"*Unless* we realise, *Unless* we change, *Unless* we speak....." Carol Shields: *Unless*. London: Fourth Estate, 2002.

By Samantha Hume, University of Cologne, Germany

1 Carol Shields' novel *Unless* is an investigation into the notion of goodness. It both illustrates the ways in which goodness is taken for granted as a feminine attribute and criticises this as being restrictive with the potential to oppress women and inhibit their development. *Unless* is also about language, voice and especially silence. Its critical perspective is very much a feminist one, but this does have to be sought after. It is not clear whether Shields intends to make her readers angry, which she does, or whether this is a byproduct of the frustration of recognition of the fact that her characters do indeed reflect many contemporary, middle-class, educated women's lives and readers may be forced into a self-reflection which can be uncomfortable.

2 The plot of *Unless* deals with the plight of Reta Winters' (née Summers) teenage daughter Norah, who has dropped out of life and now sits on a street corner wearing a sign around her neck with the word "goodness" on it. This withdrawal from life takes its toll on the idyll that is her well-balanced, well-cared for family. The perfect family home on a hill with a beautiful garden, peace, prosperity and above all harmony and predictability is suddenly ruptured by her disappearance. Her parents are devastated and fraught with worry and incomprehension. Her sisters try to maintain the noisy jollyness of their home knowing, however, at all times, that this is merely a superficial attempt to pretend that nothing has happened. But it is her mother's reaction which is the central focus of the text. Reta embarks on a journey of discovery trying to find the reasons for her daughter's drastic behaviour. In the course of her journey, Reta discovers a great deal more about the notion of goodness and what far-reaching consequences it has for women in general, not only for Norah. Norah, in fact, is simply the catalyst for the development and eventual insight experienced by Reta. She drifts in and out of the text to remind the reader that Reta's quest is to understand the possible motivation for her daughter's action. Reta is shaken into a state of reflection on her own life, her mother's, her daughters' and her friends' lives and even her husband's. This reflection also encompasses a critical perspective on a wide range of feminist topics including herself as a woman, her career, women's careers in general and on the fate of women in the world, their invisibility, their voices and their silences. From a narrative perspective, it seems at first as though Reta were distracted by disjointed sorties into various experiences throughout her life; however, closer inspection and extrapolation at the end of the text reveal that these apparently

isolated events are indeed the interwoven threads that create an intricate potential explanation for her daughter's despair.

3 Goodness seems to be very much an attribute of femininity, of womanhood. Women are the nurturers, they create homes and care for others. Motherhood, as a concept, entails self-sacrifice and goodness. Since motherhood is part of definitions of femininity, it is not surprising that this creates expectations of women's behaviour which in turn pressurise women into conforming, into being good. Goodness, unfortunately, is set up as an antithesis of aggression and anger. There is no place for hostility in goodness, no space for fury and rage. Reta introduces herself as a writer, a translator. She lists all the publications she has and how she has managed to write so much despite having had and brought up three children. Her list, however, reads like a catalogue entry. Reta does not describe her achievements with any sense of praise or pride, but rather constantly apologises for the periods of time which she describes as "lost" when she had to look after Tom and the children. She seems to define herself first and foremost as wife and mother, who also happens to write. Her obligations of childcare, cooking, cleaning and creating the idyllic happy home seem always to take precedence over her ambitions as a writer.

4 As a child of the sixties with an awareness of feminist issues and translator of feminist works by Danielle Westerman, she is well-informed about feminist theory. Westerman is the Simone de Beauvoir of Canada; she has published widely, "a woman with twenty-seven honorary degrees and she's given the world a shelf of books. She's given her thoughts, her diagram for a new, better, just world" (223), and, at the age of eighty-six , proves herself to be still capable of change and development. She functions as a kind of mentor for Reta and although single, fiercely independent and non-conformist, through her writing and their conversations, it becomes quite clear that she does have an effect on her. Reta does have the obligatory room of her own, but it is a small attic room with no central space in the house unlike the "big blocky desk that Tom uses for personal correspondence" (50) which is in the large space at the entrance to the house. This is almost a stereotypical view of what much of male-dominated society would define as a woman's role. She may be anything she wishes as long as it is invisible and does not detract from her role in the family. This is an extremely irritating characteristic of Reta and ultimately one which has contributed to Norah's withdrawal. So much goodness and self-sacrifice sparks memories of the ubiquitous "angel in the house" syndrome, which feminists have been trying to kill off for more than thirty years. But Reta at the beginning of the text is yet to be enlightened and Reta at the end of the text, while still striving to reinstate the idyll and harmony, does offer some hope of having moved

