she has educated herself in feminist writings and chose to distance herself from the males in her life (Swann 20) The lack of recognition, is not however from the men but from her own mother. When Maloney describes her scholarship, “some letters after my name instead of before” (Swann 34), she tells the reader that her mother would prefer “Mrs. – she would like me to be a Mrs.” (Swann 34). Maloney’s mother does not care much about her education and literary success, she would prefer that Maloney settles down and gets married. Sarah Maloney presents a female character, Rose Hindmarch, but has only nice things to say about her, such that Hindmarch is “A good woman. A courageous woman” (Swann 45). Maloney attaches positive words to Hindmarch. Maloney feels a common sisterhood, things in common with Hindmarch and also, with Mary Swann.

Sarah Maloney receives a parting gift when she visits her in Nadeau “a small spiral notebook” (Swann 45) and “a cheap paperback book, a rhyming dictionary” (Swann 45). For Sarah Maloney, the notebook holds much more importance in the
aspect of it serving to be a diary of Swann’s whereas the rhyming dictionary that Rose attached great importance but Hindmarch did not feel worthy of it, “It would only be wasted on me. What does someone like me know about real poetry?” (Swann 45) is actually what Sarah rejects. Sarah has described herself as a serious writer and cannot be embarrassed by the fact that Mary Swann used a rhyming dictionary. Instead of submitting something Mary Swann truly used, Sarah decides to tamper with the evidence for it did not suit her concept of a natural poet that Maloney has envisioned for Mary Swann. Although Maloney speaks of her motives to Mary Swann to be pure, to protect the “real” Mary Swann, Maloney has constructed this Mary Swann to suit Maloney’s needs.

After having discarded the rhyming dictionary, Sarah contemplates on what to do with the notebook. “But no matter how I present the notebook, the responses will be one of disappointment, particularly for Morton Jimroy with his holy attitude toward prime materials. He will be disappointed ... disappointed by the notebook itself, disappointed by Mary Swann, and also, I have no doubt, by me” (Swann 50). Threatened that Morton Jimroy will be disappointed, “Doesn’t he understand anything about mothers? “Childhood,” he wrote in his second to last letter to me, “has been greatly overestimated by biographers in the past, as have family influences” (Swann 50). In an attempt to justify her feelings, Sarah Maloney realizes that she also has the right to be disappointed. “haven’t I been disappointed in turn by him and his biographical diggings? (Swann 50) The reader learns that Sarah Maloney is projecting her feelings of disappointment with herself to Mary Swann and now to Morton Jimroy. Something in Sarah Maloney’s life is missing and although she has grown attached to Mary Swann and her work, Sarah knows that this something lies in her, “I’m tempted to grope under the band of my skirts, grab hold of my flesh and see what it is that’s
weighing me down – whether it’s Mary Swann who has taken up residence there or the cool spectre of loneliness that stretches ahead for me. Because it does, it does (Swann 58). Sarah Maloney has not yet discovered what gives her life purpose and it is not until the final chapter of the screenplay that what Sarah Maloney was missing in her life was to be a mother to her own child.

Morton Jimroy is the subject of the second chapter of Swann and he is introduced as he corresponds with Maloney and although Maloney considers him to be spurious, she believes Jimroy “has one rare quality that I suspect is genuine: an urge for confession, or at least intimacy” (Swann 25). The intimacy Jimroy seeks is lacking in his personal life and so he attaches himself to Maloney.

3.2. Morton Jimroy

The second chapter is dedicated to a male character, Morton Jimroy who is a writer about the mystery of life, or the way a life is lived – a biography. Shields reveals Morton Jimroy’s profession indirectly. In contrast to the first chapter of Sarah Maloney, where Sarah Maloney introduces herself to the reader intimately in first person on the first page, Morton Jimroy’s work is revealed on the seventh page of the chapter, when Mrs. Flanner who is trying to rent her house to Morton Jimroy states “So you’re hardly a stranger, Professor Jimroy. But I’m afraid I haven’t read your other book, the one on Pound” (Swann 75). Shields uses this contrast to distance the reader from Morton Jimroy and to create an opposition to the character Sarah Maloney.

Morton Jimroy writes biographies of famous deceased poets. Jimroy has decided to write a biography of a woman, and an unknown poet, Mary Swann. Jimroy reveals “I think you would have to say she had one of the dullest lives ever lived” (Swann 76). As Morton Jimroy seeks to write Mary Swann’s biography, he searches for Mary
Swann’s influences, her literary predecessors and questions how art could have come out of such a rural uneducated farm girl. This is a question Morton Jimroy cannot find an answer for.

Questioned after delivering a lecture, Morton Jimroy ponders “How we love to systemize and classify what is rich and random in life. How our fingers itch to separate the tangled threads of theme and anti-theme, moral vision and moral blindness, God and godlessness, joy and despair … Scholarship was bunk – if they only, only knew it” (Swann 81). Morton Jimroy uses these binary oppositions to contradict himself. Morton Jimroy is the first to systemize and classify people and search for an answer to why a person is the way they are due to their past influences as it is Morton Jimroy’s profession and yet, he openly acknowledges that there is no point or truth in this scholarship. The reader grasps that Morton Jimroy has difficulty finding meaning in the work that he does. Yet Morton Jimroy defines himself in his work and so it is clear that Morton Jimroy is not confident about the direction of his life.

Jimroy seeks some answers about his life’s purpose in his writing to Maloney “the validity of art, his terrifying perception – false, thank God – that art was nothing but a foolish and childish plaything” (Swann 25). Jimroy defines himself by his art and if it held little value then it would be “the fierce sadness of a wasted life, the conviction that I had done nothing but dally with the dallying of other human beings” (Swann 26). Morton Jimroy believes that his art of writing is what places him above others. It is in his writing that Jimroy finds himself. Jimroy continues on to speak about authenticity: “It seemed at that moment that not a single man on earth had ever spoken the truth. We were all, every last one of us, liars and poseurs” (Swann 26). Unsure of his writing, Jimroy is second guessing himself and others. Jimroy is searching for what is true in life. Attempting to fill the void, Jimroy comes upon Maloney’s article when he
comments: “I felt a oneness with this Mary Swann” (Swann 26) but instead of seeing
Mary Swann as only his (as Maloney refers to her as my Mary) Jimroy writes, “Mary
Swann belongs to all of us, to the world, that is — her poems, her scraps and ciphers her
poor paltry remains” (Swann 27). Mary Swann’s work belongs to everyone and to
further this point, Jimroy affirms that “the work often possesses a greater degree of
dignity than the hand that made it … Of course a biographer of a writer must pay as
much attention to the work as to the life. But the life is more than gossip and disclosure.
It is what the work feeds on. One’s own experience, before it is tainted by art” (Swann
82). Morton Jimroy elucidates that it is the work that must be analysed in order to
understand the man. Although the aspects of the lived life must be included, the work is
the most pure product of the man that created it. Contrarily, it is the reader who inserts
their own experience into the text they are reading and taints the work with their own
concept of self.

