



**CONTEMPORARY MORMON LITERATURE:  
PHYLLIS BARBER'S WRITING**

DISSERTATION

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## 1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION: *BEYOND THE EDGES*

I feel I should begin with a couple of questions, not to justify my dissertation, but to provide some sort of explanation to support my choice. Why Mormon literature? Why Phyllis Barber?

I must admit that I got involved with Mormon literature by accident. Without going into detail let me say that “by accident” I mean that there was no specific reason or objective at the beginning. In fact, at first, I approached this topic with a certain degree of prejudice. Take into account my situation: I am not a religious person, nor am I a woman. I had never been to Nevada before I began my research, nor do I play the piano or even enjoy classical music. Phyllis Barber is a Mormon<sup>1</sup> woman who was raised in Las Vegas and studied music, eventually becoming a professional pianist. Even though I seem to have very little in common with the object of my research, I consider myself sensitive enough and adequately prepared to undertake this challenge. But it still seems necessary to ask a couple of questions: Why Mormon literature? Why Phyllis Barber?

I would not have been able to reply to these questions when I made the decision to choose this topic. But now, totally convinced of my choice and my goal, I feel equipped to give an accurate answer. My response emerges from the reading of Barber’s books and articles as well as those of many others labelled as writers of Mormon literature. The rest of

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<sup>1</sup> Barber’s engagement with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not measured in this dissertation. My statement that she is a Mormon is grounded in her cultural and spiritual education, even though, throughout her literary production, different levels of attachment to the Church will be apparent. Perhaps, that variety in her commitment to the Church shows in itself that such a defining label as Mormon proves slippery. As a starting point, I trust my use of the term in an academic realm, since I reckon the necessity to establish a defining context to place her literary production. In a deeper analysis, I believe that throughout this dissertation I will show how I perceive that any notion related to a possible definition of Barber’s literary production as Mormon fiction claims a wide conception of the term, thus following and agreeing with the general spirit and philosophy of this dissertation.

this introduction is my broad response to those two questions. But, before I begin to present that response, there is one more task to tackle: I need to explain the source and magnitude of the label Mormon literature. It would be wise to assume that not everybody knows that Mormon literature exists. The fact that I cannot take for granted that everyone knows about the existence of Mormon literature defends my initial motivation in writing this dissertation.

When I began this research, I realized that it was only forty years ago that scholars and critics began to talk about Mormon literature. The first college classes on this subject were held in the late 1970s, and the first anthology, *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints* (1974) was published in the same decade. Although we are now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Mormon criticism is still being shaped and formed: passionate discussions about the purpose of Mormon criticism and the limits and concerns of both the criticism and the literature still take place among Mormon scholars and writers. The many comments that I discovered about the peculiarity of Mormon literature stirred my interest in the subject as did my growing awareness of the enthusiasm with which many scholars were addressing the development of a critical framework for this literature. It is precisely within this framework that the label Mormon literature must be defined.

Mormon literature has been isolated or ignored by college programs over the past two hundred years. Almost no trace of or reference to Mormon literature can be found in the literature programs of universities which are not located in those geographical areas where The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has established communities. In this connection, Catherine L. Albanese complains that the popular reference to the United States as a place of pluralism normally fades in scholarship: "... when we look at America's



history books – and more to the point here, America’s religious history books – we find that they generally tell one major story, incorporating the separate stories of many peoples into a single story line arranged chronologically” (xx). The attention given to Mormon literature is even scarcer in Europe. Michael Austin, a Mormon scholar who claims a place for Mormon literature in the literary history of Western<sup>2</sup> American literature and Minority Studies, laments in his article “How to Be a Mormo-American; Or, the Function of Mormon Literary Criticism at the Present Time” that “there are only a handful of non-Mormon scholars outside of the Rocky Mountain West who even know that there is such a thing as ‘Mormon literature’” (*How* 2). Today, when programs from different universities focus on diversity and minorities to widen our concept of literature and expand the canon, Mormons deserve, according to Austin, a proper place within Western American literature<sup>3</sup>. The lack of such visibility provided me with additional motivation to begin my research. It has certainly turned out to be a very interesting challenge.

Mormon literature is special, peculiar, different, but it is essentially American and Western, even though the international expansion of the Church<sup>4</sup> is opening wider horizons. Mormon literature relies on a different bond that has nothing to do with geographical coincidences. It is more a matter of spiritual concern, which makes it more complex. Edward L. Hart, a renowned Mormon scholar, talks about “double jeopardy” (1);

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<sup>2</sup> Either the noun West or the adjective Western will be written in the lower case when making reference exclusively to direction and with the upper case when referring to the genre or implying some sort of connotation that conveys certain ideas related to the West as construction or myth. Western, with “W”, will be also used when, as in here, referring to the discipline. And western, with “w”, will be also used when referring to western as synonym to occidental (as opposed to oriental or eastern culture or society). This third case would have led to confusion, especially when using the adjective. That is why I opted to use the term Western, in the upper case, when referring to the specific historic region of the West in an attempt to avoid misunderstanding.

<sup>3</sup> Maybe one of the problems to achieving this has been pinpointed by Levi S. Peterson: “Mormonism is one of the most aggressive religions in the world, and it is getting bigger and bigger. You cannot give a fair reading to literature that you think in its deepest intent aims to subvert your spiritual bearings” (Bigelow 133).

<sup>4</sup> I opted to use Church in the upper case whenever I am making reference to the Mormon or LDS Church. When written in the lower case, I am talking about the institution of church in general terms.

another prominent Mormon scholar, Eugene England, calls it “burden”<sup>5</sup> (*Mormon* 15); and Wallace Stegner explains the congenital difficulty in writing about Mormonism (*Stegner* 114). All of them tried to stress the intricate balance between religion and literature. This challenge continues to nourish controversial discussions which motivate the commitment of a few Mormon writers and make this literature unique. This brings us back to the question: What is Mormon literature? Is Mormon literature a book written by a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints even though it may not contain any reference to the author’s faith? Forty years of discussion and research have still not been able to answer that question.

In the meantime, in the forty years since Mormon literature began to emerge many Mormons who are literature enthusiasts have tried to write good fiction, whether Mormon or not. It is less than two hundred years since the Church was founded by Joseph Smith, yet, in this brief time, Mormons have established a specific identity that has generated a significant literature. In the last two centuries, a number of Mormon writers have come to merit critical analyses and major visibility. The different periods and generations discussed later, have given us writers such as Clinton F. Larson, Vardis Fisher, Virginia Sorensen, Maurine Whipple, Terry Tempest Williams, Levi S. Peterson, Linda Sillitoe, Orson Scott Card and Phyllis Barber. All of them deserve to be read and studied. Their widely praised works have raised questions about Mormonism and about literature. Moreover, the works of some of these authors transcend the limits of their Mormon identity, becoming rooted in

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<sup>5</sup> William Mulder, another Mormon scholar, chose the same word to indicate that the writers “coming out of the Mormon experience, even marginally, assume what I would call the burden of Mormon literature, with ‘burden’ suggesting both obligation and opportunity” (*Essential* 1). Mulder uses the term to refer to a slightly different concept. Mulder refers to *burden* as a symbol of the weight that the Mormon past has on writers trying to work within Mormon culture. In fact, Mulder himself proposes a parallel with the idea of burden proposed by C. Vann Woodward in *The Burden of Southern History* (1960).

personal and unique experiences of the West<sup>6</sup>. They often deal with Western history, ecology and society.

However, it is not only the content but the literary quality of Mormon literature that must be considered here. As Candadai Seshachari states: “The literary merit of a work is independent of whether it falls within the realm of Mormon literature or some other literary classification” (25). This explains why a few authors who would normally be included in the previous list of Mormon writers, even if it is not its aim to be sententious, have been omitted. Obviously, these other omitted writers would be essential when approaching this topic from a strict Mormon perspective, but my perspective is more literary. Thus, though I do not underestimate the influence of faith and culture here, in my opinion, the literary quality of the texts should prevail over the significance of their contribution to Mormonism.

The second question I proposed at the beginning of this introduction remains unanswered. Why did I choose Barber instead of any of the other writers listed earlier? Once again, to be sincere, it was by accident that the first Mormon writer I came to know was Phyllis Barber. Perhaps she might conclude that some kind of *veil*<sup>7</sup> parted for me, indicating that it is not “accidental” that I came to be involved in this project. And she would be right in a way. I came to know Barber’s work first because she is a widely known, prize-winning writer. Her autobiography, *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir* (1992), earned her a relevant place in Western American literature, even though she has not

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<sup>6</sup> William A. Wilson states that “anyone who would understand the West must, of course, pay heed to the Mormon role in settling and developing that important part of our country. But the emphasis should probably be more on the impact of the Mormons on the West than of the West on the Mormons” (189).

<sup>7</sup> The metaphor of the veil is a constant term used by Mormons to describe the fine border between the earthly and the celestial worlds. In Barber the use of this term is symbolic. Here I too use the term to signify the sense of discovery.

yet received the international exposure of other Mormon writers such as Orson Scott Card, Terry Tempest Williams or Anne Perry. Apart from the awards and recognition, apart from the fact that her work is able to “stand scrutiny” (Seshachari 25) from different literary perspectives and criticisms, Barber manifests probity as well. She is brave. She is upright. She is professional. She loves and respects the act of writing as much as she loves and respects life and people. This then is the second reason why I chose Barber instead of other, more commercially successful Mormon writers:

What congenital burdens have been placed inside or upon you? What responsibilities do you have of which you are unaware? Maybe your idea of responsibility is unconscious or unknown to you. Maybe your sense of responsibility is a gut reaction to the things you’ve been taught and don’t even realize you are living by. (Barber, *Writing* xviii)

All of these considerations rather than mere praise, come to represent properties of her fiction. These features lead me to the conviction that Barber’s voice deserves to be heard within the framework of contemporary literary criticism. Her narrative has not been studied in Europe, which motivated me to try to fill the gap. *And the Desert Shall Blossom* (1991), her only published novel, is an exercise in how creativity offers different perspectives to historical events. Her fictional recollection of the Jensen family pictures a general overview of Mormonism but it also gives a valuable portrait of the Great Depression and the individual stories which remain obliterated within the mainstream capitulation of history. Her two collections of short stories, *The School of Love* (1990) and *Parting the Veil: Stories from a Mormon Imagination* (1999), illustrate how a commitment to denounce and to defend can be valuable and profitable when done sincerely and without demagoguery. The first of this collection deals with feminist themes while the second relies on Mormon folklore but both induce a new perspective to approach recurrent issues in Mormon culture and in a broader context. *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*, her first autobiography,

is a good example of these qualities, both in terms of how she faces life and how she uses the pen. Here, Barber plays with the ambivalence she felt as an adolescent growing up in Las Vegas. Her coming-of-age is framed between two different lifestyles available to her: that of the popular culture and glamour of Las Vegas and the other one promoted by the Mormon Church<sup>8</sup>. This ambivalence will be treated by Barber in a biographical text which utilizes the resources of fiction. This conflict between the latent attraction of the possibilities of a larger world and the shelter, security and sense of community offered by the Mormon Church, which seems to be jeopardized by the first one, is not only developed in *Raw Edges: A Memoir* (2009), her second and recently published memoir, but also in her fiction. Thus Barber, the writer, rather than trying to find the answer to embrace one or reject the other, wants to resolve the paradox, heal the conflict, undo the division through balance, through a dialogue between the extremes, elaborated within the realm of possibilities provided by literature. An inevitable impulse in Terry Tempest Williams' words: "[P]aradox is life. It's the same thing as balance. You can't have one without the other. There's always the creative third, which is where possibility lies" (Austin, *Voice* 44).

Barber's writing is a literary search for identity: "[Y]ou want to use your gift of imagination. You hope it's possible to lift your experience from its limited boundaries and transform it into a unique bloom of perception" (Barber, *Writing* xxii). But this search will not be easy. Barber's identity is composed of different elements, some of which incorporate

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<sup>8</sup> In Maria Masters' interview with Barber for the magazine *Iddie*, Barber confesses that this ambivalence and paradox was also part of her personal life during the 1960s, when she moved to San Francisco: "I went from being a very sheltered Mormon girl, even if I did live in Las Vegas in my teenage years, to marrying a young man whom I thought was a devout Mormon like myself. We moved to the Bay Area where he attended Stanford Law School, and I was exposed to Jerry Garcia (my banjo teacher at Menlo Park Music Store), Ken Kesey, and the Beat poets. This was a huge leap for me. It was "Leave it to Beaver" jumping into the middle of Haight Ashbury" (Barber, *Phyllis* 1). From a psychosociological point of view, this idea could be used to analyze her fiction and illustrate how this sense of paradox is sourced from personal experience. This is evident material for her biographical works, but the importance of these experiences when analyzing her fiction is based on the fact that they reinforce the braveness and openness of Barber's moral and ideological baggage, thus providing some of the reasoning to understand the complexity and multiplicity of the moral and ideological stance outlined after a critical analysis of her fictional production.

tensions and conflicts that are augmented by Barber's own awareness of that complex balance. Joanna Brooks defines Mormon identity as "[a] historically contingent, highly contested, and perpetually tenuous construct" (*Genealogy* 293). She develops a theory that many Mormons who are dismissed from the official and institutional recognition of Mormonism rely on ethnic elements to conserve their condition as Mormons:

Given the rise of Mormon neo-orthodoxy and the growth of the worldwide church, ethnic rather than institutional Mormon identities have become a refuge for those who find themselves outside the narrowing bounds of orthodox Mormonism – especially liberals, intellectuals, feminists, and gays and lesbians. For these marginalized Mormons, identity is not necessarily maintained through the cultural practices associated with the programs of the institutional church. Rather, what provides many marginal Mormons in the contemporary American West with a continuing sense of identity is our deep, intractable, and distinctively Mormon family histories. Our genealogies root us in Mormonism, however uncertain our relationships to the present and future institutional church may be. (Brooks, *Genealogy* 291)

Barber's approach to her past and her search for identity is complex. It is true that in Barber's literature that "dynamic relationship" that Brooks points out "between institutional and individual histories" (*Genealogy* 293) can be observed. That tension between a personal concept of self related to Mormonism through "memory, desire, faith, discourse, performance, and community" (Brooks, *Genealogy* 293) and that other established and regulated by the Church surfaces in Barber's literary production.

Jack Harrell points out that Mormon writers have to avoid what he calls Mormon optimism, basically, what Terryl L. Givens calls "affirmation of absolute certainty" (*People* 26), because it is almost compulsory to introduce some kind of conflict to make stories workable (Harrell 86-87). In any case, both scholars share the same conviction that the source of that conflict resides in the very nature of Mormonism. Givens symbolizes it in the idea of the "paradox" (a term used by England as well) while Harrell uses "conflict", but,

in short, both point towards the possibilities derived from the inherent tensions between affiliation and individualism (Harrell 92) or the certainty provided by Mormonism in contrast to the idea of eternal progression and free agency (Harrell 95).

When Brooks addresses the challenge to “find a way of establishing authority and securing identity as a Mormon woman, independently of institutional sanction” (Brooks, *Genealogy* 296), Barber goes further, widening this challenge to include higher realms, broader spaces, more complex borders. Barber executes the conflicts that Givens and Harrell suggest but she constructs this particular context in order to expand into universal provinces. Barber begins in and moves from the specific, personal experience to expand to a wider embrace of the world.

Cosgrove and Domosh say that “[W]e make sense out of the world in the only ‘rational’ way: from our own experiences” (Cosgrove 37). As a consequence, Barber tries to understand the world from a little place within it. The different topics that she develops in her fiction, the personal experiences that she describes, the diverse traditions and customs that she portrays, the multiple scenarios that she provides for her characters, all these topics, experiences, cultural elements and places are sourced from a singular space: the Mormon community. But as Richard Dutcher says: “[T]he more unique the story and its characters, the more universal its appeal” (Bigelow 8). Barber goes beyond the limitations and invites us to intimate with these elements of her fiction. Barber illustrates through her narrative how different yet how alike we are.

Thus, in *The School of Love*, for example, there is no direct reference to the Mormon Church, even though God's intermission beams throughout the text<sup>9</sup>. Even though this collection of short stories can be understood from a Mormon feminist perspective, the feelings that Barber treats and the way she treats them denote a more universal perspective because the author tries to blur the local and the global throughout the collection. There is an inflection in her stories which makes the reader think about Mormonism, little details like quilting, geography, some vague spiritual, religious comments, family. But all of it contains a sense of the universal which makes the characters and their stories powerful and viscerally authentic.

The concept of universality that I propose in this dissertation combines a reinterpretation of religion on a personal and specific level (Barber with regard to Mormonism) and an expansion of conclusions in order to overcome the geographic, historic, cultural but also basically religious barriers. The term universal does not coincide with the widely accepted synonym, global. Global seems to pollute the concept with economic and political overtones, but, at the same time, the term universal seems to communicate an existentialist, essentialist value that can cause confusion in this research. Global, in this context, evokes political or economic transformations of the Nation-State system that will not be considered in this analysis. Mormonism overcame a long time ago what could be called a *hobbian process*, Hobbes being one of the precursors of the modern State which aimed to vacate the administration of political institutions from religious officiality. In the aftermath of Brigham Young's death, Mormon culture underwent a process of insertion into the

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<sup>9</sup> In the text, one of the characters talks about God like this: "My time has come. Maybe, deep down, even though I wanted to believe in a merciful, poetic, flexible God, a screenwriter or a novelist who can rewrite when a situation starts to overwhelm the protagonist, the truth is, my time has come" (Barber, *School* 83). God is present here, even if He conveys a feeling of failure. At the end of this story, "Criminal Justice", there is a vision which can be interpreted both in religious and in secular terms. In any case, this God is never strictly recognizable from a Mormon perspective.



American mainstream, thus abandoning its first period in the Utah valley during which the Mormons tried to isolate themselves, creating a government in which church and government were almost synonymous. Even though this process took place much later than in Europe, integration into the American mainstream can be also seen as a modernization that transformed and complicated the Mormon Church, so much so that right now Mormonism stands among those religions submerged in a multicultural reality<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless, those transformations often lead to the resurgence of national and cultural minorities which could be one of the objects of analysis in this dissertation. The global as a point of reference to consider the display of connectedness, relationships, networks within different communities. This could be transferred to a literary analysis that occupies a space in Barber's fiction. In fact, it would be a pivotal topic for discussion in Mormon literary criticism, both from an insider point of view and when conceiving Mormon literature as an object of research for outsiders.

This is only an example of the complexity that the Church and Mormon culture face today and the connotations of globality that are analyzed in the introduction to this dissertation and which entangle the idea of universality with concepts of economy, sociology and policy that are not analyzed in this dissertation. Neil Campbell bases his new perspective of the West on the idea that "places (and identities) have become less clear, blurred by a postmodern, transnational, global age of travel, digital communication, multinational corporations, and various complex mobilities" (*Rhizomatic* 24). David Held states that difference and diversity are fundamental to the understanding between cultures (Held 125). The sense of individuality, from a cultural or social perspective, has been

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<sup>10</sup>This multicultural reality occurs partially because of the missionary effort which is bound to the Church's identity and which could be an object of discussion in itself between those who see it as a system of proselytism that works to homogenize and unify and those who place it at the center of the agglutinating effort that expands the Church's frontiers.

complicated by new perspectives. We are subjects produced by cultural systems and traditions which equip us with certain codes of interpretation of life and death. These codes have been refined though. The institutions, the church among them, which were sources of certainty and definition no longer operate as the sole interpreters of these realities. It is true, as Held reminds us, that today we possess the ability to begin to understand that those particular cultural systems, with their specific and individual set of characteristics, are open to a wider, much more complex perception. This perception demonstrates that part of that cultural background identifying individuals is accumulated (and combined) from different systems of values and cultural items superimposed one over the other, giving thus a basis for a possibility of connectedness among different cultures in a process which not only enriches but becomes natural and inescapable (Held 122). Thus, universality does not imply that we need to assume valid arguments for all people alike, but it confers a power that reaches and goes beyond the natural limits, a power that arises after accepting the given and specific assumptions that are considered essentially true when communicated by an agglutinating language. Barber's narrative space is transformed into something elastic in which the linguistic codes favor an easy movement, a nomadism, a cultural transfer promoted by the deliberate aims of the author.

Progression from the particular to the universal frames a movement that finds meaning in present day experience linked to migration, immigration, diaspora and new ways of communication supplied by new technologies. I define this movement in communicative terms. Although I avoid the term global, I was tempted to resort to the term *glocation* to describe what Hesford and Kulbaga describe as "the interdependence of the local and global – how each is implicated in the other – and how the local, private, and domestic are constituted in relation to global systems and conversely how such systems must be read for

their particular location inflection” (303). In fact, my position is closer to Holly YoungBear-Thibbetts’ concept of mobility as enabling relatedness, as an idealization of identity as something complex, fluid, rhizomatic that offers a connection between different levels, dimensions and subject positions, especially that of the writer and the reader.

In conclusion, by using the term universal, I do not intend to refer to an essential idealization which denotes meanings of authority and discursive elaboration. The term alludes to a non-physical space in which the processes of communication and cultural representation are built upon an agglutinating, critical and open perspective. Universal here is a concept with certain spiritual connotations and a dash of religious appeal, only because the characteristics of the author and the culture in which her work is inserted are the focus of this research. Nevertheless, it is true that because I use this term in a literary context and because of Barber’s personal assumptions in favor of an artistic value as a mediator between open-minded positions, the idea transcends religious limits to become something much more complex, something that reveals a secular interpretation of religious postulates. That boundary crossed is not simply the natural place of Barber’s literature since hers is a fundamental struggle towards balancing the extremes. It is also the natural space for this research, a project in which the skeptical look of a researcher who ventures into a very different culture and the cryptic nakedness of a singular author collide to offer an array of possible and motley interpretations and paradoxes.