forward out of this restrictive identity. She comes to realise that the intellectual role model and the actual role model she presents as mother are two highly divergent images. She illustrates to her daughters that her role as mother is the most important thing in her life and at the same time wants to infuse in them the independence of thought and ambition that she would like them to have in order to gain access to all areas of life. However, the power of actions is often more commanding than that of words. Norah's goodness and self-sacrifice for others underpins this. She sits in silence, invisible, not complaining, not demanding space for herself, not demanding access to the world, handing over all that she is given in her begging bowl to others who live on the street and completely denying her existence and right to be seen and valued.

5 Reta's development in the course of the text is illustrated by her growing criticism of the way that the many issues that affect women in their daily lives are dealt with in society at large. She begins by deciding to refuse to be patronised by journalists who ask her about her husband and how he feels about her writing, as though this had any bearing at all on the text they are discussing, and feels justified in doing so by commenting that "[r]ude and difficult people are more likely to be taken seriously" (64). In the course of the rest of the novel, she begins to write a series of irate letters of protest about the systematic exclusion of women as great thinkers or the solvers of moral dilemmas or as great writers. She protests about women writers being allocated only the role of miniaturism, apparently incapable of addressing universal themes and about the achievements of women being denigrated even in their obituaries, while those of men, be they ever so minuscule or inconsequential, are expounded upon as somehow being imbued with greatness. The fact that a man read books in the last days of his life is seen in his obituary as some kind of notable event jars with the story of Lois, Reta's mother-in-law, who won a prize for a cake, but whose winning blue ribbon was simply thrown away in an attic clearout. The assignation of hierarchies to male or female accomplishments, whereby those made by women are almost invariably inferior, is an enduring aspect of male-dominated social power mechanisms. The exclusion of women and the persistent attempt of literary critics, media and philosophy to continue to render them invisible by not giving them the same exposure as their male counterparts comes to a head in Reta's final letter, which, with an unbridled and scathing criticism of Russell Sandor, a short story writer, illustrates how women's lives and especially anything to do with their bodies is overlain with disgust and denigration by much male-dominated discourse. Sandor's protagonist is a philosophy professor whose horror and disgust at seeing a mastectomy bra hanging in a shop window is symbolic of innumerable men who would have women's issues,

especially those pertaining to bodily functions, purged from public view. Reta has never sent any of the letters of protest she has written until this last one, which she ends with her real address and signs with her real name as opposed to the pseudonyms used in the others. It is fitting that, at the end of the novel, Reta is finally able to vent anger openly and voice the outrage she has suppressed for so long.

6 *Unless* is also a novel about language. The focus on language, language use and silence is a fundamental feature of the text. The chapter headings consist of adverbs, conjunctions and prepositions, linguistically termed "relational elements," linking devices for isolated events, and in Shields' words, "odd pieces of language to cement them [isolated events] together" (313). Arguably, one might define the roles of women in social discourse as similar to these pieces of language. They hold families and societies together, they are the appeasers, the members of the traditional family unit who are responsible for family gatherings, maintaining contact between generations, and caring for the rituals of bonding such as organising birthday parties, anniversaries, or weddings, christenings and burials. Reta has a similar function in this novel. The desire to reestablish contact to her daughter drives her to find the links which will solve the mystery of her behaviour. Reta's criticism of issues which affect women, the way women are ignored as intellectuals and great thinkers, as writers and philosophers and as half of the population of the world, sensitises her to the possibility that these apparently "isolated events" may in fact be drawn together to present a holistic image of women in society and thus also the motivation for a young woman to despair at it and wish to withdraw so completely from it.