Morton Jimroy begins to examine why he started studying Ezra Pound and John
Starman and admits that there are secret parallels between himself (as the author of the
biography) and the subject, the poets about whom he writes. “Once again he seemed to
be looking in a mirror” (Swann 85). Shields repeats this allusion to symbolise
Foucault’s author function, where the reader becomes the writer and sees only what he
wishes to see, what is true to him or what he is capable of seeing. As Morton searches
for Mary Swann’s life history to answer how she became such a poet, Jimroy becomes
very possessive of her. He believes that it is his right to own Mary Swann’s things as he
is the one to bring Mary Swann back to life. In this case, Morton Jimroy steals first
Mary Swann’s photograph from the Nadeau Museum and then, removes Mary Swann’s
fountain pen, the Parker 51, from the home of Frances Moore, the daughter of Mary
Swann. Jimroy steals these items to become closer to Mary Swann, so that these
possessions aid him in understanding Mary Swann’s mystery and allows him to accurately depict Swann in his biography.

As Morton Jimroy appropriates Mary Swann, he conceives that he, too, will fight for Swann. “Marvellous Swann, paradoxical Swann. He would take revenge for her. Make the world stand-up and applaud. It would happen” (Swann 87). However, as time goes by, as with the other poets that Morton Jimroy has written about, Jimroy begins to resent Swann. “The fact is – and why deny it –Jimroy has come to distrust Swann slightly. In recent weeks he has felt his distrusts turn to dislike… She was unreliable about dates, contradictory about events, occasionally untruthful” (Swann 88).

As Morton Jimroy’s own experience begins to appear in Mary Swann’s work and Jimroy is mirrored into the work, he begins to resent her as he resents himself and his previous work. His own self-deprecation (most visible in the prank phone calls he makes to his former or would be lovers) becomes alive in his writing.

Morton Jimroy is a writer and through the act of writing distorts reality. Jimroy who has only been a written correspondent to Sarah Maloney has fallen in love with her only through the letters. Shields uses this fact to heighten the significance of how writing can be inauthentic because it is only what Morton Jimory’s imagination has fabricated in his mind and it is not based on facts. “He is sodden with love, foolish with love. And the woman he loves is Sarah Maloney of Chicago whom he has never met” (Swann 96). The allusion of love is made up in the mind and Jimroy has invented this in his head to ease the pain of his loneliness.

Morton Jimroy has a vision of what he would like Mary Swann to be but he must sadly admit that “the fact is, the poems and the life of Mary Swan do not meld” (Swann 108). Jimroy realizes that one does not need to be educated and well-studied to be able to produce lyrical poetry and Mary Swann may have been a chance accident.
Jimroy may search for “the one central cathartic event in Mary Swann’s life. It must exist. It is what a good biography demands, what a human life demands” (Swann 111). So Morton Jimroy does not accept that it may have been an act of chance and believes there must be a reason for why a person is the way they are and grows desperate upon not finding the answer to this mystery.

As Morton Jimroy fails to get the story he seeks, he becomes upset. “Jimroy curses Mary Swann’s silences and admits to himself, finally, that he’s disappointed in her” (Swann 111). As Sarah Maloney is disappointed in herself (and Mary Swann and Morton Jimroy), it is now Morton Jimroy who is disappointed in himself (and consequentially Mary Swann).

Morton Jimroy decides to abandon what he has spent so much time searching for and in contrast, Morton Jimroy begins to adjust his preliminary notes to suit his needs “making a few addition and notations with a freshly sharpened pencil. It is highly probably that Swann read Jane Austen during the period because...” (Swann 118) fully ignoring the fact that he has been explicitly told by Mary Swann’s daughter, Frances, that Mary Swann read Edna Farber.

Nonetheless, Morton Jimroy feels justified for what he is doing as he asserts about the writing process that “there are gaps, as in every life, accidents of silence and misinterpretation and the frantic scrollwork of artifice, but also a seductive randomness that confers truth. And mystery, too, of course. Impenetrable, ineffable, mystery” (Swann 119). Jimroy accepts that there is mystery in one’s life that need not be unveiled. It is this randomness that creates the truth. Not everything can be explained and this is the fabric that life is made of.

At the end of the chapter, the following character to be introduced by Carol Shields is Rose Hindmarch. Through their common meeting, Morton Jimroy wants to
test his poetry analysis with Rose Hindmarch’s but Hindmarch fails to agree with him. Where Morton Jimroy finds philosophical and exhaustive meanings in Mary Swann’s poetry, Rose Hindmarch finds very practical reasons. Carol Shields’s toys with the idea of literary analyses and pokes fun at the seriousness of the practice. “‘Look at this line,’” Morton Jimroy said. “This reference to water -- a stunning line, isn’t it? -- which clearly expresses a yearning for baptism, for acceptance of some kind. Or even forgiveness.” “You don’t think” -- ” Rose began. “I mean, perhaps, you know that there’s no well out there on the Swann property” (Swann 146-7). Morton Jimroy yearns for what he projects into the meaning of Mary Swann’s poem. Jimroy dreams of being reborn and accepted. He wants a chance to get things right in life after a failed marriage. Jimroy continues the concept of spirituality when he has a hypothesis that Mary Swann did not attend church because “her spirituality was, well, less explicit than it was for regular churchgoers in the area. That it was outside the bounds, as it were, of church doctrine?” (Swann 147) Rose Hindmarch counteracts this idea when she remarks, “But I really think, well, it was probably a question of not having the right kind of clothes” (Swann 147). Rose Hindmarch once again suggests a far simpler and more likely (and more practical) reason why Mary Swann did not attend church.

All of the characters are searching for their life’s purpose, where Sarah Maloney is seeking the important role of motherhood, Morton Jimroy is searching for acceptance and the notion that Morton Jimroy’s work has had some influence, it is now Rose Hindmarch who is next to demonstrate to the reader what she is looking for in life.