From a personal perspective, these circumstances presented an unquestionable challenge of open-mindedness, embracing the unknown and a vicarious self-reflecting catharsis. Some time near the end of my research, I came across a pregnant image which lit up my darkening conscious gaps. In the introduction to *Worldviews and the American West: The*

*Life of Place Itself*, Polly Stewart, Steve Siporin, C.W. Sullivan III and Suzi Jones finish their introduction by paying homage to their former mentor, Barre Toelken who, they explain, brilliantly played with the icon of the moccasin to illustrate what it meant to deal with folklore. As they explain, Toelken once wrote that “walking in someone else’s moccasins is not just a cliché or an item of pseudo Indian lore” (Stewart 5). Then they stretch their explanation, adding that:

For traditional Navajos this idea conveys a deep meaning partly because the word for “moccasin” and the word for “foot” are the same word, and one’s moccasin is shaped by one’s foot. So to walk in someone else’s moccasins is not only to experience the world as someone else does, but to adopt part of that person as yourself for a while, and perhaps to let go of part of yourself for a while too. (Stewart 5-6)

On this journey, I have often felt as if I were wearing somebody else’s shoes and, whether moccasins or not, they sometimes felt like they fit perfectly, while at other times they hurt my feet with meaningful pain<sup>11</sup>. In any case, I always felt that taking that path and walking forward would finally make it appropriate for me to wear a new pair of borrowed shoes. If what Toelken called worldviews, “the manner in which a culture sees and expresses its relation to the world around it” (Stewart 1), are so particular and singular to the Mormons, I still learn that moccasins are flexible and adaptable, that there are universal elements that add coincidences which become an appropriate zone of tension in which to experience and test the relationships and connections favored by literature. On that point, I was the one to benefit, but I also think that this is beneficial to Mormons as well, because, as Mikhail Bakhtin says:

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<sup>11</sup> In fact, this image came to mind again when I read about the Maori ideal of the *turangawaewae* as explained by Holly YoungBear-Tibbetts. She indicates that Maori people use this expression to describe the complex relation of belonging to a place, as it is translated as “a place for one’s feet to stand” (YoungBear-Tibbetts 159). I felt that my presence in this context was not only “territorial and political” but also that I was to be careful about my “positioning of intellect and philosophy” (YoungBear-Tibbetts 159). Thus, it was not only that I needed to learn how to walk with those moccasins, it was also that I needed to be careful about where I was stepping.

In the realm of culture, outsidership is a most powerful factor in understanding. It is only in the eyes of *another* culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly (but not maximally fully, because there will be cultures that see and understand even more). A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures. We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise itself; we seek answers to our own questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths. Without *one's own* questions one cannot creatively understand anything other or foreign (but, of course, the questions must be serious and sincere). Such a dialogic encounter of two cultures does not result in merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched. (Bakhtin 7)

My view is that of an outsider. An international perspective which follows what Frank Bergon calls “a more challenging task” (Bergon, *Basques* 58) in reference to the international perspective of scholars from different backgrounds when approaching Western American literature. Bergon considers that “a novel becomes a different thing when read in such an international context rather than just a regional one” (Bergon, *Basques* 58). In that sense, my analysis, even though it conceives all the specific and particular characteristics, consciously aims at widening all viable interpretations beyond a perspective biased by distance, education and what Toelke’s calls “worldview.”

In summary, Barber’s literature is meaningful to Mormons who understand the context and the nature of her stories, but it also provides a new perspective for those interested in the Western experience. In fact, it is valuable to anyone interested in human feelings and the conflicts engendered by the clash between the individual and the community. Barber is experimental and “highly impressionistic” (Anderson, *Masks* 5). Her elaborate style occasionally uncovers the seams and labor of her lyrical and poetic flair. Furthermore, since her imagery and symbolism derive from Mormon culture and folklore, what she tries to communicate through her writing often becomes so inaccessible, overly artistic and

intricate that it cannot be directly or fully understood. Thus, the greatness and applicability of her message loses power. Yet, in spite of these difficulties, Barber faces the *jeopardy*, avoids the *difficulty* and bears the *burden* that Hart, Stegner and England defined as the main obstacle to the progress of Mormon literature. The effort required to understand her images and metaphors takes the reader beyond what seems to be addressed to Mormons, transforming the text into one which is totally pertinent and suitable to the outsider who can identify with Barber's individual experience, emotions and meanings, all of which illustrate the universality of human longings and expectations. This emphasis is consciously attained since Barber, as a writer, both longs for and cares about this target: "Do you reach out to the LDS society alone, or does your essential gesture include a desire to build a bridge between cultures and explore the universals?" (Barber, *Writing* xviii) Barber not only builds those bridges (that she then crosses) between cultures, but, in a personal dimension, that focus works as a moral statement to open blunt and analytical perspectives. Barber's moral approximation to literature resides in her conceptual rendition of literary quality, her trip back to the inner aspects of a literature that is or should be based on "the third dimension" (Barber, *Writing* XV). That dimension where good and evil mess around, where the writer sticks to her own biases in order to reflect on them by portraying them in fictional characters, then showing a complexity that allows for no conclusions: "You suspect if you want to write something that matters, you need to examine the biases<sup>12</sup> in your characters which can be understood only after reflecting upon the biases in your own character"<sup>13</sup> (Barber, *Writing* xv). This source is so basic, so primary, so deep that it posits Barber's ability to construct her topics with a universal flavor. If Harrell considers that

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<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note how Terry Tempest Williams used this same term when talking about her notions of self.

<sup>13</sup> Even if it is with a question, in this same article, Barber confesses her definition of literature: "If it is assumed that you, the writer, are born with natal human sin, that you will 'miss the mark' at some point in your life, that you, too, are one of those human beings full of contradiction, then is it important that you are acknowledging, addressing or bringing greater awareness to this condition by painting your characters with brush strokes of paradox, characters whose shoes don't always match?" (Barber, *Writing* xv)

Mormon writers need “to be more honest about the sins and shortcomings among us” (93), Barber’s own definition of identity as a matter of biases allows for contradiction, complexity, conflict and unattainability. It is a definition that allows her to portray good and evil in the wide array of degrees that this complex dichotomy produces.

Before explaining the structure and methodology of this dissertation, it is important to explain what I mean by Mormon Church. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also known as Mormon Church, has been the object of many schisms since its foundation. Gordon J. Melton places the origin of this tendency in the character of Mormon theology which “built into the system a ready-made impetus to schism” (94). Scott H. Faulring reasserts that “today more than one hundred churches, with some seven million adherents worldwide, trace their origins to Joseph Smith and to his teachings” (Smith xi). As Albanese explains, Mormon Church came to surface in a period of frenzy that led to the birth of new sects which were trying to redefine the religious nature of the new country by taking advantage of the “tensions of pluralism” (16). Among these, Mormons had at least the same spirit as those other less successful sects and, as Jan Shipps puts it, the convergence of “a similarity in appropriations of the Judeo-Christian scriptures and the history of the early Christian church” (72) encouraged many members of other sects, as was the case of Sidney Rigdon and his followers, to gather around the Mormon community. This is the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and those new religions propose original solutions that tried to renew both the strong presence of Roman Catholicism in the west and southwest and the preeminence of Protestantism: “historically this religion of oneness has been mostly Protestant, Anglo-Saxon, and white” (Albanese 13). In any case, the Mormons were much more successful than any other of these sects as Albanese herself reflects:

Nevertheless, if we remember that there were differences, it is interesting to look at the early Mormons and other radically new religious groups that arose in nineteenth-century America as classic instances of sectarianism. Such an approach highlights their departures from the normative Protestantism of the era, both in its liberal and evangelical versions. In other words, from a religious point of view it is not fair to characterize these new groups as “also-rans” among the Protestants. They were not simply smaller or less popular than Baptists and Methodists or even fundamentalists and Pentecostals. They pursued a more totalizing vision, one that departed more completely from mainstream American culture. They experimented with forms of ritual and common behaviour distinct from what others regarded as standard. We might say that, while mainstream Protestants emphasized the Word and exalted the Bible that contained it, radical American sectarians put their premium instead on the deed – on the major changes in life-style that their religious convictions demanded. (Albanese 223)

This distance from Protestantism is also highlighted by Shipps, who underlines the close connections between Christianity and Mormon theology<sup>14</sup> but states that “despite the surprising similarity between some of the modern cultural manifestations of Mormonism and American evangelical Protestantism, Mormonism started to grow away from traditional Christianity almost immediately upon coming into existence” (ix-x). All these references about the origins of Mormonism help to understand Shipps final conclusion that “Mormonism is a separate religious tradition and that it must be understood and respected on its own terms” (x).

By Mormon Church, then, I refer to what we could consider as the official and largest denomination in the Latter-day Saints movement, called The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Since this is a dissertation dealing with literature, I do not find it necessary to go deeper into the consequences and main characteristics of other schisms in this restorationist Christian movement, such as those of The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or The Fundamental Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

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<sup>14</sup> Shipps says that “unless the radical character of the Mormon restoration is taken into account, and unless careful attention is paid to the particular way in which Mormonism was shaped and transformed by the actual practical experience of the community of belief, Mormonism can all too readily be misunderstood as little more than an elaborate idiosyncratic strain of the nineteenth-century search for primitive Christianity” (68).



Saints. In fact, I find it more important to consider the cultural and sociological space in which this movement was born, as Givens has done, in order to analyze the pivotal role that the Mormons played in shaping ethnic categories both for themselves and for America at large. Because the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the Church was born, was not only a burgeoning period of religious blossoming but also a period in which American identity was being discussed and elaborated: “Mormonism burst upon the scene at the time when the struggle for American independence was still a vivid memory of many” (*Viper* 151) and, as Givens points out, in that context Mormonism was “perceived as representing values and practices antithetical to the evolving images of America” (*Viper* 151). Thus, Mormons have been going through a complex process of identity challenge and ethnic derivative simplification. From being part of the margins, as “racially different from the white majority, even when, in the case of the Mormons, they were white” (Handley, *Marriage* 3), because of polygamy and some other issues which led to aggressive federal tactics against them, to the fact that today the Mormon community is described “as the embodiment of public spiritedness and ‘traditional values’” (Givens, *Viper* 163).

I still need to contemplate a third element in order to define clearly my approach to religion and the Mormon Church as the context in which I frame Barber’s fiction. These labels are complicated and expanded by networks of influences, borders crossed and a general openness to complexity and paradox. As a consequence, it is important to define how I approach these topics. That is why, apart from explaining what I mean when I use the term Mormon Church and the concept of ethnicity, I also need to clarify how I treat religious appeal. Albanese gives three different definitions of religion: substantive, functional and formal (xxii). The first approach, the substantive, focuses on the essence and nature of religion. Therefore, it is a good approach for use by theologians, philosophers,

and even sociologists or literary critics trying to deal directly with religious representation in literary works. The second approach, the functional, defines religion in terms of how it affects “actual life” (Albanese xxii). Sociologists analyze how religion develops “systems of meaning-making” (Albanese xxii). Thirdly, if we approach religion from a formal perspective, we are moving into the realm of the history of religions, paying attention to “stories, rituals, moral codes, and communities” as Albanese points it (xxii). All three of these approaches are contemplated in this dissertation, but with unequal intentions and reliability.

In fact, Albanese differentiates between ordinary and extraordinary when analysing religions or religious systems which are understood as a compendium of creed, or that set of explanations that define the meaning of life, codes, or the rules that religions offer to govern everyday, and cultus, or those rituals necessary to perform the creed and codes shared by a community. Religion is thus defined as a composite of those symbols and their performance, “religion is a matter of practice, an action system” (Albanese 11) in which a group of people define their existence on earth and in the hereafter. The ordinary dimension of religion would be the most earthly or customary level of this reality, composed of “the customs and folkways” that gather and solidify the coherence of a group of people. This refers mostly to cultural and ethnical levels. The extraordinary dimension is beyond the ordinary, outside the circle of society. In this case, it becomes a “formal institution” (Albanese 10), a system of definition to deal with the other, the supernatural. In Albanese’s words, the extraordinary dimension “gives names for the unknown and provides access to the world beyond. It assures people that the ‘other world’ does touch this one but is never merely the same as it” (Albanese 7). Both dimensions appear in Barber’s work. They are contemplated in this dissertation even though in *Parting the Veil: Stories from a Mormon*

*Imagination*, Barber shows how the extraordinary can be an important part of the ordinary in Mormon culture, as Hugh Nibley understands when he defines two different kinds of social or cultural worlds, the mantic and the sophic.<sup>15</sup> In *And the Desert Shall Blossom*, the ordinary and the extraordinary also blend to respond to the harsh circumstances and their own personal mischevious ways, as John Bennion explains when he says that the book “explores the phsychological effects of western Mormonism, an ideology which paradoxically embraces both the ethereal and the earthy” (Bennion, *And* 1). In any case, my approach is based mainly on the ordinary, on cultural and social imperatives and assumptions which induce certain roles and definitions.

Having specified my use of Mormon terminology, I need to clarify how I intend to stretch the context to place Mormonism within the framework of Western literature and history. The analysis of Mormon history and literature requires the establishment of some kind of defining parallelism between the American history of the West and Mormon history. Thus, if the Western movement has been important in shaping American character, whether invoking Frederick Jackson Turner’s environmental determinism or not, the Mormon movement is also particularly American and important for the constitution of the American character. Nevertheless, as William A. Wilson indicates, it is not so easy to establish that parallelism. Wilson complicates Mormon history as a mere repetition of Turner’s ideas about the frontier and the American character being shaped through an evolving enterprise. Wilson considers that it would be simplistic to view this experience as a univocal challenge because it contains the echo of many more entangled elements forming a multiple endeavor:

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<sup>15</sup> Cracroft applies Nibley’s definition of the dichotomy between a Mantic and a Sophic view of the world to Mormon literature. The Mantic perception of life conceives that the divine operates in what we could call the real world. The Sophic perception, on the contrary, rejects the supernatural as an energy on duty in the real world (Cracroft, *Attuning* 5).

But for most of them it will carry other messages. It will remind them that their ancestors were on the plains suffering terribly not to fulfill some grand dream of American manifest destiny but because they had been denied their constitutional rights to worship as they pleased, because their prophet Joseph Smith had been murdered, because the Governor of Missouri had issued an order calling for the extermination of all Mormons in the state, and because they had been driven from their homes in Illinois to begin an exodus that would stretch over several decades. Hardly the stuff of patriots' dreams. What's more, the Mormon westward migration and settling of the Great Basin, far from being an exercise in rugged individualism, was one of the most successful communal and communitarian movements since Moses led the children of Israel to the Promised Land. (Wilson 186)

In general, Mormon experience of the West provides a unique approach to American history but it also complicates it denoting a sense of belonging and estrangement that draws a paradox. As Stegner says, Mormons were really “un-American” (*Stegner* 104) when they pioneered the West with a set of values that counteracted the stereotypical image of the Western pioneer: “in place of nationalism, democracy, and individualism I suppose you'd have to put sectionalism, theocracy, and community” (*Stegner* 104). Nevertheless, as Stegner himself states when considering contemporary history, Mormons today are at the end of a process of integration that elaborated a balanced picture of specialness and assimilation. Thus, he concludes, “Nowadays I suppose you'd find as many patriots among Utah youth as you do among southern youth” (*Stegner, Stegner* 104). Or as Albanese observes:

Whether as church or as independent group, though, Mormons are today growing vigorously as a body, and they represent some 2 percent of the general population<sup>16</sup>. Commitment levels are high, and Latter-day Saints have made a strong impact on U.S. culture, especially in Rocky Mountains states like Utah and Idaho. Clearly, the nineteenth-century new religion that was Mormonism has become, in the late twentieth-century, an established social entity. (Albanese 230)

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<sup>16</sup> This estimate is from 1992, the year when Albanese's book was published. Recent studies show that the Church officially recognizes more than 13 million members and more than 28,000 congregations. These numbers come from the Church's official website: <http://www.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/statistical-information>.

Having answered the two compulsory questions I proposed at the beginning of this introduction and having defined the terminology used, I now want to explain the methodology and structure utilized in this research project. This dissertation is arranged in four central parts, each of which contemplates a significant aspect of Barber's fiction. This core is preceded by two introductory sections: a history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and a survey of Mormon literature. These two sections provide the background necessary to understand what follows and to place Barber's fiction in a context that will permit its understanding and analysis.

The four main areas used in the analysis of Barber's fiction are *religion, gender, place* and *art*. Although these constitute the backbone of this dissertation, the research could have been carried out by approaching Barber's work from different perspectives. Comparative approaches are suitable to the analysis of Mormon literature; some other different perspectives, the sociological or the narratological, also could have been used either to consider Barber's writing specifically or to evaluate her belonging to a distinctive culture. I could have chosen a different methodology, analyzing each novel separately, interpreting these or any other features within each text, but in my opinion it was better to approach Barber's work as a whole. The many similarities, concordances and themes that she frequently develops in her writing explain why I concluded that it would be more interesting to organize my research around these shared ideas rather than to give priority to the individuality aspects in each work. All four of these main topics are present in her writing. The four required a critical corpus to give coherence to the methodology. Because the analysis is multiple and diverse, the critical approaches are numerous and varied as well. This could be seen as a hindrance but, in my opinion, the final results reveal to be beneficial. The fourfold perspective clearly renders a complete analysis of Barber's fiction

based on a complex network of different paradigms. With regard to the question of critical method, Edward Said states the following:

I do not wish to be misunderstood as saying that the flight into method and system on the part of critics who wish to avoid the ideology of humanism is altogether a bad thing. Far from it. Yet the dangers of method and system are worth noting. Insofar as they become sovereign and as their practitioners lose touch with the resistance and the heterogeneity of civil society, they risk becoming wall-to-wall discourses, blithely predetermining what they discuss, heedlessly converting everything into evidence for the efficacy of the method, carelessly ignoring the circumstances out of which all theory, system and method ultimately derive. (Said 25-26)

Like Said, I do not wish to be misunderstood as making excuses to justify any possible omission of certain methodological and critical approaches. I am convinced that the “method and system” used in this dissertation resonates in a work where I try to approach a complex and heterogeneous body of literature within the context of a peculiar culture and always in relation to a background that offered the same network of tensions and relations. Trying to understand Barber’s different literary qualities in the context of a Mormon literature which seeks to be included within the wider context of Western American literature and history and stressing the sense of connectedness for a universal interpretation of literary production is a slippery terrain. What is needed to achieve this balance is the flexible use of divergent methods and critical approaches, without losing “touch with resistance and the heterogeneity of civil society.”<sup>17</sup>

The strategic elements in this dissertation are *religion* and *gender*. Subsequently, they occupy a wider space. Her being raised as a Mormon, and especially a Mormon woman, is very important in Barber’s work, both when analyzing her voice as a writer and the

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<sup>17</sup> England confesses that “Mormon academic critics have been trained in and made use of all the modern theoretical approaches, from the New Criticism of the 1940s and 1950s to the postmodernism that has developed since the late 1960s, and no systematic criticism has emerged that successfully identifies Mormonism with any one theory of language or poetics” (*Mormon* 5). Since my approach is complicated with references to diverse methodological paradigms, England’s assertion is reinforced in this dissertation.

construction of her fictional characters. The other two elements in this design are *place* and *art*. The idea of place is particularly useful in the analysis of the significance of Barber's contribution to Mormon and Western American literature. *Art* covers a broad range of insights from both the technical and moral points of view.

As I say, different methodologies and critical approaches have been studied and applied in the analysis of the four main areas which constitute the body of this dissertation. As a consequence, the ideas of a great number of scholars and writers have been used in this research project.

In general, but specifically when talking about *religion* and Mormonism as a cultural backdrop, I used very different sources, from articles to memoirs or brochures and any other official information given by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, including, of course, their sacred books: *The Book of Mormon*, *Doctrine and Covenants* and *Pearl of Great Price*. In this section, I approach Mormonism as a framework within which I could attain some meaningful analysis of Barber's literary production. Even if, in this section, I develop certain topics which provide a glimpse into the conflicts and tensions that flourish in Barber's literature, faith and Mormon culture will also be functional in contact with other topics developed in subsequent sections. The best source for learning about Mormons and Mormon culture, however, proved to be the literature. Reading the narrative of different Mormon writers such as Linda Sillitoe, Levi S. Peterson, Orson Scott Card, Samuel Taylor, Virginia Sorensen, Douglas Thayer, Lance Larsen, Clinton F. Larson or Vardis Fisher helped me become more confident when analyzing diverse cultural and sociological characteristics from within the Mormon community.

My *gender* analysis takes into consideration the works of Adrienne Rich, Rosalind Petchesky, Gayle Rubin and Nancy Chodorow, most of whom deal with sexuality and reproduction. Chodorow says that “women in our society are primarily defined as wives and mothers, thus in particularistic relation to someone else, whereas men are defined primarily in universalistic occupational terms” (178), an idea which comes to terms with Rich’s theory that “a ‘natural’ mother is a person without further identity” (22). In fact, Chodorow’s theories propose a psychoanalytic textual interpretation, with attention to gendered issues, the family, mother-daughter relations and father-daughter relations. But these critical theories need to be clarified when used in this context because Barber’s literature reveals a complex approach to these topics, determining a level of approximation and conclusion that complicates Chodorow’s ideas.

Motherhood and the restriction of women to nurturing and mothering roles are basic to the understanding of Mormon society as patriarchal. This is rooted in the theological philosophy originated by Joseph Smith. His ideas about progress and exaltation became operative through projects called the “Plan of Progression”, “Great Plan of Happiness” and “celestial marriage” in order to achieve that exaltation that elevates a man from manhood to godhood:

Eventually, however, it was systematized as the “Plan of Salvation”, “Plan of Progression,” or “Great Plan of Happiness.” This plan holds that every human being existed prior to birth as a spirit child of God the Father and a Heavenly Mother. These spirit children are sent into mortality in order to acquire the physical body needed for further progression. Faithful Saints were therefore urged to bear as many children as possible, in order to provide these waiting spirits with both bodies and righteous homes that put them on the path to achieving their own exaltation. (Miles 5)

One of the key points that must be considered when talking about gender roles in a Mormon context, therefore, is the fact that they are so imbued by the nature of the religion



that they stick to the blood of their members as if they were more than mere cultural constructs for the benefit of an economic system. Motherhood as a role is sustained by an ideological discourse that promotes a certain division of duties and authority within Mormon culture:

From the 1950s to the early 1980s, equal citizenship for women was replaced by glorification of motherhood, ignoring both single or childless women and fatherhood as the equivalent of motherhood. Limiting the definition of priesthood to chiefly ecclesiastical and administrative functions has tended to limit the roles of both sexes. Anything traditionally considered “male” has come to be attached exclusively to priesthood, and this emphasis stresses – even magnifies – the differences between the sexes rather than expanding the roles of both. (Kewell 42)

As a consequence, family and marriage must also be viewed from this perspective. As Carrie A. Miles states, “in retrospect it is clear that in the latter half of the twentieth century, marriage, family, and gender relations underwent their most significant changes in human history, causing problems not just for the LDS Church but for the entire developed world” (1-2). In debating the origins of the historic social division of labor, Miles says that Mormons before the Industrial Revolution, whose economy was based on agrarian resources, “were subject to the same forces shaping the family as their more conventional neighbors” (2). Through Barber’s fiction and recollections, I analyze gender issues using a sociological point of view, because, as Marianne Hirsch proposes, sociology is a good method of analysis: “it concentrates on sex-role differentiation, where it attempts to distinguish between the individual and the roles she has to assume, and where those roles are studied in relation to their social determinants” (202).

