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**"Echoes of the Self: Exploring Solitude and Personal Growth" in Carol Shields' "Unless"**

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**Abstract:**

Carol Shields's last novel, *Unless* (2002), was a finalist for the Canada Reads contest for the best Canadian novel of the first decade of the 21st century. It would have been an ideal winner, not only due to its brilliance but also because it distinctively blends English and French languages, reflecting Canadian culture. When asked about her belief in God, Shields stated, "No. Human goodness is the only thing I believe in." This theme is challenged in "Unless" through the self-immolation of one woman and the physical and mental damage to another who tries to help her. Norah, the protagonist, suffers burns on her hands while trying to save a woman in a burning burka, resulting in her sitting silently on a Toronto street with "GOODNESS" written on a sign around her neck and a begging bowl in her lap. Her family's rush to reintegrate her into their upscale Toronto life risks ignoring both Norah's changed state and the memory of the dead woman who lingers in the narrative.

**Keywords:** English, French languages, Goodness, self-immolation and Canadian culture.

**Introduction:**

The protagonist and narrator, Reta Winters, née Summers, is the daughter of a Francophone mother and an Anglophone father, embodying Canada's two primary languages. Reta reminisces, "My mother always spoke to me in French and my father in English, and I was allowed to reply in either language."

Reta reflects that the complexity of her early years was alleviated, rather than complicated, by her immersion in both languages. Every object, every action, had an echo, an explanation. Meaning had two feet, two dependable etymological stems," highlighting Shields's fondness for duality. Reta concludes, "I swam in English, a relaxed backstroke, but stood up to my hips in French," indicating her full bilingualism, much like Carol Shields herself.

Reta, like Shields, is not only a fiction writer but also a translator. However, she places her creative pursuits in the background, prioritizing her roles as a wife, mother, and homemaker. The opening part of *Unless* highlights her work translating from French to English. While readers might not commonly view Shields as bilingual, her fluency in French was developed through study and extended stays in France, where her family eventually bought a house. Shields incorporate French significantly in "Unless": she uses French translations to emphasize points, such as the powerlessness of women.

Translation serves as a crucial motif and practice in *Unless*. The novel engages with translation on three levels, derived from the Latin origin of the word meaning "to carry across." First, Reta's literal translations from French to English appear in the novel's opening segment. Second, Shields transforms a narrative about breast cancer into a story about a daughter's disappearance. Third, Reta's met-fictional journey translates her realizations about women's powerlessness into her understanding of fiction, creating a feminist narrative for the new millennium.

Reta translates the works of Danielle Westerman, a French feminist pioneer, Holocaust survivor, cynic, and genius, who is seen as Simone de Beauvoir's spiritual daughter. Westerman's surname combines "western" and "man," alluding to Western culture and gender issues, while her first name is a feminized version of Daniel. Reta translates Westerman's poetry collection "L'Ile" as "Isolation" because the direct translation "Island" did not fully convey Danielle's sense of solitary feminism at that time. This demonstrates Reta's interpretative power as a translator to capture the author's intended meaning accurately.

Danielle even wants to translate her publisher's name from Éditions Grandmont to Big Mountain Press, humorously suggesting a New World twist to the pretentious French name. Despite believing that a writer's biases should always be accommodated by her translator, Reta refuses to translate the publisher's name, highlighting the tension between an author's intent and a translator's choices. Like Shields, Danielle is also a poet, essayist, and memoirist.

Reta discusses her translation, or "traduction," as Danielle prefers to call it, of Danielle's poetry. She found the poems challenging to translate, noting that poetry was not her specialty. However, in her younger years, she was willing to push herself, patiently moving words back and forth and reciting them softly, as translators are advised to do, to fully capture the poet's intentions.

As John Millington Synge, an Irish modernist playwright, explained, a translation must convey the poem's music along with its words. Reta is aware of Robert Frost's notion that poetry is "what gets lost in translation," and she compares the poems to intricate toys, filled with puns and early feminist references. Although Reta is hesitant to view her translations as creative writing, Westerman asserts that translating poetry is a creative act. She believes that writing and translating are complementary, not opposing or hierarchical.

Shields highlight the traditional hierarchical relationship between creation and translation, linking it to gender issues. Just as "strong" rhymes are called "masculine" and "weak" rhymes "feminine," translators and women are both seen as subordinate. Sherry Simons explains in her study that translation has been "feminized," suggesting that translators are secondary to authors and women to men. The concept of "fidelity" in translation carries both literal and sexual connotations. Yegeny Yevtushenko's adaptation of a French proverb—"Translation is like a woman. If it is beautiful, it is not faithful. And if it is faithful, it certainly is not beautiful"—illustrates this idea. Consequently, a female translator like Reta Winters is doubly marginalized.