3.3. Rose Hindmarch

The next character is Rose Hindmarch, who has actually met Mary Swann a number of times in the library as Hindmarch was the town’s librarian. The whole
chapter is written in third person and therefore, it is only the first chapter on Sarah Maloney that is in first person. Rose Hindmarch has not one but three jobs, she is also curator of the Nadeau Local History Museum as well as a village councillor. Instead of fulfilling her life with familial roles like daughter, wife or mother, Hindmarch performs these three job titles.

Shields uses humour in displaying Hindmarch for as Hindmarch is taking down the minutes at the town meeting, she is responsible as secretary to report about herself in the three roles she fills. Carol Shields uses this situation to display the irony between the actual person and the writer and how they establish themselves in the writing process. How the writer views themselves differently in writing than in person. “The Rose she writes about is braver than she knows herself to be” (Swann 125). Shields emphasizes that the writing process has given Rose powers that she does not have in her physical life. Rose Hindmarch continues to write about herself in the third person. ““Stout of heart” is how she thinks of her, an active woman in the middle of her life” (Swann 125). Hindmarch does not believe herself to be active at all but when she distances from herself in writing, she allots herself more positive traits.

As Rose has never been married, she is not defined by the husband in her life and is proud of this. At the Nadeau Museum, they have an embroidered quilt on display as a centennial project and most of the women are signed in their husband’s names. “Mrs. Homer Hart, Mrs. Joseph Fletcher” (Swann 130) etc. Rose remarks, “You might think: didn’t these women have first names of their own? Hadn’t women’s liberation touched this small Ontario town by the year 1967? … But wait. There’s one square near the centre of the quilt … that contains a single embroidered butterfly in blue thread. And beneath it is the stitched signature: Rose Hindmarch” (Swann 130). Hindmarch is proud to have her name appear in full in opposition to the other women who have lost
their names to their partners. Not only have these women lost themselves but the women transfer their pasts to their husbands by presenting themselves as shadows to their husbands. A centennial quilt is one that should present to future generations a glimpse into the past and these women shall present to the world that they were merely their husband’s possessions. The Nadeau Local History Museum also offers to Mary Swann a past and a remembrance for the future generations. Mary Swann was a nobody during her life but after her death, she has become the town celebrity. Similarly, Rose Hindmarch longs to be remembered. She has attached a square of the quilt with her name in order to be noticed and remembered. She never had a husband, “What a dirty shame she never married: this is what Nadeau people occasionally say” (Swann 126) but it appears that “she has chosen to remain unmarried” (Swann 126). As Rose did not need to be defined by a husband, she is not her husband’s shadow, for she is one of the only women whose full name is stitched on the quilt made for the centennial project.

Rose is a woman of many purposes and she fills her life with her numerous positions to help find who she is. Similarly to Sarah Maloney, Hindmarch has not yet found her place and where she belongs. Hindmarch asks that each job provides her with something she is looking for. The town clerk’s job “provides her with respectability” (Swann 125), Rose’s job as librarian has provided her with “an unearned reputation for being a scholar” (Swann 125). However, the job which means most to her is the museum curator. “It has, in fact, rescued her from the inexplicable nights of despair she once suffered … ever since she’s taken an interest in the life of Mary Swann … Her life has changed. She has connections in the outside world now, the academic world” (Swann 125-6). It is through her connection to Mary Swann that Rose Hindmarch begins to feel useful to the public, to society —that Rose has found a place in the world. She feeds upon Mary Swann’s “popularity” to cut off a piece of the cake for herself.
Rose cannot find purpose within her own life and by attaching herself to the life of Mary Swann, she rescues herself from her inner speculations of “an appalling sensation of loss, the naggy suspicion that beneath the hats is nothing but chilly space or the small scratching sounds of someone who wants only to please others” (Swann 126). Rose Hindmarch does not want the sensation of the emptiness of her life to come to light, that in truth, her life has made no difference in the world. Her newfound appreciation for herself or sense of importance is heightened when she is invited to the Swann symposium. Rose Hindmarch attaches much importance to Sarah Maloney, Morton Jimroy and Professor Lang only after figuring out how famous they are. “She hadn’t realized how famous he was until later. He was in Who’s Who. She’d looked him up. He was a world authority. He knew everything there was to know about poetry, including what it all meant. Except for that poem of Mary Swann’s” (Swann 150). Although Hindmarch attaches great value to the academic world, Carol Shields ridicules it. Having a distinguished education does not make anyone an expert on any piece of writing. Through the interaction between Rose Hindmarch and Morton Jimroy, Shields portrays the many ironies of scholarly analysis. The reader reads about the pompous theories of Morton Jimroy and contrasts them to Rose Hindmarch’s very practical elementary explanations. When Morton Jimroy discusses the depth in meaning of Mary Swann’s writing, Rose counteracts it. “‘She wasn’t writing poems about housewife blues. She was speaking about the universal sense of loss and alienation, not about washing machines breaking down or about—’ “Oh,” Rose said, “The Swanns didn’t have a washing machine’” (Swann 149). Rose does not seem to be to see things in the abstract but solely on the practical.

These interactions are exactly what Rose Hindmarch treasures the most and they give her a sense of authority. Throughout these conversations, Rose Hindmarch
undergoes a transformation with all this attention paid to her, and begins to see herself as “Rose Hindmarch, local expert on Mary Swann, a woman with an extraordinary memory and gift for detail, able to remember whole conversations word for word, able to put precise dates on...” (Swann 151). It was this sense of importance that Rose took advantage of and therefore decided to exaggerate her friendship with Mary Swann. Whereas she hardly exchanged a good morning with Mary Swann at the library, she spoke of her long walks with Mary Swann or all the books Mary Swann had consulted with Hindmarch at the library (Swann 152). Rose has taken advantage of being one of the only people that met Mary Swann in person and so she has exaggerated this relationship to give her a sense of importance.

Carol Shields uses this chapter to show how the narrator of a story can shape the story to fit their own objective by hiding the facts. “Mary Swann had been a virtual stranger to Rose Hindmarch, just as she was to everyone else in Nadeau, Ontario. A woman who kept to herself, that was Mary Swann” (Swann 152). No one knew Mary Swann nor was privy to her true feelings, which makes her a tabula rasa for anyone to speculate about and to fabricate the details of Swann’s life.