Gender roles are promoted equally for men and women in a Mormon community. I also take a look at male gender roles which are also stimulated in society. As Chodorow states: “[B]oys are taught to be masculine more consciously than girls are taught to be feminine”

(176). Mormon masculinity, as David Knowlton shows, is formed by standards that follow American masculinity, but with slight changes. Basically through the character of Alf Jensen in Barber's novel, I analyze how those standards provoke tension and conflicts when they need to be fulfilled or rejected. Even at the end of the novel, both Alf and Esther Jensen address social roles ironically when they are reunited and they try to perform those roles again:

The model mother. The model wife. Alf was also a model husband, home on time, attentive to the children, mild mannered. They almost convinced each other that theirs was a settled, genteel home life, except at night Esther tossed and pulled the covers and tried not to scream and Alf curled into a solitary ball of himself, and they both mentioned how their jaws hurt when they woke in the morning. (Barber, *Desert* 208)

The critical work of Mormon scholars Lavina Fielding Anderson, Carrie Miles, Maxine Hanks and Laura L. Bush were especially helpful in developing this topic. It was mainly useful in understanding Mormonism from a feminist perspective as well as feminism from within a Mormon context. But again, it was particularly enlightening to study Barber's own reflections on gender. In her writing she comments on conflicts such as that of being a writer and a Mormon mother and wife.

In thinking about *place*, I worked with major ecocritics who deal with the West, and especially with Las Vegas and Nevada, taking into account here that Barber's approach to place is mainly related to an urban setting. This comes as no surprise because it was a long time ago when Walter Prescott Webb first used the term "oasis civilization" (25) to explain, as Stegner and other scholars do, that the West "must be eighty percent urban" (Stegner, *Stegner* 148). The list of scholars includes Terry Tempest Williams, Cheryll Glotfelty, Thomas J. Lyon, Ann Ronald, Scott Slovic, Melanie L. Simo, Patricia Nelson Limerick and

Leonard Engel. Glenda Riley's Western ecocritical approach, combined with a feminist slant was fundamental:

After the Civil War, women writers followed the traditions of ecological romanticism – and added to them. Women's nature writing generally lacked the twin themes of conquest and domination of landscapes that marked so many men's works of the same era. While others argued for "progress" and the use of natural resources, women typically emphasized the beauty and spirituality of nature. They also interpreted nature as female and employed female images to describe the environment. As a result, female nature writers perceived the environment as accommodating and welcoming, especially of strong, independent women willing to meet nature's challenges. (Riley 66-67)

Riley specifically uses the term ecocriticism and draws the line from Grace Greenwood in 1873 to Jane Mirikitani, pointing out that Susan Griffin was the first to use the label in 1978 in her book *Women and Nature*. If, in the beginning, those women were trying to emphasize the bond between women and nature through new symbolic language, today, as Riley herself states, "contemporary ecofeminists usually indict the white patriarchy and its values for dominating and damaging both women and the physical world" (173). All this can be applied to Barber in detail<sup>18</sup>.

Particularly useful was the guidance provided by critics Barbara and Myrick Land, Nick Tosches and Mike Tronnes when analyzing Barber's concern with the city of Las Vegas. They helped me discover this city from very different viewpoints. Besides, I relied on the work of Mormon scholars and writers, from Patricia Gunter Karamesines to Terry Tempest Williams, in trying to assess Mormon involvement with environmental issues and the

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<sup>18</sup> Patriarchy will be a frequently used term in this dissertation. To define patriarchy, I could use Rich's statement that "patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men – by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male" (57). That definition introduces the term "power" which, in turn, introduces the term "authority", a term usually "related to men, while a notion of authority for women often leads to a discussion of how power corrupts" (Hanks, *Women* xxii). Rich adds that power is primordial in the relationship established by patriarchy since this is the key to understanding the control pivotal for a proper functioning of this system.

relationship to landscape beyond the lengthy praise given to Mormon watering systems or the emphasis on the spiritual covenant that Mormon faith had with nature, in which, by the way, Donald Worster sees “a deep contradiction” (413). From the days of Brigham Young<sup>19</sup>, Mormons have always had a long history of aiming for sustainability and believing in a stewardship that forces them to be faithful to nature: “our stewardship toward the earth becomes our humility” (Williams, *New x*). But as Ardean Watts says, “environmental positions are likely to be more powerfully determined by where one lives or what profession one follows than by Mormon doctrine or church policy” (49). His words reflect what Williams, William B. Smart and Gibbs M. Smith mean when they advocate the recuperation of this tradition: “with an eye toward sustainability and ecological awareness, was impressive in the nineteenth century, but this kind of active vision within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is even more necessary and critical today” (Williams, *New ix*).

Finally, William R. Handley and Nathaniel Lewis’ ideas, expressed in their book *True West: Authenticity and the American West*, were also fundamental in developing this section: “[B]ecome both literary artists and literary critics, as if tacitly acknowledging that historiographical authority is increased rather than threatened by incorporating the lessons of literary and historiographical theories of representation” (Handley, *True* 3). Handley and Lewis define authenticity as a notion dealing with authority and originality rather than with truth. Barber’s account of her childhood and teenage years in *How I Got Cultured: A*

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<sup>19</sup> There is a lot of literature about this period but I agree with Ron Molen when he says that “Brigham Young had a clear concept of how the Great Basin should be developed. Based on Joseph Smith’s model, the self-sufficient Mormon village was replicated over and over again. A commonwealth of villages was the result, a community of communities. Each village controlled its own water, food, and fuel resources, and population did not exceed the carrying capacity of the surrounding land. Irrigation systems developed through cooperation were responsible for the success of these dynamic new communities. The Mormon village exerted a strong influence on other planned communities in the West that somehow never achieved equal success” (Molen 43). I perceive the sense of nostalgia and awkward epic with the taste for communal effort so present in Mormon history.

*Nevada Memoir*, as well as the first-person narration in her fiction seeks to undermine interpretations of historical facts such as the bomb tests, the construction of Hoover Dam or the development of Las Vegas through a self-reflecting authority that translates into an original interpretation of those facts, not really adopting her experience as truth but as a zone of tension where language approaches historical facts in such personal communication that proposes new terms. This idea of the zone of tension is presented by Scott Slovic in that same book when he reports an interview he and Terre Satterfield made to Gary Nabhan in 1998 where Nabhan proposed the idea of zone of tension as “a form of language that facilitates understanding because it obstructs easy, linear thinking” (Slovic, *Authenticity* 263). Equally important is Neil Campbell’s ideas in *The Rhizomatic West*, not only for the little, specific considerations that I apply all throughout the book, but for the general application of Deleuze’s rhizome, a theory that he applies to the West and to American culture:

The rhizome is the “weed” or the grass that “overflows... grows between. It is the path itself,” located most often for Deleuze and Guattari in American art – in Pollock, Melville, Fitzgerald, Thomas Wolfe, Henry Miller, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Leslie Fiedler, and Carlos Castaneda, for “In them everything is departure, becoming, passage, leap, daemon, relationship with the outside. They create a new earth.” (Campbell, *Rhizomatic* 34)

Handley and Campbell’s ideas run proper to frame how I see Barber’s work in relation to the West and Western experience, a topic that I develop in this section. Nevertheless, the rhizomatic understood as a theory which tries to comprehend chaos and paradox is also productive to approach Barber’s message and, secondly, the appreciable conclusions about Mormon culture that her search for individuality uncovers.

The section inscribed under the denomination of *art* ponders the influence of and the relationship between music, Barber and her own characters. This area also analyzes the desire of some of her characters to attain culture as a way of defying the constraints of society and one's own expectations, and to exercise that culture in the expertise of art as a source of self-esteem and visibility. Visibility, then, means dignity, a decent image of yourself rather than pride or prestige:

Why was she invisible like spilled water on the sand? She wanted to count and be seen. She had an inner strength; if only people would stop to notice or look at her a second time. Why couldn't she be more straightforward like Thelma? More certain? (Barber, *Desert* 133)

My critical approach to these ideas is largely based on Barber's own reflections about the interconnection between music and writing, reflections that I compiled from her many biographical and academic articles. I came to understand the importance of music to Mormons through the work of J. Spencer Cornwall, Eugene England, Lester A. Hubbard and William A. Wilson. In general terms, but also of inspirational use to me in this project, was my own analysis of the relationship between music and literature which has been influenced by writers, musicians, critics and scholars from different traditions and periods who have also worked and reflected on this question: Nick Hornby, Nacho Vegas, David Pichaske, Bob Dylan, Colin Meloy, Leonard Cohen, Sergio Algora, Patti Smith, Enrico Fubini or Lydia Lunch.

Lastly, in this section I also approach Barber's work from a technical point of view. Specifically, I study the technical derivations of the influential attraction to music in her narrative and I scrutinize her approximation to the genre of autobiography. To that end, I rely not only on the work of classic scholars such as Georges Gurdorf or James Olney, but

also on modern approaches to this genre, some of them from the specific point of view of the Mormon domain.

Even though each of these four sections could be seen as independent parts, I consider them to be most useful as an exercise in networking. When connected, they become a means to approach the complexity of a body of work that intertwines within the four topics presented here. *Place* and the other elements in this dissertation function in connection with each other. For instance, *gender* and *place* enjoy close links in Barber's writing; a pivotal example would be the relationship between Esther and Alf in the novel. Lyon says that "the sensitivity to place is perhaps the oldest and most universally shared of the highest human capacities" (5) and he states that we are moved by the space we call home, "what becomes home" (5). Barber suggests that "home may be a state of mind" (*Culture* 405), in an attempt to render understandable how our attachment to different places provides us meaning despite the lack of any previous coherence. The meaning of faith is expanded if we consider how the weight of her education and faith interacts with the landscape in which Barber grew up and the settings where she places her characters. In fact, as D. W. Meinig writes that landscape is only understandable through interpretation:

We may certainly agree that we will see many of the same elements – houses, roads, trees, hills – in terms of such denotations as number, form, dimension, and color, but such facts take on meaning only through association; they must be fitted together according to some coherent body of ideas. Thus we confront the central problem: any landscape is composed not only of what lies before our eyes but what lies within our heads. (Meinig 1)

But also because she cannot be considered exclusively as an ecocritical writer, Barber could be included in the definition that Scott Slovic gives as a turning point in recent ecocritical writing:

Many contemporary American environmental writers have come recently to think of themselves not merely as “nature writers” (with “nature” coding for “non-human”) but rather as “community writers,” artists who regard their work as an act of exploring and reforming relationships in the broadest sense of the word, encompassing both the human and the non-human. For writers in the American West, however, community is a vexed and complicated concept.” (Slovic, *Authenticity* 257-258)

This emphasis on community is developed especially and personally in her autobiography. Here she applies what Jarold Ramsey calls “an ecology of memory, imagination, and story” (120). Barber digs into her memory to find, to conserve, to cultivate but also to reinterpret and stretch the meanings of the “often wasted resources of human spirit” (Ramsey 120). As Michael Austin explains, humans long for a connection that is only completed when performed both physically and spiritually. As organisms, we need to feel a connection that our bodies detect as natural and compulsory (Austin, *Voice* 4). Williams summarizes all these ideas when she connects rivers to body, thus anticipating my analysis of Esther and her relationship to the Colorado River:

The body carries the physical reality of our spirits like a river. Institutional thinking is fearful of rivers because rivers inevitably follow their own path, and that channel may change from day to day, even though the muscle of the river, the property of water remains consistent, life sustaining, fierce, and compassionate, at once. (Austin, *Voice* 151-152)

As Williams has shown, these erotics are also connected to the land, if we feel this connection to the landscape that is equally physical and that embodies the different dimensions of any human relationship. Thus, in Barber’s *And the Desert Shall Blossom*, even though Esther’s relationship to place is negative at the end of the novel, her relationship to her husband is even worse; the intimacy was lost in a scenario based on gender and culture.



In general, I believe that my approach to Barber from an ecocritical point of view opens a different level of interpretation of her work. As Meinig says my view is that of landscape as place if we understand place as “a viewer attempts to penetrate common generalizations to appreciate the unique flavor of whatever he encounters” (7). Mine is not the approach of a geographer trying to generalize or particularize through processes that attempt to give meaning to different elements from a historical, ideological or behavioural perspective but always within a geographical context. Mine is an attempt to discover the implicit and explicit meanings and relationships formulated by Barber’s rendition of places which are approached with a critical eye for the stereotypical or prejudiced gaze. As Meinig explains:

Carried further, one may discover an implicit ideology that the individuality of places is a fundamental characteristic of subtle and immense importance of life on earth, that all human events *take place*, all problems are anchored in place, and ultimately can only be understood in such terms. Such a view insists that our individual lives are necessarily affected in myriad ways by the particular localities in which we live, that it is simply inconceivable that anyone could be the same person in a different place. (Meinig 8)

These reflections, which here seem to be established statements, are transformed by Barber into questions that remain unanswered. This is because, as I have stated before, Barber’s literary work is much more concerned with asking questions than with answering them. Meinig’s conclusions echo Barber’s questions when she tried to provide a meaningful introduction to what she was trying to achieve through the completion of her autobiography, *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*:

In a sense, I’m still trying to find that life, having been derailed by the confusion of adolescence and later by the obligations of adulthood, but I need clues from the past as I move on. What was the milieu surrounding me as a child: the suppositions, the beliefs, the attitudes? Who were those people: my relatives, the rangers, the teachers in my church? And finally, need I always be a product of

southern Nevada and the Mormon church? Made in the U.S.A. and Nevada by the Mormons? Am I a flower that can bloom anywhere, or will my roots shrivel in strange soil? (Barber, *How* 10)

From my perspective of landscape in Barber's fiction, many of the different approaches that Meinig proposes collapse to release a composition of her physical surroundings that blends faith, gender, and culture. Thus, the sections in which I classified my analysis prove the need to be regarded as an attempt on networking and connection which renders a complex analysis of Barber's literary production. Moreover, the two introductions to Mormon history and literature should be approached not in isolation but as part of the subsequent analysis of Barber's literature.

Many Mormon scholars were useful to me in developing those initial introductory sections. On the one hand, work by scholars such as Edward L. Hart, Dale L. Morgan, Bruce W. Jorgensen, Richard Cracroft, Edward Geary, Gideon Burton, Eugene England, Richard D. Rust, William Mulder, Karl Keller, Lavina Fielding Anderson, Linda Sillitoe, Neal Lambert or John Bennion helped me to prepare the introduction to Mormon literary history. Special mention goes to Michael Austin's article which deeply stirred my interest in this topic. I used the work by scholars and researchers such as Leonard Arrington<sup>20</sup>, Wallace Stegner, Robert Mullen, David Bigler, Juanita Brooks and many others in the introduction to the history of the Church. Of incalculable value in introducing myself into the world of Mormonism and Mormon literature were the additional primary texts and secondary sources that I read. These include complementary critical articles, personal accounts, websites such as *The Motley Vision* or the official website of the Mormon Literary Association, magazines such as *BYU Studies*, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon*

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<sup>20</sup> Arrington is a key figure not only in the history of the Mormon Church but also in Western American history. Dean L. May credits Arrington's book, *Great Basin*, which is still a major text among historians of the West, as a "magnum opus, in print for forty-one years and moving towards a highly likely golden anniversary" (May 8).

*Thought* or *Sunstone*, films, documentaries, rock and folk music and even a very profitable visit to the Mormon Trail Center in Omaha, Nebraska.

These, then, are the sources used and methodologies applied in the completion of this dissertation. Four different approaches in a single analysis might appear, at first glance, to be confusing, even incoherent. Nevertheless, I am persuaded that this combination deploys a solid and exhaustive study of a literary corpus which is authentically heterogenous and sophisticated in point of view, content and style. Thus, my methodological approach aims to emulate the very nature of the object of analysis.

Virginia Woolf proposed a simpler critical approach to literature: “integrity and disintegrity as criteria to discern the quality of a book” (*Room* 84). Barber has many things in common with the Woolf of *A Room of One’s Own*. Barber is also aware of the lack of a valuable tradition “behind them” (Woolf, *Room* 88) and that is why much of her fiction can be read as an attempt to look back “through our mothers if we are women” (Woolf, *Room* 88). One of the main elements in Barber’s fiction is her probity, her “integrity” in writing from a sincere perspective and a committed boldness. Woolf’s moral approach to literature is also proposed by Stephen L. Tanner in “The Moral Measure of Literature”. Based on the work by John Gardner, Tanner proposes the moral approach as a valuable method pushed aside in the modern age due to “the relativistic temper of the modern mind” and “the attempt to emulate the dispassionate objectivity of science” (2). In fact, Tanner concludes that the moral approach is unavoidable for a Mormon critic since modern methods of

criticism (an opinion corroborated upon by other Mormon scholars<sup>21</sup>) can be “an unsettling process” (4):

I do not see, for example, how a Mormon critic can avoid subscribing to some kind of edification theory. His world view necessarily causes him to see literature as a criticism of life and to value it according to what it affirms or promulgates. This does not mean he must reject modern critical theories and methods, but he must complete or supplement them so that ends as well as means are assessed. (Tanner 4)

Tanner even agrees with Hart’s idea about the risk of “double jeopardy” involved in a writer and, especially a Mormon writer talking about literature and, especially Mormon literature. Tanner says:

The writer cannot know in advance the exact nature of the values he will portray. The process of writing itself, involving both the conscious and unconscious mind, creates values or shadings of values the author cannot foresee and sometimes does not recognize even after the fact. That is part of the mystery of the creative process. The critic must reconstruct intention implicit in the work, which frequently transcends the author’s conscious intention. (Tanner 6)

Since Tanner himself says that to be a good moral critic you need wisdom and maturity, and specifically, he considers that a good knowledge of the Restored Gospel was compulsory to review Mormon literature from a moral point of view, I have to affirm that mine cannot be seen as a work produced from within a moral framework. Yet, my approach and that proposed by Tanner have many things in common, not least of which is a taste for interpretation, both of the characters and of the conscious and unconscious motivations of the writer in an attempt to give meaning to the text. Whether I come to ethically conclusive statements or not may be the difference between Tanner’s proposition and the final result of this analysis. Mine is an outsider’s approach. Even though I try to understand Barber’s

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<sup>21</sup> Orson Scott Card: “... but the fact that she, like many others, has not realized that currently fashionable literary theory is not only an invalid standard against which to measure Mormon literature, but is positively inimical to Mormonism and Mormon writing” (*Storytelling* 134).

literature and Mormon literature from within, it is inevitable that I remain an outsider. Nevertheless, my moral approach is wider and more elastic than what Tanner could have imagined because in approaching Barber from a moral point of view, implementing Woolf's technique of discerning worthy literature, I learn that Barber's ethical tone is complex and universal. Barber, rather than affirming values, tries to confirm the complexity of reaching the point of affirmation. Barber's moral approach goes beyond proposing morally uplifting tropes and topics for Mormons to show the recognition of what Tanner calls "the relativistic temper of the modern mind" (2). In my opinion, it is a tricky business for a critic to determine whether something is good or bad, morally, in literary expression. There is always a second possible interpretation. When Tanner says that "when a literary work cheats or lies or achieves its right and wrong ends unfairly, or celebrates what ought to be scorned, or mocks what should be praised, the critic should announce what has gone wrong and point out why" (7), he forgets that cheating, lying or achieving ends do not provide closure; the reader's personal interpretation is what closes the book morally. As Woolf says, "one can only give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncracies of the speaker" (*Room 4*). Mormon writers, however, seem inextricably compelled to write with moral issues in mind, as Dave Wolverton states: "I'm not a prophet. I don't write scripture. Yet that doesn't free me from the necessity of being a moral writer" (Bigelow 260).

Again, Barber, rather than connoting "emotional affirmation" (Gardner 129), denotes her limitations, prejudices and idiosyncracies. She privileges questions over answers, the search rather than the finding. Instead of affirming her emotions, she confirms that emotionally she is still a seeker and a doubter. When Aldo Leopold concludes that "all ethics so far evolved rest upon a single promise: that the individual is a member of a

community” (203), we can assume that this means both competing and co-operating; Barber’s ethical turn in literature derives from her study of the position and nature of her own self, avoiding the extremes and trying to find her place as an individual within a community, either when talking about the ethics of gender, Mormonism or place. In any case, my approach to a religious interpretation of Barber’s work avoids any conclusive statement insofar as my aim is to do as Stegner suggests: “I think one has to deal according to his belief, sympathetically or otherwise, with the supernatural aspects; but one has to take very seriously the social and individual results of faith – what it does to people, and what it does to groups of people” (*Stegner* 113). Perhaps the moral approach should be made by focusing on the reader. Rather than looking for the moral ideas in the narrative, the attention should be placed on the agency of the reader who is free to exercise moral judgements. Jorgensen pursues this idea in a Mormon context: “I am free to think and judge and feel and to know myself judged by the judgements I write out” (47).

Later in this dissertation, when discussing Barber’s biography and her literary career, I will expand on the reasons and aspirations, the structure and objectives of this project. Meanwhile I would like to end this introduction with a quotation from one of Barber’s personal articles, “The Mormon Woman as a Writer”: “Then I cross my fingers and hope I can speak clearly enough for someone to hear, for someone to be moved by my words as I have been moved by others who’ve chosen to write” (*Mormon* 119).