7 The way in which language reflects power mechanisms is also highlighted. Shields cleverly illustrates the insertion of the letter "r" into the title Ms and thus immediately transforming the neutrality of the title into the relativity of the designation of "wife of" and the concordant meanings this entails. The associations of home, hearth and "baking tins" is a powerful device to detract from seeing a woman as an intellectual power and a voice that deserves to be heard. Shields' similar remarks on the accordance of power to males from birth simply because they have the Y chromosome which says "yes for ever and ever" (270) offers clear criticism of a status quo that disadvantages women purely on the basis of biology. Women like herself, her mentor and especially her daughters are all swept up into "uncoded otherness." The use of language to mirror power in interaction is further illustrated in the dialogue between Reta and her new editor Arthur Springer. His crassly patronising manner is typified in his total refusal to allow Reta to finish her sentences. His constant interruptions show him to be the subject and agent who is in control of the conversation. He disallows

Reta's opinions by invoking so-called truisms such as the hierarchy in literary criticism which considers popular fiction not serious literature. He ridicules Reta's female character Alicia whom he deems incapable of being the moral centre of her book, obviously, because she makes rice casseroles and writes fashion articles. The fact that she is a woman denies her access to universal themes. This devaluing of women's achievements is in the same vein as the derogation of women as great thinkers. They are capable of "goodness but not greatness," also a phrase which is reiterated at various points in the novel. Clearly then, language is power and the lack of access to language or the silencing of women's voices is an indirect criticism of social discourses which privilege men. Women's right to be seen as individuals and not as appendages, their right to have access to power structures which may affect their lives and women writers' right to determine that female characters are as capable of depicting universal issues as male characters are all represent criticism of a status quo which invalidates women. Interruptions in interaction as one means of silencing women's voices is not as powerful as the voluntary withdrawal and self-silencing of the women themselves. Norah's decision to fall silent in her anger and despair, Reta's use of letters to vent an anger which she never truly voices because she does not send them, and Lois, Reta's mother-in-law, who has also grown more and more silent in the realisation of her own powerlessness in her life, all maintain this status quo that oppresses them. Lois always saw herself only as the doctor's wife, with no other purpose and no other aim. Instead of open protest, the constriction of marriage forces her to flee into instability and mental illness reminiscent of Perkins Gilman's heroine in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Now in later years, she feels no longer able to stop herself from saying things that might be offensive, which is no more than a euphemistic way of saying that she cannot allow herself anger. One might then ask why it is that these women are all so easily silenced? The combination of frustration, helplessness and fear of the consequences may offer one answer, although it seems to be the message of this text that the realisation of the magnitude of the problems women still face, despite supposedly "having it all," is so great as to be unbearable. The recognition of how various oppressive structures are interrelated makes it difficult to tackle only one, but more importantly, seeing them all together is simply devastating.

8 At the end of the novel, Norah has returned home and a sense of normality seems to be returning to the family. Reta knows that things will not be the same. The cycle of seasons from the beginning of the crisis has run its course and she has arrived out of winter to a new spring. Shields' use of the ten month period does not seem to be chance. Norah's budding independence and maturity in summer, her withdrawal into despair in autumn, the cold winter

of loss and then the return in spring all point to a natural cycle of development. This is paralleled by Reta's own awakening and the integration of her intellectual knowledge into her own real everyday life. From a feminist perspective, the whole text is reminiscent of the wave of consciousness-raising novels of the 1970s and its message seems to be as clearly relevant in the new millennium as it was then: women cannot become complacent about their place in male-dominated social discourse. The mechanisms that have been in place for hundreds of years still operate and women must always be aware that it is easier to be seduced into silence than to vent rage even where it is truly justified, but uncomfortable. Mothers must see what roles they are offering their daughters and what restrictions they are perpetuating through their own silences. Carol Shields' *Unless* reveals all this to us in beautifully crafted prose. She provokes anger but also understanding. If set at the turn of the last century, this text would seem perfectly fitting. Placed, as it is, in contemporary Canada, it is a frightening reminder of how little has really changed and what still has to be done for and by women both on the individual level and the level of society as a whole.