Recent feminist translation theorists seek to elevate translation to the same level as creative writing, a view Shields appears to support. Reta comes to see "translation as an act of originality," recognizing that converting elegant French into readable English is an aesthetic endeavor. With the money Reta earns translating Danielle's book "Eros: Essays" into English, she takes her family to La Roche-Vineuse in southern Burgundy, where Danielle grew up and where the Shields family bought a home.

Reta then translates Westerman's memoirs, with the first volume "Pour Vivre" translated simply as "Alive." Her interventionist translation is criticized as "clumsy" by The Toronto Star, but Danielle dismisses the reviewer with a crude term, which Reta translates as something between a pimp and a jerk. This could reflect Shields's own reaction to reviewers who dismissed her work as "women's writing." Just as Reta is called a "bard of the banal" by a reviewer, Shields was similarly labeled "bard of the boring" and her writing "smaller than life" before she won the Pulitzer Prize for "The Stone Diaries" in 1995.

#### **Significant Of Reinterpretation:**

Shields's fiction was often dismissed as domestic fiction or "women's writing," perhaps motivating her to write from male perspectives in "Happenstance" and "Larry's Party," and to compose a male voice in "A Celibate Season." Shields has been described as an "alchemist of the everyday," transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary, celebrating the quotidian and

domestic. Despite the dismissal of her work, Shields practiced women's writing in the sense of scripture feminine, as described by Hélène Cixous, aiming to make women's lives visible and viewing writing as an act of redemption. In her "Playwright's Note" to "Thirteen Hands," she expresses her interest in redeeming the lives of women artists and activists, aiming to valorize their lives.

Reta translates the second volume of Westerman's memoirs, "Les femmes et le pouvoir," as "Women Waiting." She explains that although women possess power, it is a power that has yet to be seized, ignited, or released, reflecting Shields's feminist thesis in "Unless." This significant reinterpretation emphasizes women's ongoing powerlessness. Reta asserts her own agency through her translations, placing her ideological stamp on the work. While Boris Pasternak likened translation to copying a painting, Thomas Bailey Aldrich believed true art selects and paraphrases rather than providing verbatim translations. Reta's choice of title also has autobiographical or met fictional significance, as it matches the title of a short play by Shields. The concept of igniting is crucial, not only to the self-immolation of the "Muslim woman" but also to Norah's transformation as a result of her involvement in this event.

Westerman, described as a poet, essayist, feminist survivor, and holder of twenty-seven honorary degrees, becomes Reta's moral mentor, the voice in her head guiding her actions. Reta frequently asks herself if Danielle would approve, and she feels overshadowed by Danielle's severe moral stance. Despite this, author and translator develop a symbiotic relationship, with Danielle calling Reta her "true sister," equalizing the traditional hierarchy between author and translator. Reta, translating the third volume of Westerman's memoirs, "The Middle Years," taps into Danielle's "vein of language."

Umberto Eco famously said, "Translation is the art of failure," and Reta, perhaps aware of this sentiment, transforms into a creative writer herself, composing a book on Russian Icons. Shields suggest a connection between creation and translation, with Reta becoming her own translator and rendering her English text into French. Danielle, discouraged by Reta's neglect of translating the fourth volume of her memoirs, takes on the translation herself, leading to an ironic exchange of roles between them, emphasizing the complex relationship between creative writing and translation.

Danielle theorizes that Norah is responding to women's powerlessness in a patriarchal society by choosing complete passivity. She believes Norah has embraced powerlessness, claiming everything by doing nothing. Reta asks Danielle to repeat this in French, emphasizing the novel's central concept in both of Canada's official languages. Echoing Westerman, Reta reflects on Norah's pursuit of goodness over greatness, registering her existence in the only way available to her.

*Unless* opens with the concept of literal translation "from French into English," but extends this to figurative translation and gender politics. Interpretation is central to the novel, as Reta's eldest daughter, Norah, inexplicably sits on a Toronto street-corner with a begging bowl and a sign reading "GOODNESS." The novel explores various interpretations of Norah's behaviour, with different characters offering theories, from a phase or breakdown to a physiological cause. A psychiatrist suggests it might be a behavioral response to something unbearable or an embrace of the ineffable. Tom, Norah's father, believes it is post-traumatic shock, searching for the trauma to identify a remedy. Reta hopes Norah is in a demented trance, imagining she will snap out of it like Sleeping Beauty.