Now I, in turn, cross my fingers and hope I can show someone how and why to hear and be moved.

## 2. THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT: *MORMON HISTORY*

### 2.1. Foreword to the History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

In the general introduction to this dissertation, I already talked about the convenience of offering a historical introduction as a valuable context in which the analysis of Phyllis Barber's literary production would find plenary significance. To understand Mormons and Mormonism, as I will try to explain it, is compulsory to have a notion of their history. In *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, Terry Tempest Williams explains it plainly and briefly: "In Mormon culture, that is one of the things you do know – history and genealogy" (*Refuge* 13).

Following that idea, Williams outlines how lineage makes history and history is tied to the land. Thus she proposes a double source: faith and place. In my analysis of Barber's fiction this double source proves suitable. However, it is indicative how Williams states that this fact is disturbing and comforting at once, giving a glimpse of her recurring reference to paradox.

But what I want to emphasize here is the importance of Mormon history for the fabrication of Mormon identity, both as a tight group, as a community, and in the individual and personal design of one's place in the world, as I will try to show when analyzing Barber's writing. In *America: Religions and Religion*, Catherine L. Albanese reduces all this explanation to one sentence: "To understand the Mormons is to understand this history in which they acted out their identity" (226). In fact, this turning to history to build an identity, both communal or individual, has proved a common practice. Levi S.

Peterson explains that “if it is written well, history can function as potently as either fiction or drama to capture our imagination, to arouse our emotions, to cause us to identify and project and to live vicariously in the scene portrayed by the historian” (*Juanita* 135).

In the 1970s, Jan Shipps explains how Mormons relied on their history to ritualize their past, “to take hold of their own past” (64), thus building a sense of community that took the shape of an ethnic perception. The history of Mormonism is a story of constant progress, an evolution of their sense of community through the events and circumstances that have drawn their path to present-day consideration as a spiritual and cultural group. When Candadai Seshachari tries to explain the nature of a Mormon writer’s duty, he is compelled to say:

It is through this singular experience that he asserts his individuality, indeed his humanity. This experience defines his being. If one takes away from him the memory of the martyrdom of Joseph Smith, the tragedy and heroism of the exodus of his ancestors, as well as the everyday details that made Zion happen, it is like blotting out the story of Christ from a Christian’s consciousness, or like rooting out the fact of slavery from the racial memory of the American black. Bereft of his “Mormonness,” which saturates all levels of his conscious and unconscious mind, the Mormon writer is naught, unfit both as subject matter and creator of literary works. (Seshachari 23)

Whether talking about a writer or about a mathematician or a plumber, the fact that Mormons look back to their history to find a place for themselves is an obvious assertion. And when the obvious plays a role, the risky mistake of bending for simplicity appears. Such a clear statement may invite us to remove complexity from the history of the Church of Latter-day Saints, when, in fact, it is necessary to approach its history with an eye open to different approaches, perspectives, and levels of interpretation, even for one single event. There is no better example to understand this complexity than by paying attention to an even more obvious statement: that the history of the Mormons took place almost in its



entirety in the West. For an understanding of their sense of community and their quasi-ethnic perception it is indispensable to study the myths on which that agreement is erected and as Stacey Burton has suggested, the pioneering days, which formed the axis of Mormon history, are basic to understanding this mythical nuance: “Mormons have long revered early adherents to the faith, particularly the pioneers who crossed the plains to Utah. But what began as reverence gradually became mythologizing and then sacralizing” (Burton, *Toward* 32).

This process of “mythologizing and then sacralizing” finds an explanation in the Mormon tendency to look backwards in search of a sense of community which derives from a reaction against the growing secularization of their surroundings. As Anthony D. Smith explains in *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, “the myths represent a means of adapting to rapid change, of mediating between an untenable but much-regretted religious tradition and an ardently-sought but often fearful social change and modernization” (*Myths* 84). Smith adds that these myths also reflect the “hopes and possibilities” (*Myths* 84) placed upon a change produced by moving into a new industrial, capitalist and modern society, a “modern era where traditional economy of isolation and subsistence is finished” (*Myths* 84). Or as Slotkin puts it, “myth-making is simultaneously a psychological and a social activity. The myth is articulated by individual artists and has its effect on the mind of each individual participant, but its function is to reconcile and unite these individualities to a collective identity” (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 8). With some variations and a change in emphasis, the Mormon’s growing “mythologizing and then sacralizing” of the pioneer days fits into this background. In *And the Desert Shall Blossom*, ironically maybe, Alf throws his anger back in Esther’s face: “Don’t get lost in here mooning over the past: your fine pioneering family” (Barber, *And* 88).

Summarizing, Mormonism began in the east but became what it is in the west. Their experience of the frontier opens a different approach to the conquering of the West. Richard White explains that “the American West is a product of conquest and of the mixing of diverse groups of peoples” (4). For the Mormons, the West permeates the same notions of “quest and prospect” (Limerick 117) which prompted different people in that direction. If the Mormon experience is labeled as peculiar, it is because it was slightly dissimilar in source but alike in disguise. Mormons conquered the same as they built a kingdom where there was only a desert and a lake of undrinkable water. In his landmark book, *“It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own:” A New History of the American West*, White proposes the understanding of the West as “a set of relationships” (538). In that sense, the Mormon experience of the West asserts White’s idea of the West as a complex space, full of paradoxes, different dimensions and perspectives. Mormons crossed the plains, opened the way to migrants behind, and set in motion a system of proselytizing which took new migrants from such places as Sweden or Norway, helping to compose the multicultural brew that today enriches American identity. But that is not the only contribution by the Mormons. Two more could easily be added to their record.

First, they played a distinct and peculiar role in the conquering of the West. Wallace Stegner is one of the writers who emphasize this fact, as James Alexander Trombley states:

Among the Mormons, the supreme virtues of family, community solidarity, history and tradition would contribute significantly to the elaboration of Stegner’s concept of the sense of place. In addition, observation of Mormon life would catalyze one of the major tenets of Stegner’s personal philosophy, the notion of a “usable past,” alone capable of providing a meaningful foundation to community development in a West that “has too long made a tradition out of mourning the passing of things we never had time to know, just as we have made a culture out of the open road, out of movement without place. (Trombley 31)

No one is so far from Daniel Boone as Brigham Young, even though they were both in the same place at practically the same time. Mormons presented a set of values very different from the stereotype favored by a mythic interpretation of the frontier: “They would replace individualism and democracy with communalism and authoritarianism” (White 193). In that sense, they opened a way to a complex and dynamic understanding of a reality which, as it passed into history, has been subjected to mythical interpretations.

Nevertheless, there is a second contribution by the Mormons, but this one was not positive for them. It is a key example for considering the complexity I refer to when placing Mormons within the context of the American West. The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a national quest for a new identity. There, the Mormons played a pivotal role as an opposing tenet necessary to work out the new identity required by the fresh country, as Givens puts it when analyzing the anti-Mormon literature in fashion during the 19<sup>th</sup> century:

Exaggerating these conflicts – emphasizing or inventing Mormonism’s alien character, strange belief, and hostile intents toward American institutions – could only facilitate the self-definition of a people who chose to see themselves as theologically Protestant, morally Puritan, and politically Jacksonian.” (*Viper* 18)

Constructing an identity by contrasting another is not an American invention. If, as Werner Sollors proposes, ethnicity is not essential but invented, not a “conspirational interpretation of manipulative inventor” but some “intensely debated, collective fictions that are continually reinvented” (xi), Mormons, at the time American identity was being assembled, played the role of the villain that faces the hero in the “collective fiction” being

debated. And, as White explains, the selection of Mormons for that role was a paradox in itself:

that Mormons should be tainted with the brush of un-Americanism is particularly ironic because Mormonism is in many ways the most American of religions. Founded in the United States by a New Englander, it incorporated many of the popular beliefs, religious controversies, and social values of early-nineteenth century rural New York in its theology. Nonetheless, persecution in Missouri and Illinois did in many ways mold the early Mormon church into an institution designed to survive in a world of enemies.” (White 163)

Givens, again, associates this tendency with the speciality of Mormon religious genius and he places most of the stress to understand Mormons’ compulsion to come into an ethnic category on these confronting outsider forces rather than in the Mormons’ own concept of themselves as a peculiar people:

On the other hand, the position of Mormonism in the margins of American ethnicity suggests the substantial degree to which identity can be – and in this case has been – manipulated. To attribute quasi-ethnic status to a new religious minority (whether as sociological pronouncement or through scores of literary representations) is to participate in a process by which threatening proximity has been transformed into manageable difference. This reification of religious difference into ethnic status might easily be interpreted as a reflection of Mormonism’s religious genius, the making of a religious community into a people, were it not for certain facts. The history of colonialist discourse and the malleability of ethnic categories (of which Mormonism is an example), the prevailing ideological systems under which Mormonism evolves, and the role of popular fiction in shaping this evolving identity – all suggest more is at work in Mormonism’s acquisition of ethnic status than self-representation as “peculiar people.” (Givens, *Viper* 18)

In summary, two forces work to complicate the easy conclusion that Mormon ethnic consideration is basically derived from a strong stress upon community bonds and peculiarity. Considering outsider interests is key to understanding this process, an idea that William H. Handley also proposes when analyzing Zane Grey’s novels. He states that the Mormons “were an important transitional group against which the nation defined itself

based on marital practice and the question of consent” (Handley, *Marriage* 4). Handley, though, distances himself from Givens when he points out that the explanation cannot be reduced to certain “anxieties over religious heresy,” but that it is necessary to consider “the contradictions of American religious intolerance, civil beliefs, and cultural practices” (Handley, *Marriage* 115) which denote a process of definition full of paradoxical issues.

In short, the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints presents parallelisms with the history of the United States of America: “... Mormons in their new faith were as American as their Puritan ancestors in New England” (Albanese 229). Talking again about the West, if New York newspaperman John O’Sullivan found in the phrase *manifest destiny* a perfect statement to illustrate the expansionist fever of their contemporaries, some sort of close but slightly different term could have been invented to define Mormon enterprise. *Selected destiny* could do. The Mormons’ experience displays a new array of perspectives which contributes new meanings to the experience of the West. Nevertheless, their participation also exercises a profuse protagonism in the global evolution of the new country, sometimes paralleling it, sometimes, confronting or opposing it.

Here I follow a particular structure to classify Mormon history into periods. One of the main sources on which I have based my classification is found in Daniel H. Ludlow’s *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, a semi-official text which gathers more than a thousand articles. Published for the first time in 1992, the book edited by Ludlow aimed at being an independent work of history, but mixed reviews praised it but also criticized its faith-promoting spirit. In any case, the list of writers involved in the project includes both historians committed to the Church and independent scholars such as Jan Shipps. Since my

interest is to be respectful but objective at the same time, even though I chose this text as a guide and primary source to design the structure of this section, I am forced to broaden the sources of information and the diversity of approaches with additional articles and books dealing with the same topics addressed in this *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*.

However, my final decision has been to divide the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints into six different periods: *From the Beginnings to Nauvoo, Nauvoo, The Exodus, The Kingdom of God on Earth, The Polygamist Controversy and the End of Isolation* and, finally, a sixth period dealing mainly with the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century called *Consolidation, Integration and Internationalization*. In the first section, I begin with an appraisal of the foundation of the Church, starting with Joseph Smith's first vision and ending with Governor Bogg's Extermination Order, a period that seems to establish a pattern that will be repeated in the following years. In the second period, I focus on the first successful but not lasting attempt to build Zion. Nauvoo works as a symbol of Mormon enterprise and this period ends with the death of Smith which, obviously, deserves a close analysis. In the third period, the focus turns from Smith to Brigham Young and Mormon history seems to suffer a barely visible change of character and spirit. The time of the exodus, as Jan Shipps affirms, unfolds significant meaning because its interpretation helps to construct Mormon's institutionalization as a Church and almost as an ethnic group: "... these events took on an experiential character appropriately described as metaphorical only if metaphor is understood as something more than literary device" (Shipps 61). This period and the following, from the days of the pioneering experience to the Mormon instauration of a community in the desert, still exercise a fundamental influence in present day Mormonism. After these, the fifth period explains the controversy over polygamy with the federal government; again, a period of meaningful consequences for Mormon culture. A

period that, in fact, draws a line separating all the previous periods from the future evolution of the Mormon community. The last period, as already indicated, tries to chronicle the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the growing internationalization of the Church, as well as its integration into the American mainstream, a process that provides eloquent assumptions for understanding the nature of Mormon culture and opening new definitions from different approaches. Today most Mormons live outside of the Utah Mormon country<sup>22</sup>, and, as Brooks perfectly summarizes, the “phenotype” for Mormons has changed completely:

And if nineteenth-century travel writers once characterized the Mormon race by its English converts’ pale faces and narrow features, this phenotype no longer applies except to a minority of church members still residing in the geographical Utah-Idaho-Arizona corridor. Still, Salt Lake City remains the headquarters of the Mormon Church and the geographical center of Mormon life. (Brooks, *Genealogy* 294)

Special attention is placed on the consideration of the birth of the feminist movement within Mormon culture in this last period. First, because this critical, social, cultural, and political movement (complex and varied in itself) illustrates the multiple changes and processes occurring in Mormonism during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. If Edwin Brown Firmage says that “scripture has come down to us through countless *male* scribes and redactors, placing powerful masculine influence within scripture” (343), then it is natural that Mormon feminism points right to the core of Mormon theological foundation to draw their concerns and objectives. Thus, women’s interests and influences have gone from social issues to theological matters. Secondly, because the stress placed on developing this movement relates it to the main object of this work. It will help to establish some sort of frame where our conclusions (and the possible generalizations drawn from them) will be better understood.

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<sup>22</sup> Using John L. Hart’s numbers, published in *LDS Church News* at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1997), William A. Wilson concludes: “Especially is that true today when most Mormons do not live in the West. Of today’s ten million Mormons only ten percent live in Utah, and over half of all Mormons live outside the United States and Canada” (189).

This last section of the introduction to Mormon history launches a different image of Mormonism. A contemporary reality in which 19<sup>th</sup> century rural Mormonism has developed into an urban culture in which different tensions combine to elaborate a much more heterogenous community. Thus, this final depiction of Mormonism operates as a proper context to situate Barber and the stories in her books. White explains how

the West that emerged from World War II was, above all, a metropolitan West. Old cities expanded. Small communities became booming cities. Sagebrush flats, desert mesas, and coastal tidelands all sprouted suburbs and towns that freeways and secondary roads wove together until by 1970, 83 percent of the people in the Mountain and Pacific Coast states lived in metropolitan areas. (White 542)

Barber's fiction is set in this urban West to which I will be heading after travelling along the whole track that the Mormons followed from New York to Utah and beyond, after two centuries of changes. In any case, Barber's fiction requires a wider context. To understand her stories in their fullness, the reader needs a whole understanding of the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Her stories have roots that go very deep, as deep as two centuries can dig. In this recapitulation of Mormon history I intend to give a proper context in which to frame my analysis.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> I need to warn the reader that this is not a history of Utah. Historically, as McCormick and Sillito confess, it is easy to define Utah's history as "a narrow and selective reading (...) that mainly recounted the activities of Mormons and the Mormon church, as if Utah was a one-dimensional society of interest only as a religious utopia" (McCormick 3). Even if Utah owes its speciality to the presence of the Mormons and their history is partially the history of the state, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Utah is a heterogeneous state now that commands its study from different perspectives, one of them, and one very important, being that of the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Lavina Fielding Anderson reveals a similar idea in her literary history of the state: "for almost a century thereafter, Utah's literature could be divided into 'insider' writings by the often beleaguered Mormons and intended for internal consumption and 'outsider' writings intended to explain or sometimes denounce Utah to the larger society" (*Utah* 1).



## 2.2. The History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

### 2.2.1. First Period: 1820-1838. From the Beginnings to Nauvoo

#### 1820 Joseph Smith's First Vision

Joseph Smith Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith, Joseph Smith's parents, were New Englanders who, at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, moved to New York in search of better opportunity. As Leonard Arrington and Davis Bitton put it: "a combination of poor judgement, bad luck, and adverse circumstances conspired to keep them continually on the move" (*Mormon* 4). That movement led them to follow the same path that many other immigrants were taking in that period:

In the frontierland of western New York, Palmyra was only a small town, but more itinerant evangelists had come to it than the pious Smiths could remember. Here, and in the thinly settled wilderness round-about, there had been in the early years of the nineteenth century one religious revival after another, with crusaders invoking all the terrors of hell upon an unbelieving world. Farther east, in such nests of infidelity as Yale and Bowdoin College, students were reading the French atheists, swearing by the memory of Tom Paine, and predicting that in another century Christianity would be as dead as Jonathan Edwards. (Fisher 3)

These words open Vardis Fisher's novel *Children of God: An American Epic*, in which he gives a literary chronicle of the beginnings of the Church and the settling of the Utah Basin. It functions as an illustration of the days in which the Smiths were trying to find a place to settle and a faith to follow among the many prophets that were selling their spiritual options in the country because, with regard to religion, the first years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were a disturbing time.

The Calvinist perception of a predestined fate for human beings was swept away in those years by an increasing focus on human effort. Indeed, the Methodists' energy in the West and the pioneering and western democracy made the revolt against the predestinationism of Calvinist ideas even stronger. The Second Great Awakening of the twenties was the catalyst for the emergence of a number of different sects, all of them proposing the genuine reading of the Bible. Many itinerant preachers could be seen all around the country, especially, where the Smiths came to settle, in the state of New York that came to be known as the "burned-over district" (O'Dea 10) because no folk remained to be evangelized after this revivalism:

Toward the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century, new ideological elements complicated the picture. Anticlericalism among the believers was watched by a positive tendency toward unbelief. Political radicalism and associated religious skepticism, together with the spread of so-called "natural religion", threatened the older orthodoxy. Moreover, religious innovation – such as denial of the dogma of Trinity – began to make headway. Thomas Paine's "Age of Reason", an example of cruder lower-middle-class "infidelity" was known all over the new republic by the end of the century, and small indeed was the hamlet where it had not penetrated.

Such deterioration called forth two strong reactions, each of which was fostered and organized by the clergy. First came the Great Awakening of the 1740s. Starting from many local sources and becoming a continental movement of great dimensions, it swept the country, and penitance, conversion, and religious enthusiasm seemed to penetrate all classes of population. Yet this fervant revival of religion died down in time and in many places left spiritual deadness in its wake. Temporal crises usurped Colonial attention, and in the period of the Revolutionary War and immediately afterward, religious conditions and the state of morals have been described as reaching the lowest ebb in our national history.

The respond was the Second Great Awakening, affecting most religious groups. (O'Dea, 8-9)

The many immigrants moving to this area took with them "the revival oriented church to stoke the fires of their emotions and burn the word of God into their pioneer hearts" (Melton 93). Under these circumstances, the interest and concern of young Joseph Smith finds meaning. With so many options, rather than enjoying possibilities, the young Smith was suffering chaos: the multiple schisms and branches that divided religions into sects and

churches resonated in the head of the son of the Smiths, reluctant to believe in any of these options:

Nowhere was lapse from the old codes more evident than in the churches, which were racked with schisms. The Methodists split four ways between 1814 and 1830. The Baptists split into Reformed Baptists, Hard-Shell Baptists, Free-Will Baptists, Footwashers, and other sects. Unfettered religious began spawning a host of new religions. (Brodie 12)

There were all types of sects spreading all around Palmyra. Isaac Bullard, Ann Lee, mother of the Shakers, William Miller, John Humphrey Noyes or Matthias in New York and Dylks in Ohio were fair examples of these eccentric leaders that preached in the surroundings of Smith's home. In fact, Smith knew about all this and he could have been in touch with these preachers. Jemima Wilkinson, "the Universal Friend," was one of the most famous new leaders. "One found instead [of sober preachers] faith healers and circuit-rider evangelists, who stirred their audiences to paroxysms of religious frenzy" (Brodie 12-13).

The analysis of his family tree helps to give a context to Smith's story. His own parents had many doubts about which was the true religion, though it is documented that some of the members of the family came to be in contact with the Presbyterian Church in Palmyra, New York (Backman 3). They were Calvinists, but the conditions of the New America were changing the intensity of their faith. In fact, as Fawn M. Brodie showed in her famous book *No Man Knows My History*, the experience of his grandfathers, Asael Smith and Solomon Mack, gave Smith a background of rebellion and doubt that led him to his own lack of commitment to any Church: "As religious dissenters they believed more in the integrity of individual religious experience than in the tradition of organized sect," says Brodie about the Mack family (4). In fact, Brodie, at the beginning of her book, emphasizes

the fact that those were days in which New England was ground for doubts and remorse for any organized church, especially among the Macks and Smiths. A good example is Lucy's own concept of religion.<sup>24</sup>

This was the historical context in which the young Joseph Smith felt the need to ask for guidance and, in the following years, the Church was born. Many of the distinctive characteristics of the Mormon ethic can be found in the different tendencies that religious revivalism developed during those years. In the spring of 1820, Smith asked for direction from God. He was full of doubts. The young Smith did not know which of the many preachers was speaking the truth so, in order to avoid making a mistake, he asked for guidance from God himself. Being only fourteen, he went into the woods near his home and prayed. He testified that both God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared before him. He was told that none of the churches on earth was the true church and that he was the one selected to reorganize the true church of Jesus Christ.

This vision is still a matter of study and it opens up debate about the verbatim interpretation of this vision and of the Book of Mormon as a whole. Brodie skillfully traces records and bibliography which reveal a dubious map of distortions and errors concerning that first vision:

If something happened that spring morning in 1820, it passed totally unnoticed in Joseph's home town, and apparently did not even fix itself in the minds of members of his own family. The awesome vision he described in later years was probably the elaboration of some half-remembered dream stimulated by the early revival excitement and reinforced by the rich folklore of visions circulating in his neighborhood. Or it may have been sheer invention, created some time after 1830 when the need arose for a magnificent tradition to cancel out the stories of his

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<sup>24</sup> Brodie describes Smith's mother's religious belief as follows: "Her religion was intimate and homely, with God a ubiquitous presence invading dreams, provoking miracles, and blighting sinners' fields. Her children probably never learned to fear Him" (Brodie 5).

fortune-telling and money-digging. Dream images came easily to this youth, whose imagination was as untrammelled as the whole west. (Brodie 25)

In any case, its power, metaphorically or substantially, was central to the formation of the Church and still retains a basic meaning in Mormon belief, remaining part of their cultural baggage.