Although Rose Hindmarch was one of the only people who actually met Mary Swann in the flesh, Rose Hindmarch was no expert. Carol Shields, though, mocks this fact when Homer Hart, Rose’s friend deliberates, “Don’t know why the heck they shouldn’t invite you,” Homer says, “Why you’re the expert, Rose. If anyone knows about Mary Swann, you’re the one. The only one who really got to know her”” (Swann 141). Shields has, however, established that no one could have known Mary Swann, not the scholars, not even those that have come in contact with Mary Swann. Shields re-emphasizes this irony when Belle, Rose Hindmarch’s bridge partner points out “You’re the one with the real know-how, the firsthand knowledge. You’ve got it right over all
those professors and book writers. You knew Mary Swann. In person” (Swann 142). Even though Rose Hindmarch came in contact with the authentic Mary Swann, Swann was not one to reveal herself to others. Swann was described as not “much of a talker … Just one of the nervous types. And ashamed at how she looked, those clothes of hers … Mary Swann, she was one of your shy women … She always looked scared to me, a regular rabbit-type woman” (Swann 142-3). It is clear that Mary Swann did not have a lot of money and she was wearing old clothes. Mary Swann spoke very little to people and so Swann was considered shy and scared. Even if Swann was to tell someone how she really felt or something about herself than Swann’s opinion may change in the future. Circumstances change the way a person behaves and acts and what may have been true at one point may not be true at another time. Truth is inconsistent and sporadic.

Rose Hindmarch is a prime example of a woman who has never showed her real self. Rose Hindmarch masks herself in front of society. Not only does Rose Hindmarch play various roles around the town of Nadeau, she also masks herself in front of people. Hindmarch conceals that she is an atheist from society and “despite her atheism, or perhaps because of it she almost never misses church” (Swann 145). Going to church is not a holy experience with God for Rose but rather a place to go where society can see you and if you are absent then people can start talking.

Rose Hindmarch certainly talked a lot about Mary Swann and made up what she needed. However, the reader is surprised to learn that despite all of Rose’s expertise knowledge about Mary Swann, she fails to report that it was she who suggested to Swann to visit Frederic Cruzzi and have her poems published. “She has never told anyone— that it was she who suggested to Mrs. Swann … that she should show her poems to Frederic Cruzzi” (Swann 165). It is important to register what is said but
equally important is to realize what is left unsaid. Hindmarch not only gave untruthful information about Swann to the literary critics, she also chose to leave out this information. This information may have been particularly interesting to Morton Jimroy who was searching for some sort of connection to the publishing of *Swann’s Songs*. Hindmarch offers a justification for keeping this news to herself, “She cannot possibly be the one who set in motion the chain of events that led to Mary Swann’s death since she has never been capable of setting anything in motion” (*Swann* 165). Rose Hindmarch tells the reader that she does not feel guilty for playing a part in Mary Swann’s murder because after all, Rose Hindmarch could never accomplish anything in her life. Whereas Sarah Maloney has an inseparable bond with her mother, Rose Hindmarch has little to no relationship with her mother. Her family is hardly mentioned until Rose Hindmarch describes the lack of support her friends and family have provided for her in her life. Rose Hindmarch has very low self-esteem and it was her grandmother who told her “that she had the worst posture ever seen in a young girl and her mother who said looks weren’t everything, and a teacher back in the early grades who said she was a silly goose” (*Swann* 166). Of course, none of these comments seem detrimental but Hindmarch takes criticism very badly and it is possible that these events have shaped the way she behaves in life.

Rose Hindmarch discloses that she does not feel guilty about telling Mary Swann to visit Frederic Cruzzi, yet, she is the one who creates a memorial for Mary Swann at the Nadeau Local History Museum and so, throughout these contradictions, the reader is told not to trust what Hindmarch tells them.

As is Shields custom in this novel, at the end of the chapter, Rose Hindmarch introduces the final character to be revealed to the reader, Frederic Cruzzi. Rose Hindmarch is instructed by Willard Lang to write to Frederic Cruzzi and in her letter
Hindmarch writes “I tell you that I am the librarian (part-time) out in Nadeau and that I was a great friend of Mary Swann’s before she passed away” (Swann 194). It is with this irony (of Rose being a great friend of Mary Swann’s) that the reader is transitioned into the next chapter about Frederic Cruzzi.

**3.4. Frederic Cruzzi**

The final character to be presented to the reader is Frederic Cruzzi. Frederic Cruzzi’s chapter is written in the third person and Cruzzi is defined on the first page of the chapter. This chapter reads differently than the previous ones in Swann. This chapter is more of a factual account on what happened and less on what Frederic Cruzzi’s personal thoughts are on what occurred. Shields uses more dialogue in this chapter and offers the number of letters that Frederic Cruzzi wrote and received in way of proof, presenting this chapter as accurately as possible. Frederic Cruzzi is an 82 year old editor and his wisdom is felt in the chapter.

Frederic Cruzzi’s does not believe in academic deliberation and so upon being invited to Swann Symposium reacts to Willard Lang’s letter by writing “the glory of Mary Swann’s work lies in its innocence, the fact that it does not invite scholarly meddling or whimsical interpretation … I have no wish to tamper with their [Mrs. Swann’s words and rhythms] meaning. Furthermore, it would cause me grief to hear others doing so” (Swann 187). The theme of how academia attempts to take over the life of the artist and appropriates it reappears and Frederic Cruzzi opposes it.

The chapter mainly focuses on Frederic Cruzzi and his life, how he came to establish the Peregrine Press, a small publishing company that Frederic Cruzzi founded with his wife, Hildë. “Whatever we decide to publish must have a new sound … We have the responsibility as a small press to work at the frontier” (Swann 203). The reader learns about Frederic Cruzzi’s love for his wife and also about his first (and last)
encounter with Mary Swann. As for physical appearance, Mary Swann was non-distinct and plain. Even more so, “She had a look of being wasted. Thin, but thin without the lankiness that accompanies ease and good health” (Swann 212). Mary Swann was frail and overworked. What was more startling was the unease that Swann was in when she was offered tea. “She was not used to being served” (Swann 213). Swann probably was never served in her life and therefore, was surprised that someone could serve her. When describing how Mary Swann’s poems made Frederic Cruzzi feel, Cruzzi replied, “I knew the work was highly original. It was powerful. There was, you might say, a beguiling cleanliness to the lines that is only rarely seen” (Swann 215). Cruzzi saw much more in the simplicity of the poems.