The novel *Unless* is filled with feminist references, including Helen Reddy's song "I Am Woman" and the art of "bean-counting" male-dominated lists of great thinkers and writers. Reta writes unsent letters of protest under pseudonyms, expressing objections to gender biases. Shields herself is unafraid to publish her views on gender and power, as demonstrated in her interviews and writings.

The word *Unless* offers hope and possibility, suggesting a potential escape from a dismal fate. Shields comments on the title, seeing it as a provisional word that can change everything. Reta reflects on how "Unless" provides a way out of despair, a tunnel into the light. The concept is emphasized through the trope of translation, although Reta notes that "unless" cannot be fully expressed in French, highlighting the nuance and significance of the word in English.

Ultimately, *Unless* is a novel of interpretation, exploring how to understand and respond to Norah's inexplicable behaviour, reflecting broader themes of women's power and agency in a patriarchal society. In Carol Shields' novel *Unless*, the concept of translation, in the broad sense of transference, is central to the narrative. Initially inspired by Shields' own battle with cancer, the novel shifts focus from literal translation to metaphorical transference, transforming personal grief into a broader exploration of maternal loss. Shields initially began writing about her cancer experience but found it too autobiographical and emotionally draining. Instead, she redirected her sorrow into the fictional mourning of a lost child, inspired partly by the experience of one of her doctors.

Shields' personal struggle with cancer is metaphorically mirrored in the novel's theme of estrangement, as observed by Johnston, who notes that cancer is replaced by the estrangement of the protagonist's daughter, Norah. Shields' ability to blend reality and fiction is evident in her characters and themes, emphasizing the mother-daughter relationship and reflecting her belief that fiction is the other side of reality. This approach is evident in Reta, the protagonist, who sees her life as a novel and uses fiction as a means to cope with her grief.

Reta's journey is both literal and literary, paralleling Shields' own process of transforming personal experience into creative expression. Reta writes a sequel to her successful comic novel, "My Thyme Is Up," titled "Thyme in Bloom," which mirrors her own quest and reflects her evolving understanding of happiness and loss. Through this met-fictional narrative, Shields satirizes the comedy of manners and critiques traditional gender roles, highlighting the tension between personal desire and societal expectations.

The title *Unless* encapsulates the novel's met-fictional quest and symbolizes the hopeful yet conditional nature of existence. Reta uses fiction to navigate her daughter's disappearance, realizing that novels must offer readers a sense of possibility beyond mere escapism. Shields' interviews suggest that writing "Unless" served as a therapeutic antidote to her illness, similar to how Reta uses writing to cope with her daughter's absence.

Reta's reflections on her writing evolve into a feminist critique, questioning the traditional disempowerment of women in literature and society. She recognizes the inherent gender bias and insists on retaining the feminist perspective in her work, opposing her editor's attempt to marginalize her female characters. This feminist awareness extends to her understanding of Norah's catatonic state, which she attributes to the broader societal oppression of women.

Ultimately, Reta's personal tragedy and her literary endeavours converge, leading her to revise the structure and thematic focus of her comic fiction. Inspired by her daughter's feminist perspective, she envisions a future novel, "Autumn Thyme," which will portray a true feminist heroine. This planned novel will be marked by melancholy and brevity, reflecting Shields' own experiences and insights. Through "Unless," Shields explores the provisional nature of existence, suggesting that fiction can offer a momentary balance and a glimpse of hope amidst life's uncertainties.

#### **Conclusion:**

*Unless* is a serious book despite its comic resolution, blending coincidence and contradiction, ethics and aesthetics, paradox and possibility. Norah's recovery contrasts with the tragedy of the woman who immolated herself, highlighting unresolved issues. Although Norah's return to her family enables a happy ending, Reta remains disillusioned about women's equality in

the modern world. This transformation from summers to winters mirrors Carol Shields' analysis of Jane Austen's fusion of moral seriousness with comic drama, as seen in "Jane Austen: A Life."

Shields' "double vision" allows Reta to see the comedy in her tragic role, reflecting a blend of humor and sorrow, which is a hallmark of Shields' writing. Margaret Atwood describes this duality as Shields' ability to balance surface-level humor with deeper, ominous undertones. This juxtaposition is likened to a boat skimming across the River Styx, capturing Reta's delicate navigation of her daughter's disappearance.

Shields use the concept of translation, both literal and figurative, to bridge reality and fiction, and to critique the powerlessness of women in a feminist millennial context. Rachel Cusk aptly concludes that *Unless* is a feat of translation, hinting at its subtle mastery by suggesting that calling it a masterpiece might be reserved for a man's declaration

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