Three years after the first vision, it is said that an angel called Moroni appeared before Smith. The angel told him about some golden plates where the history of the former inhabitants of the western continents had been written. Smith did not receive these plates until September 1827. In those four years, many different events helped him become a man. He was in jail. He took part in a treasure hunt and, thanks to this, he met his future wife, Emma Hale<sup>25</sup>. His parents lost the farm where they had been living. In the meantime, Smith, subject to more visions and with the help of different people, began the founding of his new church.

In the following years, Smith began working on the translation of these plates that he claimed to have divine origin, but neighbors were impeding the translation of the plates in Palmyra, a boomtown in the years previous to his vision thanks to the Erie Canal pending construction in order to connect the Great Lakes to the port of New York (Brodie 10). Consequently, Smith moved to Harmony, New York, the place where he had met his wife. There, Oliver Cowdery became engaged in the translation of the plates and eventually became a prominent member of the Church<sup>26</sup>. The translation of those plates was a difficult

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<sup>25</sup> Emma Hale, then Emma Smith, is the object of wide research today and her figure has been underlined by many scholars. Arrington says that she was “a full partner with the prophet in their marriage – a business partner, a trustworthy spokeswoman, a person he regarded as worthy of being consulted and of occupying a leadership position” (Arrington, *Persons* 2).

<sup>26</sup> Scholars such as Larry E. Morris have studied the influence of Cowdery, both on the translation of the plates and on the shaping of Smith’s founding ideas.

task. Martin Harris, another early member of the Church, went to Albany and New York City to show a fraction from Joseph Smith's translation of the Golden Plates to different experts such as Samuel L. Mitchell, vice President of Rutgers Medical College and Charles Anthon, professor of Greek and Latin at Columbia College (Brodie 51) but neither attempt to win support could be said to be very successful. In fact, Harris, who at the beginnings was a useful economic patron, became a future source of controversy because of his uncontrollable curiosity. He was one of the witnesses that Smith selected to partake of his visions together with Cowdery and David Whitmer. Harris betrayed Smith when he showed the manuscript of the translation to foreigners and he was replaced by Cowdery. In May 1829, Cowdery and Smith testified that they had had another vision and that they were given the authority to baptize, the Aaronic Priesthood. Later, Peter, James and John had appeared to them and they had been ordained apostles. By the end of the month, Smith and Cowdery had to leave Harmony because of the growing hostility, a circumstance that became a pattern in the early history of the Mormon Church. In any case, Smith and Cowdery had already attained the basis to found their church. The visions that they firmly testified to have experienced gave them enough of a foundation for their future decisions.

### 1830 Church Is Organized / Book of Mormon Is Published

Smith and Cowdery went to Fayette, New York, and they convinced Egbert B. Grandin, Palmyra's local printer, to publish the Book of Mormon<sup>27</sup> which they had already translated

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<sup>27</sup> The Book of Mormon takes its name from the prophet Mormon. In the words of David Bigler, the Book of Mormon is "the professed record of the family of a God-fearing man, named Lehi, who was led by God in about 600 B.C. from Jerusalem to the New World, just before the fall of the city to the Babylonians. In America, these Israelites of the tribe of Manasseh became divided into two groups, the Nephites, named after Lehi's righteous son, Nephi, and the Lamanites, descendants of his sons Laman and Lemuel, whom God cursed with a dark skin because of their wickedness" (64).

from the golden plates. By March, copies were ready and the next step was to organize the Church.<sup>28</sup>

The Church was officially organized on April 6, 1830 in Fayette, New York, in the Whitmers' Farm House where the book was also partially translated and witnessed, since three people were allowed to view it. Only six members attended that day, even though some scholars include the presence of more than fifty people who did not subscribe as members (Bushman 1). Smith and Cowdery had already been persuading new members, meeting together or baptizing them. In this first meeting, assistants agreed to name Smith prophet and leader of the Church. The members of the newly organized Church of Christ, as it was known at the beginning, chose Cowdery as the second leader. Three branches were organized, the three of them in the state of New York, and they began the first missionary efforts to get new converts. The growth of the Church was quite slow in these first months, but one mission was so successful that it doubled Church membership. After the summer, when the first controversies and troubles arose regarding Smith's authority (many members claimed to have their own revelations), Cowdery and some other members, Parley P. Pratt among them, converted 130 members from a Campbellite sect with which Pratt had been associated before. Sidney Rigdon was the leader of this group and he himself found Mormon beliefs appealing and converted to the Church, initiating a role that was to become very important in years to come. Richard L. Bushman and Larry C. Porter describe this first successful event in the history of Mormon missionary efforts:

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<sup>28</sup> In her biography of Smith, Brodie offers a picture of the reactions that newspapers showed after the publishing of the book: "On April 2 the Rochester *Daily Advertiser* published the first review: BLASPHEMY --- BOOK OF MORMON, ALIAS THE GOLDEN BIBLE. // The Book of Mormon has been placed in our hands. A viler imposition was never practiced. It is an evidence of fraud, blasphemy, and credulity, shocking both to Christians and moralists. The author and proprietor is Joseph Smith, Jr., a fellow who by some hocus pocus acquired such influence over a wealthy farmer of Wayne county that the latter mortgaged his farm for \$3,000, with which he paid for printing and binding five thousand copies of the blasphemous work" (Brodie 82).

The most successful early missionary venture was launched in September and October 1830, when Oliver Cowdery, Peter Whitmer, Jr., Parley Pratt, and Ziba Peterson were called to teach the Indians. The Book of Mormon had special relevance for Native Americans because it was a religious record from ancient America, and the four were charged to take this message to the Indians who were assembling in the territory west of Missouri. The mission was notable as much as for what was accomplished en route, however, as for the preaching to the Indians. After leaving New York, the missionaries stopped in the Mentor-Kirtland area of northeast Ohio near Pratt's former farm. Before joining the Church, Pratt had been associated with the Campbellite movement, which was forming into the Disciples of Christ church. This group believed in rigorously adhering to the teachings and practices of the New Testament church, sloughing off all later additions. The teachings of Joseph Smith appealed to many of them because his doctrines embodied for them a pure restoration of true Christianity. About 130 persons were converted, including the leading Campbellite preacher in the area, Sidney Rigdon. (Ludlow 5)<sup>29</sup>

The newly organized Church began a frenzied movement to win new adherents. Apart from the Campbellites, one of the most important target groups for converts in those first days was Native Americans. One important tenet of Mormon faith is rooted in the Mormon belief that Native Americans were the descendants of the original Israelites who came to America, as explained in the Book of Mormon; this, in any case, was, as Brodie records, a fashionable trend in those days. Some scholars have pointed towards Mormon relationship with Native Americans as one of the sources that explained the tension between Mormons and gentiles<sup>30</sup>. The idea that Mormons were friendly towards the Indians is partial and incorrect. They aimed at being on good terms with Native Americans, but this was a failure and relative in any case. A more detailed explanation of the implications of the Book of Mormon and Church policies towards Native Americans is given by David L. Bigler in his book *The Forgotten Kingdom: The Mormon Theocracy in the American West 1847-1896*. After recalling the story of the Lamanites and Nephites and their coming from Israel, as

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<sup>29</sup> This citation and the following citations under the name of Ludlow belong to the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*. Published for the first time by Macmillan the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* is a very important official document relating the history of the Mormons. Nonetheless, the pagination used for these citations in this research paper corresponds to the pagination of the electronic version published on the website [www.lightplanet.com](http://www.lightplanet.com). The pagination follows the division in chapters organized by the cited electronic version.

<sup>30</sup> Gentiles are what Mormons call those who are not members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



told in the book, Bigler explains how this served as a foundation to contemplate Native Americans as descendants of those original tribes:

It tells how the Lamanites eventually destroyed their white cousins and went on to become the American Indians, a “remnant of Jacob” in the New World. Thus the natives of the Americas, including those in the Great Basin, and the early settlers of that region shared an important bond. Under Mormon belief, they were both descendants of Abraham through Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph and were brothers by blood. (Bigler 64)

From the very beginning, the Mormons sent missionaries to the Native Americans in the belief that they would be convinced by the word of the Gospel. Many scholars, such as Howard A. Christy, have suggested that this policy was based on “attitudes of fairness, benevolence, and conciliation” (*Open* 34), an idea that is supported by the words of Brigham Young himself:

Though the existence of this policy is not questioned, the interpretation of its essential beneficence flies in the face of evidence that is, at the least, ambiguous. Hostility and bloodshed, as much as benevolence and conciliation, characterized Mormon-Indian relations in Utah before 1852. The policy actually carried out, though couched in terms of beneficence, had as one of its major elements, in addition to assistance, stern punishment when deemed appropriate or necessary. (Christy, *Open* 35)

In any case, Merry C. Baker, in her article “An Indian Interpretation of the Book of Mormon,” where she tries to defend a personal thesis about the origins of Native Americans that clashes with the one proposed in the Book of Mormon, summarizes quite well the source of this special Mormon attitude towards Native Americans and gives an account of the obvious failures:

The Book of Mormon presents the claim that its Lamanites and Nephites were originally one people. They became two peoples through disobedience and due to God’s supposed disfavor, the Lamanites became dark and evil, while the Nephites

were white and good. In this fictional division of peoples, the basis is set for the view that the “Lamanite” Indians (unless they convert to Mormonism) have no right to the American “promised land,” because they long ago gave it up by choosing to be God’s enemies. The alleged property rights of the fair-skinned Nephites were renewed for later European immigrants (Mosiah 10.12-20). In the Mormon explanation of history, these white newcomers would also be divided – into converts to Mormonism (Ephraimites) and non-converts (wicked Gentiles). Therefore, Indians have no right to complain of their mistreatment, unless they leave their friends, family and clan, to accept Mormonism and serve the LDS priesthood. Yet another great irony arose for Joseph Smith at the very point – the native Americans were wise enough not to convert. A book written to win their servitude to the Mormon cause failed in its original purpose: hardly any Indians (or Jews) have ever become Mormons. The great “mission to the Lamanites” set afoot by Joseph Smith at the end of 1830 proved to be a terribly embarrassing failure. (Baker 11)

Even though Baker’s theory about the origins of Native Americans invites for an analysis in a different context than the one offered by this dissertation, she shares common ground with the theories proposed lately by Thomas W. Murphy, who, in “Lamanite Genesis, Genealogy, and Genetics,” states his agreement with Simon Southerton that there is no “scientific evidence” supporting the idea of people migrating from the Middle East to the New World:

Some Latter-day Saints have expressed optimism that DNA research would lead to a vindication of the BoMor as a translation of genuine ancient document. The hope is that DNA research would link Native Americans to ancient Israelites, buttressing LDS beliefs in a way that has not been forthcoming from archeological, linguistic, historical, or morphological research. The results, though, have been disappointing. So far, DNA research lends no support to traditional Mormon beliefs about the origins of Native Americans. Genetic data repeatedly point to migrations from Asia between 7,000 and 50,000 years ago as the primary source of Native American’s origins. (Murphy 47)

In any case, Mormons preached among the Native Americans, and they were especially successful among the Hopi Indians<sup>31</sup>. Later, once the Mormons settled in the Great Basin,

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<sup>31</sup> The Hopi tribe has been grouped among the Pueblo Indians residing in the American Southwest. They remained isolated from Christian culture for a long time, basing their economy largely on an arid form of agriculture. Maybe because they share the need for water, the Mormons were very successful in praying among the Hopi. In fact, as Albanese remarks, “at least one Hopi prophecy taught the coming of a new – and true – religion and counseled rejecting the traditional past to follow it” (42).

Native Americans would again play a very important role in the history of the Mormon Church. And a complex one, in fact. But before that occurred, the entangled set of relationships between Native Americans and Mormons during these early days offers an important source for understanding the rapid growth of the Church.

### 1831 Kirtland, Ohio. The First Gathering

Rigdon, the former leader of the Campbellite sect and recently converted, convinced Smith to move to Ohio. Smith and his wife, Emma Hale, were among the first members who moved to Kirtland, Ohio in February 1831. By May, practically all of the members gathered there together with converts from New England and New York. There were over 1,500 members by 1836. The completion of the Kirtland Temple was a major goal for the Church with many members gathering there to aid in its construction. Temples play a major role in Mormon rites and doctrine which is why it was so important for them to complete the construction of this building. It was dedicated in March 1836. During the gathering in Kirtland, Smith decided to send the first missionaries overseas. The first mission to the British Isles, which turned out to be very successful with over 1,500 new members, opened a line for subsequent missions to attract new members (Ludlow 9).

During the years that Smith and his close assistants spent in Kirtland, the future structure of the Church began to take form. In those years, the First Presidency of the Church, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and the Quorum of the Seventy were organized. *The Doctrine and Covenants*, one of the sacred texts for Latter-day Saints was first published. Many of Smith's revelations, which are the source of the structure and the theology of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, are listed in this book. However, the new

structure of the Church also led some members to apostatize because they did not believe in the new hierarchy that was being formulated. In 1833, Smith dictated the so-called Word of Wisdom, probably the best known of all his revelations<sup>32</sup>. In that revelation, Smith advocated for abstinence in the consumption of tobacco, alcohol and hot drinks. Brodie states that Smith “was only deferring to the pressure of the times, for he was too fond of earthly pleasures to become a temperance crusader” (166). In the same line of thought, Catherine L. Albanese points out that when Mormons promoted the prohibition of tobacco, caffeine and alcohol, they were following the same fashions that other new 19<sup>th</sup> century religions followed as well, including the Seventh-day Adventists’ call for vegetarianism or the Christian Scientists’ banning of tobacco and alcohol. In her opinion, this was a time that favored health through new methods:

Indeed, the nineteenth century was a century of natural health, as from many quarters people supported the idea that nature had energies to cure people and to keep them strong. After 1840 the water cure, or hydrotherapy, became popular. The sick submitted to a variety of healing baths, showers, and compresses, hot and cold, in the belief that water could work the cure they sought. Meanwhile, vegetarianism thrived as a way to gain greater health and to preserve the strength a person already had. (Albanese 488)

Whether for economic or health reasons, this is a revelation that still prevails today and has been established as part of Mormon identity. It was, however, only one of the many changes that Smith introduced and promulgated during his days in Kirtland. In fact, as Joanna Brooks indicates, the Word of Wisdom is today one of the main cultural traces to shape Mormon identity even though in Smith’s days it was a topic that was revered but also often avoided:

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<sup>32</sup> As Terryl L. Givens has noted, one of the main differences between the *Book of Mormon* and the *Old Testament* is the stress placed on “divinely communicated speech that extends not to prophets alone” (*People* 23) but to regular people. This becomes one of Mormonism’s most valuable characteristic as well as a source for subsequent dissensions. Givens explains how this revelatory pattern has helped to promote Mormon culture’s stress on certainty as a rhetorical resource even if “with one exception, no new revelation has been added to the Mormon canon in generations” (*People* 26). In any case, the fact that contemporary revelation is accepted through the Prophet is one of the most characteristic tenets of the Mormon faith.

Abstinence from coffee, tea, tobacco, and alcohol are now significant markers of Mormon identity, although our grandparents might remember that more than a few souls in their small Utah towns kept a coffee pot on the stove and “Jack Mormons” – smokers and drinkers – were considered Mormons still. Increasingly, conservative policies have come to index orthodoxy. (Brooks, *Genealogy* 294)

Smith had already indicated that the kingdom of God on earth, Zion, which the Mormons had been chosen to build, should be founded in the West (Andrus 131). While in Ohio, he travelled to Missouri to find a second place to gather. He decided that Independence, Missouri, was the proper place, in spite of the fact that it has been described as “the crudest kind of frontier village, with little more than a dozen log houses, three stores, a schoolhouse, and a brick courthouse” (Brodie 114). Smith remained in Ohio, where the Church headquarters were located, but many members moved to Independence to start the foundation of Zion. Their aim was to build a city of peace and a place of refuge for the Mormons (Lyon, *Independence* 5).

What they found in Missouri, however, was growing hostility from older settlers who saw them as a threat to their own way of life. In *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*, Richard White points to cultural differences as the key for understanding the accusation of un-Americanism that Mormons and Catholics carry as a burden: “a conviction on the part of many Americans that Mormon beliefs and practices were both blasphemous and incompatible with the rights and responsibilities of citizens of a republic” (163). It was obvious that there were undeniable differences between the cultural characteristics of the older group of settlers and the Mormons. The stress on polygamy became a pattern of accusation in continuous controversies which the Mormons would overcome in the years to come, but the deeper reasons for the clash between the older settlers and the Mormons remained the same from the very beginning: the combination of an economic and political

threat and the fear of unusual religious beliefs. Besides, at first, the friendly attachment between the Mormons and the Native Americans was also a source of controversy. Positive feelings towards the Indians was one of the main causes of the hostilities between Mormons and their gentile neighbors in Missouri. In any case, political issues were the major source of discrepancy. Mormons voted as a group which represented an important threat to the idea of democracy shared by most Americans. This voting behavior was a form of loyalty that gave the other settlers the impression that the Church came before the country, one of the main reasons why they were viewed as un-American: “To be Catholic or Mormon was thus necessarily to be un-American, since American republicanism depended on a free electorate” (White 164).

Whatever the circumstances, Mormons kept on migrating quite quickly to Jackson County, Missouri, causing tension to increase at the same speed. Confrontations began to take place. In early November 1833, a thousand Latter-day Saints<sup>33</sup> were forced to abandon their homes and farms. Most of them relocated in Clay County, but they soon tried to go back to Jackson County, and they even organized a paramilitary force called “Zion’s Camp.”

The same tensions were beginning to surface back in Kirtland, Ohio, but, this time, the source was coming from the growing opposition of the members who had apostatized. Many historians point to the failure of the Kirtland Safety Society Bank Company. This was a quasi-bank that Rigdon and Smith founded to end the economic problems they had after stamping notes that were to be changed for money later. Andrew Jackson’s circular, issued in 1836, “forbidding agents to accept anything but gold and silver for the sale of

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<sup>33</sup> Latter-day Saints, LDS Saints, Saints or Mormons are used interchangeably to make the narrative varied and poignant but they all convey the same meanings as none of them add any secondary information in terms of tone, metaphor or any other kind of implications.

public land” (Brodie 190) precipitated the end of the institution. This is presented as one of the main reasons for the tension among Mormons and for the failure of the Kirtland settlement, even though economic failures of this kind were common for entrepreneurs in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Partridge 2).

In the new year, 1838, Smith and other Church leaders were forced to leave for Missouri. Most members followed them within a few days. But the antagonism between Saints and gentiles in Missouri was increasing as well and it finally led to violence. In fact, the Kirtland period had worked as the explanation for many of the events repeatedly experienced by the Mormons: conflicts with gentiles, problems within the community, growing hostility, external and internal tensions, a tendency to move, and the basic cultural and organizational constituency of a hierarchical community that experienced, from the very beginning, a steady and firm growth which helped to build a sense of cultural tightness enhanced, in fact, by the hostilities suffered in those first days.

### 1836 Far West

Although most of the members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Missouri gathered in Clay County after being driven from Jackson County, the same suspicions soon surfaced among the settlers of Clay County. In order to end the controversy, Alexander Doniphan, a representative from Clay County in the state legislature, proposed the creation of two new counties: Caldwell County and Daviess County. The members of the Mormon Church were settled in Caldwell County, where they founded a city called Far West and, in 1838, Smith, escaping from Kirtland, came to live in this new settlement.

Both the internal and external problems of the Church were getting worse. Conflicts between Smith and Cowdery started early in 1838. They could not agree on financial issues and, besides, Cowdery accused Smith of adultery. Cowdery was finally replaced by Rigdon; like his predecessor, Rigdon, too, was declared the source of many grieves for Smith and he was eventually excommunicated.<sup>34</sup> In April 1838, Cowdery himself was finally excommunicated and together with his brothers-in-law, David and John Whitmer, and some other prominent members who opposed Smith's new revelations and changes, he moved to Ray and Clay County. This group, known as "the dissenters," issued reports about the Mormons that helped to fuel hostility towards them. Perhaps the best illustration of how far these controversies went is the Battle of Crooked River which was a direct consequence of the growing tensions between Mormons and gentiles in 1838.

As explained above, when Smith moved to Missouri, controversies with the former leaders of the Missouri branch, the Whitmers and Thomas B. Marsh, basically due to economic affairs, led to their apostasies. Marsh reported that the Mormons had invaded Daviess County and sacked the county seat of Gallatin and the tension increased to the extreme. The Mormons claimed that the gentiles tried to stop them from voting and that mobs were harassing them (Durham 18). Reports of this fight were exaggerated. Members of the Danites, a fraternal society organized to defend the Mormons and which is still a matter of controversy among Mormon historians, coordinated a military force that burned what they considered to be the headquarters of the mob at Gallatin. The skirmish between Mormon forces, basically members of the Danites, and the Missouri State militia occurred in October 1838. There were three Mormon casualties and one gentile dead, but the main

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<sup>34</sup> Brodie describes Rigdon as "unstable and fanatical, but no one could challenge his fierce loyalty to the prophet, even though it found expression chiefly in denunciation of real or imagined foes" (217).



consequence of this battle, the battle of Crooked River<sup>35</sup>, was Governor Boggs' Extermination Order which he issued to expel the Mormons from the state of Missouri.

### 1838 Haun Mill's Massacre / Extermination Order

Missouri Governor Lillburn Boggs' military order to drive the Mormons from the state had been based on exaggerated information provided by two citizens of Richmond, Missouri (Ludlow 1) after the Battle of Crooked River and it became controversial even among non-Mormons<sup>36</sup>. The battle, as reported to him, indicated that Mormons massacred a whole militia when, actually, Bogart, the captain in charge, lost only one man and there were only three casualties on the side of the Mormons. But extended reports about the intentions and achievements of the Danites were also delivered in the same pack. Governor Boggs responded to these reports by calling out 2,500 state militiamen to put an end to what was seen as a rebellion by the Mormons. One of the key moments of this period of tension was the so-called Haun's Mill Massacre.