Ironically though, Frederic’s wife, Hildë, unknowingly, put all the fish bones from the whitefish they consumed into the bag of Mary Swann’s poems, damaging their contents, “under the fish remains, under the wet heaviness of fish slime, were the soaked remains of Mary Swann’s poems” (Swann 220). Shields parallels this to death or remains— the fish and Mary Swann as she is already dead as Frederic and Hildë were rescuing her poems.

Seeing Mary Swann’s poems disappear from sight made Frederic Cruzzi lose control over himself. Frederic Cruzzi, a dedicated and loving husband, struck his wife when she came to comfort him. “They both knew it was a blow delivered without restraint” (Swann 220). The reader has come to trust Frederic Cruzzi and respect him in his interaction and attentiveness he gave Swann. To show Frederic Cruzzi as projecting violence on his wife, makes the reader distrust him. As Frederic Cruzzi begged for forgiveness from his wife, he came to realize the phrase “something snapped. Someone was pushed over the edge. Temporary insanity” (Swann 221). The reader who quickly came to trust Frederic Cruzzi is now given a parallel between himself and Angus
Swann. This helps explain, in part, how Mary Swann could have come home that night when something snapped in her husband, Angus. It is in this rage that Angus could have committed this horrible crime as these were known as crimes of passion. Shields goes on to describe how the husband and wife team, Frederic Cruzzi and Hildë Cruzzi came to rescuing Mary Swann’s work. “From the puddles of blue ink, words could be glimpsed, then guessed at … By midnight they had transcribed more than fifty of the poems … The seriously damaged poems worried them more … They puzzled and conferred over every blot, then guessed, then invented” (Swann 225). Shields uses this to showcase her theme of how art is written, where the reader can become the author of the text, the creator. A text is constructed from the author and the reader. It is impossible to separate the two—and it is impossible to experience the same thing every time the same poem, novel, etc. is read. As such, Carol Shields ironically chooses one poem that has been interpreted differently by Sarah Maloney, Morton Jimroy and Rose Hindmarch. Adding to the satire, this poem has been the most damaged and therefore, has been almost entirely crafted by Frederic and Hildë Cruzzi instead of by Mary Swann.

The last poem begins, ““Blood pronounces my name.” Or was it “Blood renounces my name”? The second line could be read in either of two ways: “Brighten the day with shame,” or “Blisters the day with shame,” They decided on blisters. The third line, “Spends what little I own,” but they just as easily be transcribed, “Bends what little I own,” but they wrote Spends because – though they didn’t say so – they liked it better” (Swann 223). As Frederic and Hildë Cruzzi decipher the poem line by line, they interpret it according to their liking, they choose what suits them best and toss away what they do not like or does not suit their purpose. Frederic and Hildë Cruzzi have now become the creators of Mary Swann’s art. They claimed that they “wanted to offer her
help and protection, what she seemed never to have had. Both of them, Cruzzi from his instinct for tinkering and Hildë from a vestigial talent never abused, made their alterations with, it seemed to them, a single hand” (Swann 223). Frederic and Hildë do not feel they have done anything wrong. They worked together to create the art of Mary Swann’s poems. As Frederic Cruzzi and Hildë Cruzzi reconstruct the poem, Shields ascertains that the reader has become a part of the story. It is no accident that each critic or interpreter of Mary Swann’s poem understands this poem in another way and yet, the characters never question whether their interpretation is correct or not. Art is to be shaped by the interpreter in any way that seems fit to them. One cannot say that one’s interpretation is any less significant than someone else’s. The poem is written to allow the reader to do what they seem fit to do with it.

Blood pronounces my name
Blisters the day with shame
Spends what little I own
Robbing the hour, robbing the bone (Swann 51).

Sarah Maloney, believes the poem expresses the mother-daughter blood relationship. For Sarah Maloney, her relationship with her mother holds a central role in her life. As Sarah Maloney describes the poem, “One poem in particular turns on the inescapable perseverance of blood ties, particularly those between mothers and daughters. It’s a poem that follows me around, chanting loudly inside my head and drumming on the centre of my heart” (Swann 51). Mother and daughter will always be connected by blood, and it is the mother whose influence on her daughter is so strong that they become one, and the daughter as an individual is robbed of her own interpretation.
Morton Jimroy, in contrast, relates the poem to the Holy Communion or the blood tie between a man and a higher power. “It’s a pretty direct reference to the sacrament of holy communion. Or perhaps, and this is my point, perhaps to a more elemental sort of blood covenant, the eating of the Godhead, that sort of thing” (Swann 148). Morton Jimroy seeks a way to be born again, to find a new purpose in his life after he has lost it. Jimroy takes it in a sense a spiritual awakening or a re-birth where he can reinvent himself.

Rose Hindmarch perceives the poem as a reference to menstruation. “Rose said nothing, not wanting to disappoint him a second time. She was unable to utter the word menstruation” (Swann 148). At the time, Rose Hindmarch was going through menopause and it was a topic of her frequent worry. Although Rose Hindmarch’s associations have always been less academic and more practical, she finds this to be as the experience Mary Swann was undergoing in the poem.

Frederic Cruzzi’s chapter completes the four character divisions of Swann. Each chapter was narrated differently, in first person or in third person and the last chapter read more as evidence or a biography of Frederic Cruzzi’s life rather than the inner workings of the characters and how they viewed themselves. It can be said that the four narrators are causing the death of Mary Swann by appropriating Mary Swann and claiming ownership of her work.

The fifth chapter shifts the novel from the experience of the four narrators to that of a screenplay. The final chapter leaves little open to interpretation and reveals to the audience who is behind the disappearance of Mary Swann’s work and the importance of her art.
3.5. The Swann Symposium

In the novel, Shields tries to locate the author’s identity by satirizing how a group of critics try to appropriate Mary Swann and *Swann’s songs*. Shields uses the screenplay at the end of the novel to facetiously declare how the reader or audience can be influenced by how information is presented to them and how authentic and trustworthy the narrators are (or the director’s influence on the audience).