During the Haun Mill's Massacre, a group of militiamen from Missouri that far outnumbered the Mormons, attacked a Mormon settlement in Caldwell County, killing seventeen Mormons. This attack came to be recorded as a massacre because it was totally unprovoked<sup>37</sup>. Following the Extermination Order by Governor Lillburn Boggs and the massacre in the Jacob Haun's Mill settlement, the Mormons were forced to abandon Missouri (Blair 1-2).

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<sup>35</sup> This battle is known as the most important event of the Mormon War in Missouri.

<sup>36</sup> Many years later, in 1976, Missouri Governor Christopher S. Bond apologized by issuing an executive order rescinding Boggs' order (Ludlow 1).

<sup>37</sup> In her book *The Mountain Meadows Massacre*, Juanita Brooks reports a significant scene of this event that portrays its cruelty and violence: "When one small boy begged for his life, a mobocrat answered, 'Nits make lice,' and blew out his brains" (*Mountain* 5). Brooks explains the consequences that this event was to have in the future event that she studies in her book.

These violent events, regarded historically as the first Mormon War, urged Mormons to escape from hostilities. After surrendering at Far West and agreeing to leave the state, they crossed the Mississippi River into Illinois. Their losses went beyond the human casualties; the economic costs and property losses were also very important. Rivalry between the leaders increased significantly as well and would soon manifest itself between Rigdon and Smith in Nauvoo, Illinois, the next gathering place that the Mormons would found.

However, after leaving Missouri and crossing the Mississippi, the Mormons initially received a friendly reception in Quincy, Illinois. They purchased land for a new gathering place close to the Mississippi River and they called it Nauvoo. Many members settled on the other side of the river, in Iowa. Meanwhile, the second mission to the British Isles was organized. Thanks to the efforts of the Quorum of the Twelve, its success was even greater than the 1,500 converts from the first mission four years earlier. The emigration program was perfectly organized in those years and Nauvoo became the first truly successful attempt to build the kingdom of Zion on earth as it had been envisioned by Smith. However, Nauvoo too would have a violent end in the aftermath of the prophet's death.

### **2.2.2. Second Period: 1838/39-1846. Nauvoo: The First Attempt to Establish Zion**

#### 1840 Nauvoo Becomes a Legal Entity, the Nauvoo Charter

Before the Mormons arrived, the place where they finally settled was no more than some swampy ground on the banks of the Mississippi River. The Mormons' unselfish aptitude for hard work made it possible to achieve the construction of a city. Nauvoo, under the

strong leadership of Smith, became one of the biggest cities in Illinois, eventually forming a community of over 12,000 members (Black 93). The city was organized according to a written urbanization plan drafted by Smith and two of his counselors, Rigdon and Frederick G. Williams, which was based on the vision of Zion that was sketched on the Plates and initially disclosed by Smith (Lyon 7). Smith proposed this plan even though it never was given the status of a revelation and it was almost impossible to follow completely.

In fact, the plan shared a common pattern with most of the cities that boomed in the West from the 1790s to the closing of the frontier: wide streets and a rectangular grid pattern, quite different to the irregular patterns of the major New England cities. Richard H. Jackson, who makes a deep analysis of Smith's plan and its application in "The Mormon Village: Genesis and Antecedents of the City of Zion Plan," affirms that this plan could be considered "utopian in nature" (2) and that, in fact, it was not followed completely in Kirtland or in Nauvoo, Far West or Salt Lake City.

After the experience in Missouri, Smith had realized that he needed power – that is political authority and armed forces – to achieve his aims. He got both by means of the Nauvoo Charter (Dunn 23). John C. Bennett, the Quarter Master General of the Illinois State Militia, converted to Mormonism and became a close assistant to Smith, helping him to obtain a charter for Nauvoo.<sup>38</sup> Besides, both Democrats and Whigs, closely balanced in the Illinois Assembly, were eager to satisfy the aspirations of the Mormon Church. In fact, Smith played politics with these two parties throughout the Nauvoo Period, trying to use the Mormon group vote for one ticket or the other to his advantage. By doing so, Smith attained a charter that was even stronger than what he had conceived because it gave him a

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<sup>38</sup> The help that Smith got from Bennett left him indebted to him and he resolved this by giving Bennett great power in the city. This option finally went wrong when Bennett was excommunicated for his dubious behavior on the topic of plural marriage, eventually converting him into one of Smith's worst enemies.

triple power: it granted corporate status to the city, the right to organize a university and also a city militia. Smith promptly assumed all the power himself: he appointed himself land agent, major, militia leader, magistrate and merchant. Smith also had time to deliver many new doctrines into the Restored Gospel. Among them, for instance, the baptism for the dead or proxy baptism, a religious practice that allows a living person to be baptized on behalf of a deceased person, thus enabling the deceased to become members of the Church in the afterlife and to enter the Kingdom of God. This practice, forbidden by the Catholic Church in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, is practiced inside Mormon temples and it is one of the reasons why the Mormons are still renowned for their emphasis on genealogical studies, since their archives try to gather as much information as possible about family history in order to extend the possibilities of vicarious baptism:

Mormons believe that saving gospel ordinances must be performed in the flesh. Since their deceased ancestors have not had this opportunity, Mormons seek out the names of these ancestors through genealogical research and then vicariously perform these ordinances for them in sacred ceremonies in their temples. (Ramsey 188)

The city grew rapidly and, with an economy based mainly on construction, it was successful. Different building projects such as Nauvoo House<sup>39</sup>, the hall of culture, the music hall, and especially the Nauvoo Temple, which, as in Kirtland, became one of the council's major projects, helped to improve the Mormon economy. In addition, the emigration effort was strengthened and many members who were scattered throughout Canada and the United States were called to gather in Nauvoo. A well-organized plan to aid immigration from Scandinavia and the British Isles was put into action as well. In three years, immigrants from the British Isles multiplied almost by eight and many more expected to leave for America, as reported by Parley P. Pratt, a missionary in the British

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<sup>39</sup> A hotel that was built after revelation. A glimpse of how Smith got to gather money and faith (Brodie 263).

Isles (Brodie 265). The cultural life of the city improved as periodicals were published, popular drama was performed and concerts by brass bands were programmed. Education became important and the foundation of a university was established through lyceums, debating societies and a library. In fact, scholars like Jackson, when considering the layout of the city center, emphasized the intention to promote education by making it more available to a compact group, a common concern in New England in those days:

The New England emphasis on education is similar to Mormon Church leaders' explanations of why it was necessary to bring the Saints together into communities. Since "the glory of God is intelligence," Saints were continually urged to gather together into cities so that they could be educated about religious and secular matters... (Jackson 5)

The Latter-day Saints built a great city out of the swamps of Illinois. Overnight the city came to pose a threat to Chicago and other cities in Hancock County. As could be expected, problems began to arise and, as occurred before in Missouri and Ohio, they came both from inside the Church and outside.

The Nauvoo Charter was seen as a threat by neighboring cities. Some of the external problems emerged due to Smith's desire for political power. He used the strength of the Latter-day Saints' vote to ask for independence and security. He even proposed his own candidacy in the 1844 US presidential election (Robinson 147), mainly after receiving no positive results when he tried to get the help and friendship of the other candidates and redress for previous persecutions. Smith lost some political friends a year before this election, when he

prepared a petition for Congress in December 1843 in which he asked that Nauvoo be made a completely independent federal territory, with the Nauvoo Legion

incorporated into the United States Army and the mayor of Nauvoo given power to call out the United States troops whenever necessary. (Brodie 356)

One of the focal points of the internal controversy came from the core of the Church's hierarchy. The theological changes promoted by Smith were not accepted by all the prominent members of the Church. It was back in Kirtland when Smith spoke for the first time about the plurality of wives, but not in public. In Nauvoo, he revealed this new theology to the leaders of the Church. It came to be widely known when one of the members was accused of adultery.

William Law and Robert Forster were actually excommunicated due to their opposition to Smith and they proceeded to set up a church of their own. In fact, the events that took place after the confrontation between Law and his followers, Forster and Higbee, and Smith, had important consequences that led to Smith's imprisonment in Carthage in 1844<sup>40</sup>. Law was one of the Church members that most strongly rejected plural marriage. Even though he differed with Smith on economic matters, the main reason for their disagreement was when Smith tried to approach Law's wife (Brodie 369). These "dissidents" believed in the Book of Mormon, but they did not trust the new innovations that Smith was promoting in Nauvoo. In the *Nauvoo Expositor*, Law intended to express his own opinions regarding the new doctrines that Smith had put into practice in Nauvoo and to present the new church that he had organized after rejecting those new doctrines. The dissidents also published a list of Smith's doctrines which they could not accept. This list included the new doctrine of plural marriage which, although it had been introduced into Mormon doctrine in Nauvoo, was still practiced in secret (Bigler 28). The first and only number of this publication led to

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<sup>40</sup> Even before the closing of the *Nauvoo Expositor*, many confrontations took place between these men, as J. Melton Gordon explains: "In May 1844, Law announced a newspaper to support his views. He then got an indictment against Smith for adultery and polygamy. Robert Forster got an indictment against Smith for false swearing. Francis Higbee sued for slander, demanding \$5,000" (94-95).

the end of what had come to be a very successful city and a time in which Mormons lived a momentary period of peace and prosperity. The Mormons were forced to move again after the tragic consequences of the conflicts that arose after the publication of the *Nauvoo Expositor*.

### 1844 Joseph Smith Is Killed

The decision to close the *Nauvoo Expositor* by force because Law and other excommunicated dissenters had been using the periodical to criticize the Church gave Smith's opponents a reason to demand legal charges. The Nauvoo Council declared the paper a public nuisance for promoting violence against Smith since, in the only issue that they were able to publish, they claimed that Smith was trying to establish a theocracy. Smith ordered the city marshal to destroy both the paper and the press. He, in turn, was accused of violating the freedom of press. Tension increased dangerously and Smith mobilized the Nauvoo Legion to defend the city. The consequences of this decision illustrated the magnitude of Smith's mistake. Governor Thomas Ford proposed a trial in Carthage, with a non-Mormon jury but ensuring the security of the leader of the Church. Smith agreed and submitted even though he thought of escaping to the West.

Smith and his brother Hyrum went to Carthage but they were imprisoned on a new charge. They and two other leaders of the Church, Willard Richards and John Taylor, were kept under arrest in Carthage Jail on charges of treason against the state of Illinois. Taking advantage of Smith's imprisonment, Governor Ford sent troops to Nauvoo. A mob of almost two hundred men with painted faces broke into the jail and killed Joseph and Hyrum Smith. Richards and Taylor survived (Arrington, *Church* 1).

These deaths brought the founding period of the Church to an end. Within a few days the city of Nauvoo was abandoned and the exodus to the West began under the command of Brigham Young, Smith's successor as the leader of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In any case, as Brodie explains, the figure of the prophet and founder of the Church grew because of his death:

This martyrdom gave to the story of Joseph Smith the imperishable force of tragedy. What was already a legend it converted into an epic. The martyrdom was a dramatic symbol that God had placed His seal upon the testimony of His prophet. And it was the legend of Joseph Smith, from which all evidences of deception, ambition, and financial and marital excesses were gradually obliterated, that became the great cohesive force within the church. (Brodie 397)

#### 1846 The Saints Are Driven by Mobs

After the death of Smith, Rigdon, taking advantage of the absence of the majority of the leaders of the Quorum of the Twelve, all of them in the East on missions, tried to claim the leadership of the Church, but Brigham Young and some of the leaders of the Quorum arrived in time for the meeting which had been called to decide the future of the Church. The Mormons voted for Brigham Young and the members of the Quorum of the Twelve.

Most of the Saints left Nauvoo by force in February 1846. Mobs had driven the Mormons from their homes, but the resolution to move from Nauvoo had already been taken by the Quorum of the Twelve. They remained because they wanted to see the temple finished and they wanted the Saints to be given temple ordinances<sup>41</sup>. Some of them received ordinances even before the temple was finished but Church leaders had to begin preparations to leave

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<sup>41</sup> This new doctrine, which practically started in Nauvoo, is still today subject of interpretation by outsiders who search for hidden elements in Mormon belief and culture.



because of rising mob violence. After the summer, the Mormons began to depart, leaving a special crew in Nauvoo to complete the temple. After its completion, they followed the main body on their way west. The temple was abandoned and destroyed by fire in 1848.

The new leaders of the Church defended the exodus to the West not as something provoked by antagonistic opposition but rather as the fate of the Mormons. In 1832, Smith had talked, for the first time, about a future in the West and, in a letter from 1840 (Lyon 6), he prophesized about a place near the Rocky Mountains. Nevertheless, in reality it was the violent opposition of their neighbors that provoked the departure of the Mormons from Nauvoo. Once again, dissensions inside the Church and fear of the non-Mormons provoked a confrontation that led to negative consequences. The death of Smith marks the end of the founding period and the beginning of a journey that was to become the most important and decisive event in the history of the Church.

### **2.2.3. Third Period: 1846-1847. The Exodus: from Nauvoo to the Great Basin**

#### 1846 The Exodus Begins. Requisition to Serve in the Mexican Campaign

Frank Bergon and Zeese Papanikolas explain what the West was like in the 19<sup>th</sup> century:

With the Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis and Clark expedition of 1804-1806, the West became more than merely a direction or receding line of wilderness. It became a region, a vast country extending across the North American continent from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean. (Bergon, *Looking* 6)

The Mormons were heading to that “vast country”. They were not the only adventurers in this challenge though. As White explains, from 1840 to 1860, “approximately 30,000

people traveled to the Far West on the overland trails” (189). Mormons seemed to have a very different reason to move West, but their motivations and dreams actually matched those of the other pioneers crossing the plains.

Some of those pioneers moving west were heading to California, many in search of Marshall’s gold after President Polk’s confirmation, or to Oregon. Alternatively, they were looking for a better future or trying to leave their problems behind. Mormons shared both these feelings but they had a different goal. They were seeking a haven where they could establish their kingdom: in the length and size of that “vast country”, they hoped to find a place where nobody else wanted to go. They were following Smith’s revelations. The prophet’s practical thinking led him to believe that it would be easier to lay the foundations of that promised kingdom of Zion in an isolated place where they would avoid the confrontations, controversies and conflicts they had suffered in their early settlements in New York, Ohio, Missouri and Illinois. Moving west was the only way.

In their search, Mormons opened one of the two most important trails in the general move west, the Mormon Trail<sup>42</sup>. But they also provided a different register to the experience of moving west. Their experience was unique both because they were heading to a different place and because they chose an uncommon way:

The Overland Trail provided passage for both frontier types. In the 1840s and 1850s over three hundred thousand people trekked from settled areas and closing frontiers east of the Mississippi to points on the Missouri River, at or beyond the edge of farm settlement, and followed the Overland Trail across the future Nebraska and Wyoming toward destinations to the west. Until the late 1840s, virtually all overlanders headed for Oregon’s Willamette Valley. But beginning in 1847, Mormons followed the trail

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<sup>42</sup> White says: “Over time several overland routes developed to the West, but the major routes until the coming of the railroads always remained the Oregon Trail along the south side of the Platte River and the Mormon Trail on the north side. Both trails merged to go through South Pass in Wyoming before the Mormon Trail branched south to Utah” (199).

for much of its length until crossing the Continental Divide. Then, instead of proceeding northwest toward Oregon, they turned southwest until they reached the land between the Great Salt Lake and the western slope of the Wasatch Range. A third group of overlanders, quite distinct from either the Oregon settlers or the Mormons and much larger than either, followed the trail in the four summers from 1849 through 1852, passing through Mormon country and on west to the Sierras and the goldfields of California. Thus by 1850 the Overland Trail could lead to Oregon, Utah, or California --- three very different frontiers. (Nugent, *Trails* 171-172)

In fact, the opening of this trail is not the only perduring memory that the Mormons created in this essential period in American history. The Mormon history of the conquering of the desert landscape of Utah, as Jared Farmer indicates, constitutes a natural and quintaessential part of the general history of the conquering of the West:

By being typical and exceptional at the same time, Utah offers a valuable perspective on the United States. The religious element is of course distinctive, yet the main story of Utah's formation – settlers, colonizing Indian land, organizing territory, dispossessing natives, and achieving statehood – could not be more American. Even so, the Great Basin, the Mormons' region of settlement, remains outside the purview of mainstream American history. (Farmer 14)

As I explained at the end of the previous chapter, Young was the one appointed to resolve all the uncompleted visions introduced by Smith. He was the leader and the one responsible for the pioneering of Utah, one of the most important episodes in Mormon history and a fundamental experience to strengthen the idea of Mormons as an ethnic group. Young appears as the second main important figure in Mormon history, the man who tried to accomplish what Smith had envisioned before him.<sup>43</sup> Terry Tempest Williams presents Young's positive memory in Mormon culture as being linked to his commitment and success in winning a proper place for a new community:

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<sup>43</sup> Young's zeal to accomplish Smith's visions is illustrated by the following anecdote: many years after the failure of the Kirtland Safety Society Bank Company, Young attempted to fulfill Smith's prophecy that the notes stamped by that failed bank could be as worthy as gold and he gathered "some of the gold dust that was coming into Salt Lake City from the gold fields of California, manufactured a supply of coins, and ordered that the pack of Kirtland bills he had carried west with him be issued on a par with the gold. Joseph thus found at least one man who could make his prophecy come true" (Brodie 199).

In Utah, there was a man with a vision. He dreamed of a civilization bright with lights and strong of belief. He knew the industrious nature of work and picked the beehive as his symbol. He loved the land he saw before him, a landscape so vast, pristine, and virginal, that he recognized it as the kingdom of God, a place for saints with a desire for home. The desert country of the Great Basin and Colorado Plateau was an answer to prayers of spiritual sovereignty.

He sent families north into the mountains and south into the valleys where redrock walls rose upward like praying hands. He said: “We will create Zion among the wilderness.” And with great stamina and imagination akin only to communities committed to faith, the building of culture among the pioneers began. Humble ranches, small businesses, and cottage industries of silk and wool sprung up and a United order was dreamed. (Williams, *Red* 74)

Williams’ account rather than illustrating Young’s love of the land, testifies to Williams’s own. Nevertheless, her definition of Young as “the colonizing prophet” (Williams, *Red* 74) works as a proper label to understand the importance of Young, not only for the Church, but in the history of American enterprise in the western land where he, and this is what Williams confesses as her main source of respect, tried to apply a land ethic<sup>44</sup> intertwined with the religious and social ideas of the new community. The same idea that Edward A. Geary proposes in his personal account of Young in *Goodbye to Poplarhaven: Recollections of a Utah Boyhood*. Not only does Geary introduce Young’s stress on communal work and fondness of settlement, but he also emphasizes Young’s entrepreneurism and ideology for Mormon success in the attempt to conquer the West:

That, in a nutshell, was Brigham Young’s philosophy of community building: the faith in the power of work, the fearlessness of risk, the confidence of success. It was not merely a theoretical program, but one tested repeatedly over the thirty years that he directed Mormon colonization in the West. Some colonies failed, and the tumbleweed blows today across abandoned fields. But most of the four-hundred-odd towns and villages that Brigham Young planted grew and flourished, at least up to a point. If the inhabitants didn’t exactly get rich in ten years, they did have comfortable homes, orchards, flocks, herds, and a community that worked. (Geary, *Goodbye* 9)

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<sup>44</sup> Williams expands on this topic in an interview: “If you go back and look at the teachings of Brigham Young, his journals and sermons, they are filled with very strong notions of sustainability. Early brethren of the Mormon Church gave rousing speeches on the perils of overgrazing and the misappropriation of water in the desert” (Austin, *Voice* 95).

In February 1846, after detailed planning and conscientious organization, the exodus began.<sup>45</sup> Under the leadership of Young, more than one hundred Mormons with seventy-two wagons headed west. These pioneers constituted the main body with at least three more groups moving in the same direction along different lines. When, by the end of the year, the main body had already crossed Iowa and was building temporary settlements to spend the winter in what they called Winter Quarters and Kaneshville<sup>46</sup>, additionally four groups of Mormons were moving west along different routes.

In addition to those who settled in Nebraska, there were those who came to be called the Mormon Battalion. Just a few days after they commenced the journey, while they were still crossing Iowa, a U.S. military officer arrived to recruit five hundred volunteers to serve in the campaign against Mexico (Yurtinus 475). By the end of 1846, over five hundred Mormons were marching westward in the Battalion. They never fought but they took part in many civil work projects and about twenty of these men died of natural causes while in service.

Other soldiers who were sick were sent back to Pueblo, Colorado by General Saint George Cooke before reaching San Diego, California, their final destination. These came to be known as the “sick detachment”. More than ten families that followed the troops for some time gathered in Pueblo with a third group of people who had set out from Missouri, hoping to encounter the main body of Mormons further along the way.

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<sup>45</sup> Different records illustrate how Young was familiar with some of the discoveries made by Frémont or Powell and he had enough information about the place he was envisioning. White, for example, states that Frémont’s entrepreneurship and “his description of Utah later attracted Brigham Young and the Mormons to the area” (123).

<sup>46</sup> Winter Quarters, present day suburb of Florence, in Omaha (Nebraska), and Kaneshville, today Council Bluffs (Iowa).

Apart from these two groups, a third one led by George Miller spent the winter in northern Nebraska. A fourth group led by Samuel Brennan followed a completely different route. Brennan had been ordered to lead a group of Church members from New York to the west coast of California by ship. They sailed from New York in February and by July they were in San Francisco. Brennan was a successful pioneer who, following orders, became the leader of a thriving community in California (Arrington, *Mormons* 34). When he met Young, he tried to convince him that California was the best place to establish Zion but Young, following Smith's vision of an isolated place for their community, did not want to settle in a place where good prospects might attract the attention of other pioneers.

That goal made Mormon pioneering unique as did the fact that their movement was communal rather than individual. Their wagon trains involved whole families moving together in search of a place where they could gather and set up a community. In his article, "Frontiers and Empires in the Late Nineteenth Century," Walter Nugent uses figures and percentages to show how Mormon migration had a specific peculiarity. He says: "Utah exhibits an unusually balanced sex ratio for a frontier and more children than usual – evidence that the Mormons migrated as families and that they continued their procreative duty" (Nugent 173). Nugent includes a table with figures justifying his conclusion. It is noteworthy that the average age from 0 to 14 was 42% in Utah, only 38% in Oregon and barely 6% in California. In conclusion, Mormon pioneering of the West shows a set of characteristics that illustrate its different condition. Nugent's numbers help to infer that Mormons migrated in group, as if a whole community was moving in harmony and with a common goal.