The screenplay acts as completely new material. Although the reader has been familiarized with the characters in the past 229 pages, the screenplay is written anew as if no information has been passed to the audience (or reader). The screenplay is written under the pretence of being objective: “The director hopes to remain unobtrusive throughout, allowing dialogue and visual effects (and note private passions) to carry the weight of the narrative” (*Swann* 231). Yet, it paradoxically begins to influence the reader by telling the camera to focus on certain parts of the story and revealing what the reader should concentrate on in the director’s notes in moulding the audience just as the four characters have moulded the figure of Mary Swann.

As the characters are re-introduced, they are presented a bit differently. Rose is a chatterbox when she goes on and on about a topic, relentlessly not considering whether her audience is listening or not. Rose was more complicated and intuitive. When Sarah Maloney is presented in the script her story has changed since she is introduced in the first chapter of the novel. Maloney admits to having changed her mind about the many things she believed. Given that Maloney represents Swann then it is fair to assume that Mary Swann has also changed. Sarah Maloney is recognized by a woman on the bus and she confesses that since her published book, Sarah has gotten remarried and is now pregnant. Sarah used to repress the notion of being a wife or mother, but in the screenplay she begins to embrace it: “You know something? – this is what I’ve
always wanted only I didn’t know it” (Swann 249). Sarah Maloney has been given what she was yearning for, motherhood, and is now finally able to free herself from her motherly attachment to Mary Swann. Maloney was missing something in life and in the novel, she could not uncover what it was. It seems that she has found that it was a child that she was missing from her life.

Whereas Sarah Maloney has changed, Morton Jimroy is constantly being portrayed in his pretentious grandeur. When Willard Lang incorrectly introduces Jimroy as having fewer honourary degrees, being the “holder of two honourary degrees” (Swann 255) Morton interrupts correcting Lang by “lift[ing] his arms in a shrug: he is holding up three fingers … Three honorary degrees, of course! The most recent from Princeton University, I believe” (Swann 255). Shields exemplifies Morton Jimroy’s self-importance. When Morton Jimroy poses the question that has accompanied the reader throughout the entire novel, “Who really was Mary Swann?” (Swann 257) in his speech at the convention, he simplistically goes down the list of roles Mary Swann had played in a domestic sense “A woman. A wife. A mother. Perhaps a lover” (Swann 257) without presenting her as an artist or poet, and failing to consider Mary Swann’s character.

Morton Jimroy has invented a theory that it was Angus Swann’s discovery of Mary Swann’s affair that lead him to murder his wife and he searches for this lover and believes he can find proof of this in the notebook. He pressures Sarah Maloney into revealing her notebook. “We are all anxious to discover anything at all that may illuminate the…character of Mary Swann’s special muse” (Swann 267). There is no proof though to suggest that Mary Swann had a special muse. In fact, it would have been most improbable considering how Mary Swann was surveyed by her husband allowing her only a few minutes to borrow books from the library.
Morton Jimroy concludes with, “It is a mystery, just as our own lives are mysteries. Just as we don’t ever really know that person sitting to our right or left … Appearance and reality” (Swann 258). After this speech, Shields adds a Director’s Note. “The repetition of the phrase “appearance and reality” must be framed with silence and intensity, since it can be said to define the submerged dichotomy of the film” (Swann 258). This director’s note blatantly emphasizes to the reader that the main theme of this screenplay and correspondingly, this novel, is that there may be quite a discrepancy between what a person presents to the outside world and what their deepest thoughts may be — what is apparent may not be true in reality. Shields interrupts the screenplay anew with another Director’s Note. “Another sort of director, distrustful of his or her audience, might employ a flashback at this point” (Swann 259). Shields openly employs these interruptions to distance the reader of the screenplay from the story. It is an element to prevent the reader of becoming too close to the characters and allows the reader to question the character’s intent. Other comical elements are seen when Rose Hindmarch tries to defend her library, which she feels is under attack. Instead of adding to her argument, Rose Hindmarch makes the story sound even less academic and more ridiculous. “Mrs. Swann liked a good story. For example, Pearl Buck. I remember she likes Pearl Buck real well. And Edna Ferber” (Swann 260). Pearl Buck and Edna Ferber were not respected authors and certainly not those to be admired by the literary public. In a similarly preposterous defence, Morton Jimroy adds, that Mary Swann “was familiar with that genre of verse commonly known as Mother Goose” (Swann 261). When pressured, Morton Jimroy uses mother goose rhymes as literary predecessors that have inspired Mary Swann to write her illuminating poems. Shields uses a lot of irony and humour in the screenplay to emphasize the absurdity of the critics.
Frederic Cruzzi shines more light on Morton Jimroy and presents Jimroy’s motivation, “Some men only relate to women in the…abstract. And not in the actuality. A letter, even an intimate letter, is still somewhat of an abstraction … Could it be that you have something he wants?” (Swann 275) Cruzzi stresses the difference between fiction and reality where the writer can view themselves differently on the page than as they do in real life. Cruzzi goes on to explain how Morton Jimroy has become obsessed with Mary Swann and desperately wants Mary Swann’s life to become more interesting and it is by connecting Mary’s death that Jimroy believes he will find the truth to her life. “He wants Mrs. Swann’s life. Every minute of it if he could have it. Every cup of tea that woman imbibed. Every thought in her tormented head. And what’s more, he wants her death. Or some clue to it … he made it quite clear that he’ll never be able to understand Mrs. Swann’s life until he understands her death” (Swann 277). Morton Jimroy is not ready to give up on his project of writing Mary Swann’s biography. He wants any piece of information that can provide clues to how Swann may have lived. Jimroy feels that it is once he understands Swann’s death that he can finally comprehend Swann’s life and her life’s work. Shields corresponds this notion to the death of the author, where the author must first die to be later reborn in the reconstruction of the readers.

When Cruzzi speaks about Mary Swann, “Her life is a puzzle. Her death, as far as I’m concerned, is just one of those…random accidents” (Swann 279). Frederic Cruzzi has experienced this feeling of rage and so it is not surprising to Cruzzi how Angus Swann may have lost his mind and committed the crime, “In matters of love… I have to admit that all things are possible” (Swann 279). Feelings can cause someone to lose their mind and not act rationally and having experienced this, Cruzzi knows how easily this can happen.
After almost all of Mary Swann’s things have been stolen, Rose Hindmarch protects Mary Swann’s last photograph when she says, “I have to think about the museum. (She clutches the photograph.) I’m the one who’s responsible” (Swann 293). This can also be understood two-fold. It is Hindmarch who is responsible for Mary Swann’s memorial room in the Nadeau Local History Museum and it is she who presents this memorial to remember Swann, but it is also Hindmarch, who told Mary Swann to go and visit Frederic Cruzzi in Kingston and perhaps caused her death. It could be interpreted that she is responsible for the fact that all that remains of Mary Swann is this blurry photograph.

Rose Hindmarch redeems herself in the final chapter when she confesses that “People always say I was the only one who knew Mrs. Swann, personally, but I didn’t, not well. Well, no one really knows anyone really well, not the things they’re worried about or scared to death of or what they’re really thinking” (Swann 242). Shields uses this postmodernist technique to question the authenticity of what a person says. Although Rose is speaking about Mary Swann, this could be equally true for Rose. Although Hindmarch does not reveal that she fabricated the friendship she had with Mary Swann, she does speak a truth. One never truly knows what another is thinking and what they say is true. This is true for Rose Hindmarch and it is also true for Mary Swann. Morton Jimroy delivered the same message on appearance and reality and it heightens the theme of distinguishing fact and fiction and whether it is possible to separate the two.

The irony of Swann’s symposium is reiterated when Rose remarks, “Wouldn’t it be funny if … Well, if here we were, all sixty-seven of us. All of us here to talk about Mary Swann’s poems, and what if – what if not a single one of us has a copy of her books?” (Swann 303) Not only would this be ironic, it is what happens when no one
possesses a copy of *Swann’s Songs*. By this time, all of Mary Swann’s books and most of her possessions have been stolen and the disappearance of the author is nearing completion.

The novel concludes with another act of reconstruction. The readers reconstruct the dead (and disappearing) author. Upon having lost all of Mary Swann’s books and poems, all of the participants at the Swann symposium, including Sarah Maloney, Morton Jimroy, Rose Hindmarch and Frederic Cruzzi unite and in a communal effort reproduce Mary Swann’s poem ironically titled “Lost Things.” The literary community “are seen joined in a ceremonial act of reconstruction, perhaps even an act of creation” (*Swann* 311). Although the protagonists have attempted to claim a piece of Mary Swann’s ownership, they work together to create art anew. Each reader provides a verse to recreate the poem and the art that has been lost.

*Swann* is divided in five chapters. First, the four chapters reveal the way four narrators Sarah Maloney, Morton Jimroy, Rose Hindmarch and Frederic Cruzzi view themselves and project these views onto the work of the deceased poet Mary Swann. As a satire, Shields uses points of view and narrative styles to distance or proximate the reader to the characters. In the final chapter, Shields adopts a screenplay narrative distorting fact and fiction and how the audience can be influenced by the director.
Conclusion

This thesis examines Carol Shields’s *Swann* with her unique narrative style to present how the author must first die in order to be reborn through the act of the author’s reconstruction. By analysing *Swann* chapter-by-chapter, from “Sarah Maloney” to “The Swann Symposium”, this thesis attempts to explore Mary Swann’s absence and gradual disappearance as she is appropriated by her four narrators. This thesis engages Mary Swann as a woman who has found her voice in her writing only to be silenced by her four narrators: Sarah Maloney, Morton Jimroy, Rose Hindmarch, Frederic Cruzzi, and ultimately, her murderous husband Angus Swann.

*Swann* is a literary mystery of a woman who is erased from her own life. While Mary Swann has lived an ordinary life on a rural farm in Nadeau, Ontario, she has amassed a modest claim to fame with her collection of poetry, *Swann’s Songs*, published posthumously. It is her brutal death of being shot, dismembered, and hidden in a silo, which has been the most dramatic event of Mary Swann’s life. The underlining mystery is not Mary Swann’s murder, but the gradual vanishing of all of Mary Swann’s possessions – the traces of her existence. *Swann* combines an unconventional novel form providing multiple narrators while integrating letters, announcements, and finally, offering a screenplay at the end of the novel. Shields constantly shifts the narrative as she rotates narrators: Sarah Maloney – who discovered Swann, Morton Jimroy – Mary Swann’s self-appointed biographer, Rose Hindmarch – a small-town librarian who knew Swann, and Frederic Cruzzi – Mary Swann’s publisher. Shields commences with first-person narration, only to switch to third-person narration, where at times the third-person narrator is a critical narrator undermining the speaker’s credibility, while at other times the narrator becomes an omniscient one reporting on the events in the novel.
The greater mysteries which are explored revolve around the questions of who Mary Swann is, and the far more vast: what is art? The former question can be answered in a number of ways. More questions of this nature can be asked, such as who is Sarah Maloney, Morton Jimroy, Rose Hindmarch or Frederic Cruzzi, but ultimately, Mary Swann is a part of them all. It is through reading Swann that the fictional readers adopt Mary Swann to fit their own purposes. The role of the reader is to reconstruct the author, and it is through this interaction that meaning can be grasped from the text. The answer to the second (and far more vague) question of what constitutes art can be as complicated or as simple as the interpreter chooses. Art can certainly be defined as something that expands or shifts its interpreter’s view of the world, as every different perspective illuminates multiple realities of experience. The art of writing is “a texture that approximates the world as we know it; characters who in their struggle for the world resemble ourselves; dilemmas which remind us of our own predicaments; scenes that trigger our memories or tap into our yearning; and conclusion that shorten the distance between what is privately felt and universally known” (Goertz and Eden 22). As the reader travels through the journey of the novel, it is their personal experience in finding these similarities with the text that creates the art.

Redemption can be found through the writing process. By writing about the lives of the voiceless, it can offer these voices a platform in which they are heard; it redeems them. Shields claims that she writes “about people I have an urge to redeem to hold still in the flow of history … Everyone needs recognition” (Cumming 12). Carol Shields redeems the life of a vanishing woman, Mary Swann. Mary Swann finds her voice through the writing of her poems, but on the night of meeting the editor who decides to publish her poems, she is silenced by her husband. The silencing of Swann’s voice continues “because she is a woman, an unknown poet, with no power or privilege in
literary discourse, Mary Swann is dismissed by the majority of academia as a *poète naïf*” (Besner 215). Mary Swann is discredited from the role of a serious poet because she is a woman lacking an educational background in the arts. Shields’s novel portrays that “in the masculine-dominated field of literary production, political struggles over manuscripts, interpretations, and reputations are a significant but erased part of the biography of a woman writer” (Beckham-Long 59). *Swann* is about how the creators of literature are manipulated by literary academics that declare to study them objectively only to claim ownership over their work.