## 1847 Pioneers and the Great Basin

On April 5, 1847, the first group of pioneers, guided by Young, departed from Winter Quarters. The last stage of the long exodus took three more months. By mid-July, advance scouts entered the valley of the Great Salt Lake. On July 24, Young piloted 148 Mormons into the Valley. A few days later, he proclaimed that that was the right place to establish the kingdom that the Mormons were bound to build and he chose a proper site for the temple. Within a few days they started to construct a new city.

In *Looking Far West: The Search for the American West in History, Myth and Literature*, a picture of these first days is reflected in the memories of Thomas Bullock:

On this spot that I am now talking to you about, the pioneers arrived on Thursday, the 23<sup>rd</sup> July last, at five p.m.; the next morning removed to the spot where the city will be built; at noon consecrated and dedicated the place to the Lord; the same afternoon four ploughs were tearing up the ground; next day the brethren had planted five acres with potatoes, and irrigated all the land at night. (Bergon, *Looking* 229)

When the Mormons got there they assumed that they were outside the United States' legal scope, so they took possession of the valley and began to build their settlement without reflecting upon the presence of the former inhabitants of that land: "In Utah, too, the Mormons established residence on Indian lands without any federal acquisition of title" (White 89). The Mormons simply took hold of the valley and began to build their kingdom. In any case, many miles away, history was brewing a different state of affairs for the Mormons and their new settlement. After the annexation of Texas, Mexico broke diplomatic relations with the United States in 1845. Only three years later, that is, one after the arrival of the Mormons to Salt Lake Valley, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was

signed and the land that the Mormons had chosen became part of the United States of America.

Young went back to Winter Quarters to meet with the rest of the leaders to propose the reorganization of the First Presidency. His strength and leadership increased after the exodus, when he became a prominent figure. The Twelve selected him as President of the Church and he went back to the Great Basin, leading a new group of more than two thousand pioneers. When they arrived in May 1848, more than four log cabins had already been erected in the settlement.

The settlement faced many difficulties in those first days. Among them, one of the most important and one that has endured as an important trace of Mormon identity: the scarcity of water resources. As Geary quotes from Virginia Sorensen: “The story of Mormon village is the story of water” (*Goodbye* 22). This industrious effort to sustain an agricultural system in a dry land is one of the main examples of Young’s (and the Mormons’) stress on communal effort, enterprise and hard work. Geary adds:

It was the necessity of irrigation that largely determined the shape and look of Mormon country. The task of digging and maintaining the irrigation canals was too great for a single family, thus dictating a communal pattern of settlement instead of the individualistic pattern that characterized the fertile Midwest. On the other hand, there was no capital available in the early days to construct massive reclamation works such as have been built in the West in this century. Each community was on its own in supplying labor and machinery, so the systems were relatively small and simple. (Geary, *Goodbye* 22)

And Sorensen, Geary’s initial reference, provides a literary approximation to this reality in *Where Nothing Is Long Ago: Memories of a Mormon Childhood*. Sorensen, a member of



the literary group called “Mormondom’s Lost Generation” is regarded as the best Mormon writer recording rural Mormon communities from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

Each household in town had its own dam --- often nothing more than a couple of broad boards with a short handle nailed to them --- and its own water turn when the dam was put to use. Set across the streams in the street-side ditches, and packed in with wet turf, these dams were sufficient to turn the water onto lawns and gardens, and nothing short of a calamity could prevent a householder from putting in his dam at the proper time. Every spring, the Water Master --- an official of great importance in a Utah town --- provided each family with a list of Water Turns, carefully worked out. We always kept our list tacked inside the door of the kitchen cupboard. (Sorensen 5)

In the first years, the Church leaders worked to promote a tightly organized institution whose members shared some kind of tradition. The hardships that they had to overcome favored this notion of tight community sharing a distinctive set of values and beliefs. They worked to establish a new stable community based on group settlement and small-town life (Lyon, *Great* 7-8). In the Great Basin, Young’s aim was to reinforce this bond taking advantage of the physical possibilities for isolation provided by the valley. He refused to move the Mormons to California, but preferred to build the Kingdom of Zion in a place where they could become strong and solid before being forced to overcome a new conflict like those they had suffered in Missouri or Illinois. Young tried to fulfill all of Smith’s dreams and visions by founding a place of refuge for the Mormons with a theocratic government. The Quorum of the Twelve and the Quorum of the Fifty assumed the direction of the new territory right after their arrival in the Great Basin.

The first stone had been laid. Thanks to their striving and perseverance, thanks to their taste for hard work based on their theology of human effort and constructive activity, these men and women established a settlement, then a city and eventually a whole new territory in a considerably short period of time. The Mormons were successful in their pioneering of

the West and the adversities, grievances and opposition that they faced helped to reinforce their bonds and encouraged their engagement with the Church.

#### **2.2.4. Fourth Period: 1847-1857/58. The Kingdom of God on Earth**

##### 1849 The State of Deseret

During these first days in the valley, the Mormons came to be closer than they had never been before to settling that kingdom of Zion that Smith had envisioned. In the new settlement, the Saints organized an almost theocratic government in which Young was not only the President of the Church but also the governor. The settlement was growing fast, and spreading even faster. Young promoted the settling of different areas outside of Utah, and the importance of the Mormons in neighboring states such as Nevada, Idaho or Arizona was crucial. Robert Laxalt, for instance, explains the importance of the Mormons in the birth of the state of Nevada:

Not three years after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo by which Mexico, in 1848, ceded the western lands to the United States, the Mormons had been sent out from Salt Lake City on their colonizing mission. They went dutifully into the wilderness that marked the extreme western extension of Utah Territory, erecting a fort for protection against Indians, clearing and planting the fertile valley lands, and establishing a trading post to sell fresh produce and meat to the wagon trains bound for California. (Laxalt 40)

Laxalt, in his personal memory of Nevada, adds to the basic facts of Mormon presence in the land, social dimension which he credits to Mormon heritage:

I think of the little Mormon towns in fertile regions near this Valley of Fire. Tiny communities with wide streets and neat, unpretentious houses of white frame and adobe brick, and the church meetinghouse that is the heart of the town and the people.

On the outskirts, Mormon farmers in rubber boots flood their grain fields and tend to dairy herds, the orderly routine of their lives not much changed since the days when Mormon colonists set down roots in the desert and created oases in impossible settings. (Laxalt 128)

This pattern of settlement is not merely Laxalt's whimsical remembrance, but an obvious and constant pattern in Mormon development that some other scholars, such as Stegner or Geary, have described. The latter introduces some of the reasons for that pattern:

The Mormon village, the typical unit of settlement, owed something to the New England villages from which Brigham Young and many other early Mormons had come, and something to Joseph Smith's "Plat of the City of Zion," a town planned but never built in western Missouri. The City of Zion was to have been one mile square, with wide streets and uniform residential lots of one-half acre each to allow room for orchards and gardens. A space for public buildings was provided at the center of the townsite, and all barns and stables were to be outside of town, along with the farmland, so that the residents could enjoy the benefits of community life while still maintaining an agrarian community. (Geary, *Goodbye* 9)

In fact, all of this was planned beforehand. Young, once again, was trying to follow the plan that Smith had previously conceived, but it was almost impossible to fulfill his architectural visions. The plan was abandoned in Salt Lake City because of the growing population, since one of the key ideas of this plan was to leave enough space for farmsteads to have privacy with gardens in each of the blocks on the grid.

Such departures from Smith's plan for the City of Zion and the details it had in common with other cities in the West or in the entire United States in no way subtract from the uniqueness of Mormon settlements in the West. Even if all those settlements that Young encouraged around Utah were varied and moved away from the plan, either because of the grid pattern or the wide streets, bigger lots, irrigation ditches or because of the lombardy poplars that, as Stegner says, the Mormons planted "wherever they went" (*Mormon* 21), the Mormons were able to make their settlements recognizable:

Although there is a great variation from village to village, there is sufficient similarity to have caused casual observers to presume they were all laid out according to some master plan. And although there seems not to have been a master plan, still there are some similarities which do set the Mormon village apart as a unique settlement form in the West. (Jackson 7)

Those new settlements were also extended to distant parts of the territory. Young's settlement plan designs a new way of settling the West, a way based on community cohesiveness, farming and self-sufficiency. The Church programmed a settling effort that sought places that were agriculturally promising, but even those colonies that were not so promising were assigned to families in a strategic attempt to broaden the community's area of influence:

Mormons quickly created cohesive, homogenous communities organized around the church. Church leaders supervised the settlements, reminding settlers that brotherhood and cooperation should characterize their efforts and that they were engaged in a religious as well as a secular pursuit. They often cooperatively built schools, canals, irrigation ditches, meeting houses, and homes and distributed the land. By the end of the nineteenth century the Mormons had created 500 such communities stretching from Alberta, Canada, to Chihuahua, Mexico, and from Bunkerville, Nevada, to the San Luis Valley of Colorado. These were remarkably orderly places. (White 301-302)

Mormon entrepreneurial spirit was essentially conceived as an instrument for migratory implementation. The Church was the main organizer of a main support line of immigration. Young expedited many members to settle different parts of neighboring territories to expand the land of the Church. They went to settle as far away as these limits they had envisioned for the State of Deseret, founding many colonies even outside of Utah. The more remote settlements had always specific purposes: the founding of industries, the establishment of stations or the exploitation of natural resources. The most common reason was the need for land to farm. But the main accomplishment when regarding immigration

was the foundation of the Perpetual Emigrating Fund Company which raised funds and helped thousands of immigrants from Europe come to Utah. The last stage of the long trip that these pioneers had expected to endure was made on foot with handcarts.<sup>47</sup> It is a period of time full of events that converted this pioneering period into an epic which remains alive in the collective memory of the Mormons.

Additionally, the Mormon endeavor was an important aid to those who were to follow them into that uncharted land. When John Wesley Powell was exploring the West in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, he found basic assistance in the manuscript that some Mormons who came before him left as a useful account: “A few years ago a party of Mormons set out from St. George, Utah, taking with them a boat, and came down to the Grand Wash, where they divided, a portion of the party crossing the river to explore the San Francisco Mountains” (Bergon, *Wilderness* 169). Furthermore, Mormons also influenced the famous explorer’s personal inspiration. Powell’s idea of what the West should look like was partially inspired by the Mormons, as White states:

Powell blended an idealized view of communal control of water in the small Mormon villages of Utah with his memories of his own midwestern youth to foresee a rural, democratic, decentralized West. There, people would develop resources with federal aid and then cooperatively manage them. Federal development would supposedly yield a rural West of small farmers. (White 153)

Even before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the leaders of the Church had already begun to think about the convenience of asking for territorial status. Mormons were acquiring an identity as an ethnic group, even a nation. This occurred not only because their beliefs said that they were a people with a unique destiny, but also thanks to the many commonly shared experiences. They had a common religion and a common culture that

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<sup>47</sup> A good example is the story of the Willie and Martin companies, two groups of pioneers that began their trip too late in the year and had to be rescued in the middle of a violent winter (Christy 7).

provided traditions and social institutions they could rely on. As a group, they came close to sharing an ethnic identity. In fact, as Brodie points out, that sense of collective identity is grounded in the genesis of the Church: “Because he took Christian theology and ethics and mixed them with business, politics, and empire-building, his people came to do the same. The result was that Mormonism became not only a belief but also a way of life” (Brodie 295).

In addition, the Church authorities noticed quite early that the Great Basin might belong to the United States in a few years’ time which is why they asked for territorial status. However, after California and New Mexico became states, they decided to ask for statehood as well. In the summer of 1849, a committee wrote a constitution based on the Iowa constitution, naming their newly drafted state Deseret<sup>48</sup>. The State of Deseret was the closest the Mormons ever came to establishing the Kingdom of Zion.

Deseret functioned as a state for a few months (Crawley 20), taking advantage of the absence of any other authority. They organized a General Assembly and Young and other prominent leaders occupied the main offices of the legislative, executive and judicial branches. In addition, they tried to obtain Congressional recognition but Congress did not consider the proposition and, by September 1850, the federal government reacted to all these decisions: an act of Congress created a new territory called Utah Territory that encompassed the northern part of the State of Deseret that had been envisioned by the main authorities of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Young and his followers

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<sup>48</sup> The proposal encompassed nearly all of present-day Utah and Nevada, large portions of California and Arizona, and parts of Colorado, New Mexico, Wyoming, Idaho, and Oregon.

decided to dissolve the General Assembly and he was elected Governor of the new territory<sup>49</sup>.

The structure and organization of the settlement was admirable, not only because of its effectiveness but also because of the speed with which it had been constructed. The economy was based on two different aspects: agriculture and immigration. In *Forgotten Kingdom: The Mormon Theocracy in the American West, 1847-1896*, David L. Bigler explains how the Mormon economy in those early days was basically based on agriculture<sup>50</sup> and Smith's visions:

Thus was founded the communitarian design represented by the beehive symbol on today's state flag and seal. Under this agrarian system, communal food gatherers, or farmer bees, were to live in the city, or hive and harvest food from assigned plots in nearby fields for central storage from which all would share, according to their needs. As Joseph Smith charged, the "Zion square mile" would become the basic pattern, with many variations, for all Mormon settlements in the western United States. (Bigler 39)

Property was communal, as was the labor and the economy. The grazing lands and natural resources were common property. Cooperation was a key factor in their economy as it had been in their move west. Mormon experience of pioneering contrasts with the commonly evoked individualism of the mythical West. The Mormons were basically a tight-knit group, differing from the historical accounts of lone individuals and other

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<sup>49</sup> The control exercised by Mormons, even after Congress passed the constitution of Utah as a territory, was overwhelming: "The president appointed Brigham Young governor of Utah Territory, and other Mormons or friends of Mormons obtained high office. Along with these appointments came the usual collection of hacks consigned to the territories to make their way in the world. These appointees arrived to find that Brigham Young already controlled all the lucrative federal patronage in the territory, and he was not about to share it with gentiles (as the Mormons called all non-Mormons), The territorial supreme court justices also found that the Mormons had used a loophole in the legislation creating Utah to turn the probate courts, the functions of which were normally limited, into a separate Mormon court system" (White 165).

<sup>50</sup> The stress on an economy based on agriculture parallels United States' own history. As Richard White states, the same intention was promoted by the Republic: "The American Republic, they believed, would survive only so long as it remained both agricultural and commercial. Agriculture and landownership insured independence and virtue" (White 63). The coming of the railroad and the growing modernization of society frame the end of isolation for Mormons, establishing thus a connection between nostalgia and rural Mormondom.

western types. The Mormons restricted individualism consciously, both because of their faith and for practical reasons; they promoted collective action. A major example is water management. The Great Basin was a dried-out land where no seed could be expected to blossom, but the communal work of these pioneers succeeded in organizing a whole irrigation system. This sense of cooperation could be seen at all levels of society: the Church organized a network of tithing houses and many different chartered companies were responsible for the exploitation of natural resources, like the Deseret Iron Company, the Deseret Sugar Manufacturing Company or the Deseret Telegraph Company.

#### 1852 Official Acknowledgement of Plural Marriage

The practice of plural marriage<sup>51</sup> had its origins in the founding period of the Church, and, as seen earlier, it was partly responsible for the dissension of former members during the settlement of Nauvoo. Between 1835 and 1852, Mormon leaders tried to avoid giving publicity to this practice. Finally, Smith confessed the new doctrine to his brother Hyrum, and later the rest of the leaders were informed. That reluctance probably came from the fact that Smith and the other leaders feared a negative response after having suffered division even among the members of the High Council. Plural marriage was only for leaders and the approval of the Prophet was required. The Prophet himself married an undetermined number of women. Some scholars set the number at twenty-seven, but others determine that number to be as high as fifty (Brodie 334). Many of these women were fervent

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<sup>51</sup> The terms “polygamy” and “plural marriage” are used here indistinctly. I do not wish to be consciously dubious or undetermined through my indifferent use of both terms, but my intention is not to defend or attack this practice, but just relate the historical accuracy of the events evolving from it. And in that sense, whether it is called one or the other is indifferent. Mormons usually referred to this practice as plural marriage, hypothetically trying to detach it from the connotations of polygamy as a term referring to the bedding of more than one woman. In any case, England criticizes Harold Bloom for equating plural and celestial marriage (Bradford, *Four* 177). Here it is necessary to establish a differentiation. Celestial marriage is bound on the Mormon belief that marriages are to last even after earthly life is over. Plural marriage would be a different proposition, as it can be seen through our definition of its historical development.



defenders of polygamy<sup>52</sup>. Brodie states that one of the main reasons why women tended eagerly to approve of polygamy was the continued absence of their husbands on tour to preach. She adds that the fact that women who were converted to Mormonism left a man behind, meant that they were separated but not divorced; in Brodie's opinion, this forced them to be extremely flexible. Finally, she suggests another perspective that deals with economic, physical and moral security:

It was easy, therefore, for many of the penniless and lonely women converts to slip into polygamy. But for every woman who entered the system for reasons of security -- and a fragile security at that --- there were a dozen for whom this necessity did not arise. (Brodie 304)

Smith's main goal could have been to give shelter to abandoned women in such a patriarchal society or to garner the largest number of wives so as to guarantee the spiritual worthiness that that number would mean when abandoning this life. In any case, the fact is that even though Smith has been presented by some scholars as someone with problems concerning sex and women, lust and sexual appetite was one of the last important ingredients in this practice that was to cause the Mormons so many problems in the following years. Being a complex theme to analyze on the surface, the truth is that polygamy operated as the main element in energizing the negative attitudes that flourished against the Mormons. In his book *Marriage, Violence, and the Nation in the American Literary West*, William R. Handley centers on polygamy to illustrate the artificial discourse that stereotyped Mormons and African-Americans as libidinous, filthy and inferior in an

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<sup>52</sup> This defense could be tied historically to certain circumstances, even though there are philosophical, ideological and even religious reasons why this practice could be accepted. If polygamy is understood as something negative, Gerda Learner's suggestion that "women, more than any group, have collaborated in their own subordination through their acceptance of sex-gender system" (Learner 234) would resonate here. Hanks uses Learner's quotation to talk about some contemporary misunderstandings between gender issues and authority as well.

effort to promote oppositions on which the construction of a specific American identity could be favored<sup>53</sup>:

The confusion over Mormon racial identity was sometimes brought about by transferring onto the lusty polygamist the popular belief that Africans and African Americans had a peculiarly potent sexuality. After the announcement concerning polygamy in 1852, the black-Mormon connection seemed irresistible; into the twentieth century, Mormons were often illustrated as blacks, sometimes making it impossible to identify the true target, whether Mormon or black. (Handley, *Marriage* 108)

As already stated, the Church did not publicly acknowledge this practice until 1852 when the Mormons were on the road to achieving their goals. Orson Pratt, an apostle, announced the practice of plural marriage in a special conference and Smith's revelation was published after his announcement. The Mormons acted in the name of religious freedom and there was no federal law against plural marriage.

The authoritative tenet, known as celestial or patriarchal marriage, or plurality of wives, often had been denied in the past. But it was becoming increasingly clear that the practice could no longer be covered up. Accepting the inevitable, Brigham Young called a conference of his followers at Great Salt Lake in August 1852, when the faith's leading theologian, Apostle Orson Pratt, publicly acknowledged the dogma and defended it on biblical grounds. Young himself then took the stand to explain how the revelation on marriage came about and "deliver a prophecy upon it." Said he: "It will be fostered and believed by the more intelligent portions of the world, as one of the best doctrines ever proclaimed to any people." Few predictions ever underhoned a more severe or prolonged test. (Bigler 61)

The years following this announcement were hard for the Mormon pioneers. A drought and a locust epidemic augmented the difficulties the Mormons had encountered since they

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<sup>53</sup> These historic prejudices have been covered by writers and scholars dealing with other minority groups. Handley or Givens defend the existence of a pattern in which an ideological strategy to promote the blossoming of a national identity could be seen. One different example is that of Basque migration. Frank Bergon, in *Shoshone Mike*, describes one of the most important events dealing with Basques and Native Americans. In an interview published in *Western American Literature* by David Río, Bergon explains how prejudices against Basques took the shape of colorful distinctions too: "Prejudice against Basques at the turn of the century generated the derogatory term *Black Bascos*, which implied a similarity between Basques and African Americans then tagged with the racial slur *niggers*" (*Basques* 63).

came to choose the Great Basin as the site for their community. Famine and increasing problems with the federal government made things even worse. Enduring such harsh conditions required a huge effort on the part of the pioneers. Many Church leaders observed a decline in religiosity which led them to advocate the strengthening of faith and commitment to the doctrine. This is the period of reformations. On the one hand, Young's period saw the reorganization of the hierarchical system of authority within the Church. In a weberian style of hierarchy of authority, Young "systematized formal authority in a massive 'priesthood reorganization' which extended the hierarchy (line authority) to stake and ward levels" (Derr, *Outside* 23). On the other hand, the Mormon Reformation as preached by Young and other members, including Jedediah M. Grant in the years 1856 and 1857, incorporated rebaptisms and confessions which symbolized this revivalism. Rebaptism was compulsory to ensure commitment to the doctrine as the Church aimed to reinforce and promote faith and testimony. But, as Juanita Brooks has pointed out, it also helped to promote some other feelings:

In general, the effect of this movement was to arouse the people to new religious consciousness, but for some who had lived through the persecutions of Missouri and Nauvoo and whose covenants included a hope that God would avenge the death of the Prophet and the sufferings of His Saints, the Reformation served to encourage fanaticism. It also helped to cement their group solidarity and to make them feel that Zion must stand against the sins of the world. (Brooks, *Mountain* 13)

This period remains a controversial, if not dark, time in the history of the Mormon Church<sup>54</sup>. From the outside, this was seen as an obscure period in the Church, a tyrannical period that, together with the repeated confrontations between gentiles and Mormons, led to the Utah Expedition and federal government intervention in the territory. At first, President Franklin Pierce seemed reluctant to act after the announcement of polygamy,

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<sup>54</sup> Bill Hickman, for example, known as "Brigham Young's Avenging Angel", was said to have committed various crimes under Young's approval in order to promote this revivalism.

even though the denouncement of that practice was fiery in the East. Nevertheless, the severe decision to enforce the end of plural marriage would not have to wait for long. President Buchanan, who replaced Pierce in 1856, was the first to trigger gentile fury.