As Mary Swann’s voice has been erased from the text, one must fully examine the gap left by this silence. Terry Eagleton in his text claims, “it is in the significant *silences* of a text, in its gaps and absences that the presence of ideology can be most positively felt. It is these silences which the critic must make speak” (Eagleton qtd. in Mio 94). These absences raise questions to the reader, who is left to ponder their significance. In the novel *Swann*, Mary Swann hardly speaks. Her direct voice is only described in the fourth chapter on meeting Frederic Cruzzi. Throughout the rest of the novel, it is the fictional narrators’s perspectives that disclose Swann’s personality. Therefore, the little of Mary Swann that is present in the novel (her only possessions proving that she existed at all) disappear, and the slim book of Mary Swann’s poetry, which was published posthumously, is not in fact hers, as it was a collaborate effort between Frederic and Hildë Cruzzi, who pieced the poems together on behalf of the smudged poems ruined by fish grease.

It is through these fictional narrators, rather, that the reader learns about the life of Mary Swann. Roy explains “The book’s interrupted, indirect, or dialogic narration, mixed genres, embedded texts, extravagant multiplicity of narrative voices, and ambiguous ending together suggest a peculiarly feminine ambivalence toward narrative
authority” (121). It is not only a feminine ambivalence in the multiplicities of voices of Sarah Maloney, Morton Jimroy, Rose Hindmarch, and Frederic Cruzzì, but also in the multiplicity of genres (postmodern mystery, thriller, parody).

It is through these multiplicities of voices and the mixing of genres that the reader can locate kernels of the truth. Swann lives on in the reader’s memory. Memory, however, is by its nature selective, and as such is unreliable in recalling accurate details of events and in presenting the truth objectively. Truth is relative and it is up to the reader to select which pieces of information to accept and which to reject.

I conclude my thesis with the epigraph in the novel, an untitled poem by Mary Swann.

The rivers of this country
Shrink and crack and kill
And the waters of my body
Grow invisible (Swann).

This poem speaks of a dying woman who is being murdered by the country and its rivers. The word “country” represents the home, a place where one should feel safe, and where one has a feeling of belonging. If the home fails in its role of providing a nurturing environment, then it could in fact, “shrink” the individual until they “crack”, and ultimately, “kill” them. This death of the individual can also be metaphorical as the fictional readers of Swann appropriate Mary Swann, and in doing so, perform her metaphorical murder. Similarly to this appropriation, it is interesting to consider that perhaps Carol Shields may have been appropriating the life of Pat Lowther. Pat Lowther was a Canadian poet murdered by her husband. Although Lowther published some poems before her death, Lowther became much more popular after her death. And Pat Lowther’s body… was discovered in a creek (Wiesenthal 18).
Works cited


Summary

The aim of this thesis is to analyze Carol Shields’s novel *Swann* as a postmodern parody of the mysterious life of Mary Swann. Shields appoints four narrators to recount their own perceptions on Mary Swann and her art. Shields’s final chapter switches genres, morphing into a screenplay presenting academia, meeting to discuss Swann’s literary excellence at the Swann Symposium. In discovering that Mary Swann’s work and possessions have been stolen entirely, the attendees turn to reconstructing Swann’s poem in an act of creation. This thesis elaborates on authenticity and truth, as these topics are explored by the fictional readers of Swann’s book of poetry, *Swann’s Songs*.

The first chapter focuses on Carol Shields as a writer and on writing. Shields’s brief biography is established to distinguish how a writer’s personal life and writing life correspond. As the novel progresses, Shields explores the themes of domesticity, dailiness, and ordinariness, and in doing so, establishes Swann’s identity and develops relationships. It is through this sacred art of writing, that the writer finds a voice. It is important to note that art is a creative process that must consider the role of the artist as well as the role of the interpreter. The interpreter must question the narrator’s authenticity based on pieces of information that are often blended together and at times contradict one another. Shields accomplishes this expertly by presenting numerous points of view to narrate the stories, while at the same time experimenting with writing styles. Shields chooses to present information indirectly, in the form of poetry, letters, articles, and even a screenplay. Shields’s literary predecessors are also examined, as they played a significant role in Shields’s writing.

The second chapter examines two literary theoretical essays, Roland Barthes’s “Death of the Author” and Michel Foucault’s “What is an Author?” It is through the death of the Author that the interpreters are enabled to reconstruct the author anew.
Furthermore, these essays illuminate the death of Mary Swann, facilitating Swann’s reconstruction and her gradual disappearance throughout Shields’s narrative.

Finally, a close reading of *Swann* discusses how the four narrators: Sarah Maloney – a feminist literary critic, Morton Jimroy – a biographer, Rose Hindmarch – a small town librarian and Frederic Cruzzi – Mary Swann’s publisher, appropriate Mary Swann. They do so by tampering with the evidence: ignoring the truth about Swann’s influences, discarding her rhyming dictionary and, perhaps most notably, falsifying an intimate friendship with her. Shields cleverly compares this to the role of the reader of *Swann*, and in doing so, uncomfortably juxtaposes the reader with the characters in the novel, while leaving it up to the reader to distinguish the difference between fact and fiction.
Résumé

Cílem této práce je analýza novely Carol Shieldsové *Swann* jako postmoderní parodie na záhadný život Mary Swannové. Shieldsová nám nabízí čtyři vyprávěče a jejich vlastní vnímání autorky Mary Swannové a jejího umění. V závěrečné kapitole Shieldsová mění literární žánr z vyprávění na formu scénáře. Na Swannové sympoziu se nám schází akademický svět, aby diskutoval o literární výtečnosti autorky. Při odhalení, že celá práce Mary Swannové byla ukradena, účastníci sympozia se snaží rekonstruovat poezii Swannové a docházejí tak k jejímu znovuzrození. Tato diplomová práce se snaží prokázat pravdivost a věrohodnost tak jak jí zkoumají fiktivní čtenáři knihy Swannové poezie *Swann’s Songs.*


Druhá kapitola zkoumá dvě eseje z teorie literatury, „Smrt autora“ od Rolanda Barthese a „Co je to autor“ od Michela Foucaulta. Díky smrti autora je dovoleno čtenářům vytvořit si autora znovu. Dále tyto eseje osvětlují smrt Mary Swannové a
umožňují rekonstrukci Swannové a její pozvolné zmizení v celém vyprávění Carol Shieldsové.