### 1857 Utah Expedition

Democrat James Buchanan won the presidential election against John C. Fremont in 1856, but the Republican Party weakened the reputation of the Democratic Party by accusing them of being tolerant with what they came to call “the twin relics of barbarism”<sup>55</sup>: polygamy and slavery. In this context, Buchanan decided to depose Young and appoint Alfred Cummings as the new Governor of the Utah territory. After having been defied by the Mormons, federal officials sent to Utah by Buchanan went back East: “and this second band of fugitive officials declared that the Mormons were in revolt against the United States” (White 168). Their reports that the Mormons were in a state of rebellion and refused to accept the President’s decision reached the White House. Without even taking the time to investigate the truth of these reports, Buchanan secretly decided to dispatch troops to Utah.<sup>56</sup> He ordered General William S. Harney, the officer in charge of the troops, to apply federal law in the territory and to ensure Cummings’ security.

The Mormons were informed of the troops’ imminent arrival. In response, Young declared martial law and organized a resistance that forced many of the missionaries to return to Salt Lake City and enroll in the Mormon army, formerly known as the Nauvoo

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<sup>55</sup> “As the 1856 Republican Party platform put it, polygamy was, with slavery, one of the last ‘twin relics of barbarism,’ a sentiment echoed by President Grant in 1871, who decried Mormons as ‘barbarians’ and ‘repugnant to civilization and decency’” (Handley, *Marriage* 101).

<sup>56</sup> In White’s opinion, Buchanan had a previously meditated plan to dispatch more than 2,000 soldiers. He “believed that Democrats and Republicans, northerners and southerners, could unite in an attempt to restore order to Utah, and he could thus divert attention from the crisis over slavery in the territories. He could also deliver a thinly veiled threat against all those extreme advocates of states’ rights who urged resistance to federal authority by extralegal means” (*It’s* 168).

Legion. The reformation, and earlier experiences in Missouri and Illinois, persuaded the Mormons that once again they were facing a persecution of their religious beliefs. Young sent out parties to stand guard and delay the approaching troops<sup>57</sup>.

One of the widely researched events of this war,<sup>58</sup> and one that can be placed among those “tragic themes from the frontier era which Mormons cannot accept readily” (Peterson, *Juanita* 137), was the Mountains Meadows Massacre. Scholar Juanita Brooks wrote a controversial book portraying this tragic event of 1857, when Mormon militiamen and Paiute Indians slaughtered a company of settlers on their way to California. There is still some controversy regarding the participation of the Church authorities in this massacre because the only Mormon tried and executed for his responsibility was John D. Lee who Brooks labelled in her book as “a sop to justice” (*Mountain* 211).

In her book, Brooks analyzes Young’s involvement in the event. She concludes that, even though he was not in agreement with it, and even hypothesizing that he could have tried to prevent it, he was responsible for knowing the whole truth and doing nothing. Apparently, Young tried to protect those responsible, except for the scapegoat John D. Lee<sup>59</sup> (Brooks, *Mountain* 219-220).

Brooks frames this event within the state of hysteria and fear galvanized by the war, “a classic study in mob psychology or the effects of war hysteria” (*Mountain* 218). This tragic event can be interpreted as a reaction to Buchanan’s decision to send troops. Nonetheless,

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<sup>57</sup> In order to delay the arrival of federal troops, Young ordered the Nauvoo Legion to use an ancient military tactic that appears in the Bible and that has been used from the time of the Romans to the Gulf War: “scorched earth”.

<sup>58</sup> Historically it has been known as the Utah War (also the Second Mormon War, being the first one the conflicts happening back in Missouri), even though it was only a minor conflict.

<sup>59</sup> Brooks points out that some scholars were discouraged from researching this event when “‘counselled’ with such a vigor to leave it alone that they felt sure that to continue would cost them not only their positions in church schools, but their membership in the church itself” (*Mountain* 216).

even though it is included among the most important events of the Utah's Mormon War, it stands out as a relevant historical event.<sup>60</sup> A fundamental object of study to examine scholars' objectivity, rigor, and moral commitment:

In early September of 1857 the Mormons around Cedar City, apparently influenced by a religious revival still working among them and their own mounting sense of siege, decided to cooperate with local Indians who had already commenced an attack on the wagon train. In the midst of the Indian attack, John D. Lee appeared and told the migrants that he had persuaded the Indians to allow the Missourians to depart if they surrendered their arms. When they did so, the Mormons and the Indians at a prearranged signal slaughtered all the adults, men and women, and all those children old enough to bear witness, 120 people in all. The Mormons adopted the 17 children that they spared. Although covered up at the time and blamed on the Indians, the Mountain Meadows Massacre would return to haunt the Mormons later. It revealed the immense potential for violence in the mounting confrontation. (White 168)

Eventually, negotiations between the Mormons and the federal government were successful. Church leaders accepted President Buchanan's proposition and Cummings became the Governor of the territory. In addition to this, a permanent army garrison was established in the Utah territory to keep the peace. Nevertheless, the Utah War is also known as Buchanan's Blunder by those who did not coincide with the final solution guaranteed by the signed agreement. Buchanan was accused by Eastern editors of failing to officially notify Governor Young about his replacement, incurring the expense of sending troops without investigating the reports on Utah's disloyalty to the United States, dispatching the expedition late in the season, and failing to provide an adequate resupply train for the winter. Some editors also praised the Mormons' heroism, even though they condemned their beliefs.

In reality, the consequences of this war were far worse for the Mormons. Their economic welfare was seriously affected and the Mormons still had to pay their war debt. Young was

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<sup>60</sup> In concern with Young's involvement in this event, Will Bagley's *Blood of Prophets* affirms Young's complicity and proposes an analysis that places this event in the very center of Mormon history.

no longer Governor of the territory and the social and economic involvement of the gentiles began to increase. This war and subsequent federal government policy, together with the Gold Rush and the completion of the transcontinental railroad marked the end of the period of isolation in which the Mormons were closer to achieving their dream of founding the kingdom of God on earth.

### **2.2.5. Fifth Period: 1857/58 – 1900. Polygamist Controversy and the End of Isolation**

#### 1869 The Transcontinental Railroad

The period immediately after the Second Mormon War or Utah War and until the death of Brigham Young in 1877 is a time of economic resistance, particularly against the process of accommodation to the gentile business community. After the Utah War, many non-Mormons went to the Great Basin. The completion of the transcontinental railroad facilitated this movement of gentile emigrants. The envisioned kingdom was challenged by the growing involvement of the federal government in state policies and in the economy. Young insisted adamantly that an economic focus was needed to reinforce the Mormon community and make them self-sufficient in the midst of the growing involvement of gentiles in the social and economic affairs of the territory. The end of isolation threatened Utah's and the Mormons' economic and political independence and even though Young anticipated it, he did not resign himself to the inevitable. Young, in fact, was responsible for many of the measures that were taken to preserve Mormon economic and social independence during this decade.

The Church started a campaign to discourage trade with gentile businesses. The Church discouraged the consumption of tea, coffee, alcohol and tobacco. Different economic measures to favor Mormon business were also promoted. Young, for example, launched the School of Prophets to teach finance to Mormon farmers and landowners and he developed policies and techniques to protect Utah's cottage industry from industrial competition. Another organization, called the Relief Society<sup>61</sup>, worked with the School of Prophets to protect local industry by discouraging the purchase of imports. Through the School of Prophets, Young also led the foundation of Zion's Cooperative Mercantile Institution (Z.C.M.I.), an organization that set up more than a hundred cooperative shops in the territory to avoid trade with gentile businessmen. This cooperative system of merchandising was a profitable enterprise that established branch stores and all kinds of cooperative businesses throughout the territory. The success of the Zion's Cooperative Mercantile Institution persuaded Young that the communal economy of former times should be revived and emulated. This impulse towards a communal economy was called the United Order of Enoch. Since it was left to the responsibility and efficiency of local hands, it was successful only in specific places such as Brigham City, thanks to the leadership of Lorenzo Snow, or in Orderville, where it continued for a decade, even though the movement, generally speaking, ended by the time of Young's death.

On the other hand, the economic measures promoted by the Church to deter the growth of gentile economic strength were actually opposed by some Mormons who were eager to trade with outsiders and ignore the boycott. These Mormons were prominent businessmen and intellectuals, such as William Godbe, the head of a movement that came to be called "The New Movement" and his followers, the "godbeites". They wanted to develop mining,

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<sup>61</sup> An official philanthropic and educational women's auxiliary Church institution.



an industry that the Church refused to exploit suspecting that it would be tempting to foreigners; instead, they insisted on an agriculture based economy. Godbe, Kelsey and Stenhouse, the promoters of the “New Movement”, viewed the economic policy of the Church as a “Priesthood Autocracy”, considering the strong involvement of the Church in economic affairs.

In fact, even if some scholars underline Young’s emphasis on the promotion of an independent economy, some other scholars, such as White, state that the relevance of the Gold Rush and the migration movements of new gentiles, together with the strategic position of Salt Lake City helped to increase the Mormon economy. In other words, the Mormons took advantage of this situation:

Central to this expansion of mercantile capitalism were the Mormons. The Mormons had ironically migrated with the desire to avoid further contact with gentiles, and they themselves had initially constructed an economy with strong communitarian elements, but the Gold Rush left them very close to the main line of western migration. The Mormon capital of Salt Lake City became a stopping point on the trail and center of trade. It was a place where, in the words of one migrant, “it cost nothing to get in, but a great deal to get out.” Even this assessment of a stop in Salt Lake was probably sanguine, for getting there involved a detour across a collection of Mormon ferries and bridges that cost between \$14.50 and \$20 per wagon. (White 206)

Young, in any case, tried to fight this situation fiercely, since he based Mormon independence on the economy rather than on army forces. He stressed agriculture and self-sufficiency to avoid dependency on the mainstream economy. This proved to be almost impossible but Young’s zeal never ceased and in 1873 he announced the creation of the United Order of Enoch. Again, this, an effort that attracted the attention of many people proved to be impossible after the arrival of gentiles confronted the economy of the Church and initiated subsequent troubles that changed the circumstances of the Kingdom:

Yet by 1877, when Brigham Young died, most of the orders had failed. The arrival of the railroads and the discovery of valuable minerals put too much pressure on the faithful. Gentiles gladly took up commercial opportunities the Mormons refused, and the church recognized that by forbidding Mormons to work the mines and build the railroads it was delivering up much of Utah's wealth to non-Mormons. (White 242)

Some other tensions between Mormons and gentiles were based not only on economic reasons but also on the clash between two different worldviews. In *Making Space on the Western Frontier: Mormons, Miners and Southern Paiutes*, W. Paul Reeve explains the tension and competition among Euro-American Mormons, non-Mormon miners and the region's long-term inhabitants, the Southern Paiutes, throughout the southwestern Utah Territory: "Mormons, miners, and Southern Paiutes carved a world for themselves, an intercultural space that each group defined and defended for itself. Those defenses varied in intensity and lacked consistency but persisted for nearly forty years" (Reeve 2).

In his book, Reeve proposes a theory based on the definition of people that landed in a place that he defines not as a frontier but as a meeting point of three different communities. Thus, he draws a progressive context that gives space to the three different realities: the Paiutes living and working the land before the arrival of the Mormons who built an outpost and the subsequent arrival of the mining boom in the 1870s. This meeting point operates as a zone of tension to define Americanness as a clash of self-definitions: the one created by the Republican Party of "what it meant to be an American that was filtered through predominantly northern and Protestant worldview" (Reeve 6-7), or the different peculiar definitions of Mormons who are described in his book as an ethnic group, or that of Native Americans:

A hierarchy of Americanness emerged that favored the miners as the embodiment of American progress, industry, and quest for wealth. Mormons and Southern Paiutes, however, valued community over individualism and celestial rewards over material

gain, ideals that placed them well outside prevailing standards of what it meant to be an American. (Reeve 4-6)

This clash of self-definitions in Southern Utah echoes the general circumstances in which Mormons were starting to see themselves after the arrival of new immigrants to their territory. Subsequent events, however, brought an end to Mormon defiance against coming to terms with the gentile business community. In the following years, the Mormons suffered very hard times, both economically and socially, but the reason was not their stubborn resistance to allowing gentiles to enter into the Mormon economy. An uncontrolled energy was determining the tension. Plural marriage, even after the Utah War, was still a matter of debate, and in the following years, different laws were passed to tame this almost invisible tension.

#### 1877 The death of Brigham Young. Mexico and Native Americans

Young's death on August 29, 1877, was a great loss to the Church. If Smith and his close assistants, Rigdon and Cowdery, were the main figures that symbolized the founding period, Young enjoys the same status in connection to the pioneering period and the founding of Utah. Following his death the Mormons faced hard times. The Church was headed by two new Presidents: John Taylor from 1880 to 1887 and William Woodruff from 1889 to 1898, both of whom tried to sustain the pattern of Mormon expansion and improvement. Taylor, for example, reorganized the structure of the Church and its auxiliary organization; at the same time, he launched a new economic program intended to balance private and public business. Moreover, the Church tried to continue expanding with new settlements in and outside Utah, in places like Nevada and Colorado or even Mexico and Canada.

In fact, this emphasis on continued expansion is fundamental to the history of Mormonism, even though, this time, the motivation may be different, even darker, since they were dealing with the problems that arose after the announcement of the practice of plural marriage. From the very beginning, Young harbored the idea that he needed a place of refuge if things went the wrong way and, as LaMond Tullis says: “The most promising site for such a refuge lay to the south, perhaps Mexico” (Tullis, *Early* 1).

The example of Mexico is very illustrative. Today, Mexico is home to the largest community of Mormons outside the United States. But the first colonies were founded as far back as 1885 when Mormons established the settlements of Colonia Juárez, Colonia Dublán and others, mainly in Chihuahua and Sonora. This geographical expansion is part of the Mormon Corridor (1850-1890), a term used to designate the parts of western North America that were settled by the Mormons during that period, also known as the Jell-O Belt because of the Mormons’ well-known, stereotyped love of this gelatine based food<sup>62</sup>. In *Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert*, Terry Tempest Williams summarizes this period of Mormon history by telling the story of the Romney side of her family and their two alabaster of parrot shaped bookends:

In 1885, the United States government was pressing down hard against plural marriage within the Deseret Territory. The president of the Mormon Church, John Taylor, moved quickly to set up “A City of Refuge” in the state of Chihuahua in Mexico for those “Latter-day Saints” in danger of being indicted (which meant conviction) on charges of polygamy. Word traveled quickly to polygamist families in Arizona and Utah and another immigration ensued, one that would last for years, establishing nine colonies in Mexico. (Williams, *Red* 124-125)

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<sup>62</sup> Utah legislature declared Jello the official snack food in 2001.

The Mormons were expelled from those colonies around 1910 by General Salazar, while Pancho Villa was leading the revolution. In fact, the Mexican Revolution produced its own Mormon martyrs. After Ray L. Pratt and the other missionaries left because of the Mexican Revolution, Rafael Monroy was killed by the liberation army of the South along with fellow Latter-Day Saint Vicente Morales in 1915 (Tullis, *Los Pioneros* 47). Important figures in Mexican history were involved in the Mormon Church's attempt to colonize or settle in Mexico: the successful writer, journalist and politician Ignacio Manuel Altamirano who, according to Tullis, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, "was highly receptive not only to the rhetoric of the Liberals regarding the place of the Indian in Mexico's future but was also highly impressed with the Mormons' interpretation of the Indians' place in Mexico's past" (*Early* 4) or Plotino Rhodakanaty, the Greek anarchist who migrated to Mexico and who was highly interested in Mormon communal ideas, even though he later rejected his membership when the Church put aside those communal ideas.

In fact, Mormon attempts to establish colonies in Mexico began earlier, while Young was still alive, as explained in Tullis' article "Early Mormon Exploration and Missionary Activities in Mexico". These examples help to analyze two important aspects of Mormon history and the Church: their compulsion to colonize and their attitude towards Native Americans. Tullis points out that the main purpose of this mission was to proselytize among the Indians.<sup>63</sup>

The Mormon attitude towards Native Americans has always been subject of discussion and analysis. Basically, the Mormons tried to be positive and patronizing. Young promoted

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<sup>63</sup> And Tullis affirms that the failure of such proselytizing efforts belongs to the Native Americans themselves: "Mormons, frantically almost, had pursued the expansion of their faith into the Indian lands of the southern territories and Mexico. But their cross-cultural contacts seemed to be mostly negative. Frustration and anxiety resulted. The Church and its missionaries carried an enormous commitment to the Lamanites. However, everywhere the missionaries met with failure" (*Early* 10).

an approach based on practical issues: “It was better, or cheaper, to feed the Indians than to fight them” (Bigler 64-65). But the relationship between Mormons and Native Americans was, in fact, much more complex than what this attitude might have predicted. In “Early Mormon Exploration and Missionary Activities in Mexico,” Tullis explains how Daniel W. Jones, who was chosen to lead the group that was to settle the south, was encouraged by Young to favor relationships with Native Americans but he already encountered problems in Arizona because “the thought of cross-cultural contact was too shocking for some of the white families, Book of Mormon prophecies notwithstanding” (*Early 2*).

One example of this mixed attitude is found in Jared Farmer’s account in *On Zion’s Mount: Mormons, Indians, and the American Landscape* where he illustrates how, even though the Church policy was to help the Indians to farm and to behave, the problems were obvious from the very beginning. Consequently, the Mormons displace the local Native Americans who were residing at Utah Lake:

Here at the shoreline natives and newcomers coexisted edgily for one generation. Under the guidance of their prophet Brigham Young, the Saints aspired to redeem their “red brethren,” the “Lamanites.” In practice, hostility supplanted harmony. Settlers and Indians clashed repeatedly at the mouth of the Provo (Timpanogos) River, the best fishing site in the valley. Ultimately, with the federal government’s blessing, the Mormons forced the starving remnants of the Timpanogos to move to a distant reservation. (Farmer 2)

In his book, Farmer gives a general account of the relationships between Utes and Mormons after the arrival of the latter to Utah Lake, one of the most important fishing resources, around 1849. Farmer tells how the focus was displaced from the lake and the fishing to the mountains and he underlines especially how the site changed to accommodate a huge steel mill property of the federal government after World War II. In fact, Farmer

points to scholars and historians as those responsible for omitting the role of Native Americans in the history of the colonizing of Utah:

A combination of passive and active forgetting explains the fading of the Lake Utes in the collective memory of the second-generation Mormon residents of Utah Valley. The LDS Church and its early official historians – and later folk historians – mythologized Utah’s pioneer period. (Farmer 13)

Farmer indicates, paralleling “mainstream” American history, that the Mormon settlement of remote parts of Utah followed the treatment that the pioneers generally imposed on Native Americans:

That the establishment of the Mormon homeland in Utah occurred in tandem with the diminishment of native peoples and places may be discomfoting enough. But I must prod further. Mormonism, a religion indigenous to the United States, originally embraced American Indians as spiritual kin, or “Lamanites.” Metaphysically and geographically, this religion reserved a privileged place for natives. But the prophecies, dreams, and intentions never quite became realities. (Farmer 16)

Tensions between Mormons and Native Americans led to two important wars that came to be known as the Walker War and the Black Hawk War. In Bigler’s opinion, tensions between Native American leader Walkara and Young led to a series of conflicts, based not only on reports of trading, as can be seen in the following quotation, but also because Walkara was outraged by Mormon colonization of the most important fishing and hunting resources:

That year Brigham Young put a stop to the commerce in Indian children between the Utahs and slave traders from Santa Fé and Taos, but he won no thanks from Walker. On the contrary, the action infuriated the unpredictable chief and thereby precipitated the so-called Walker War of 1853-54. The conflict was less a war in the customary sense than a series of atrocities by both sides, ambushes and mutilations by one and outright executions, sometimes billed as “skirmishes,” by the other. (Bigler 73-74)

The second war, which was caused by Black Hawk and some other leaders some years later, was even cruder and more violent. Involved again were Mormon settlers and different tribes, among them Utahs, Paiutes and “a few Navahos” (Bigler 239). Even though this war was set off following certain revenge actions by Native Americans at Sanpete Valley, the real source of this second conflict came in 1864 when Congress, urged by Utah lawmakers, decided to open Spanish Fork Indian Farm for settlement, consequently organizing a new reservation in the Uinta Basin:

Even then the longest and most destructive of Utah’s Indian wars might have been avoided if Congress had ratified the promises made that year at Spanish Fork. When it did not, the deadly series of atrocities and reprisals by both sides over the next three years claimed the lives of about seventy-five settlers and about the same number of Indians, and depopulated Sevier and Piute counties as well as some twenty-eight smaller settlements in Kane, Iron, Wasatch, Sanpete, and Washington counties. (Bigler 238-239)

Leonard Arrington and Davis Bitton in *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints*, clarify how, after these conflicts arose, the Church reacted and tried to draw up a new policy to deter the repetition of such wars in the future:

Shortly after this settlement, the Mormon Church inaugurated a three-phase program aimed at preventing hostilities from flaring up again. Refinements were made in the distribution of goods to visiting and nearby tribes. These included improvements in tithing-house arrangements and in the work of Indian Relief Societies.

The Mormons also established Indian farms designed to teach native peoples the art of agriculture and assist them in their production operations. (Arrington, *Mormon* 153)

Mormon colonization uncovers the flaws inherent in the prevailing pattern followed by other pioneers to the West; its conquering spirit proved harmful to Native Americans. The two wars on Utah Lake illustrate the consequences that the Mormon settlement of Utah imposed on the Native Americans living in the area. Separation from their hunting and



fishing reserves and the clash between two entirely different cultures made the Mormon effort to proselytize among the Native Americans a fiasco.

### 1887 The Edmunds-Tucker Act

Taylor and Woodruff, the two Presidents that followed after Young's tenure, had to face very difficult times for the Mormon brethren; theirs was a time filled with changes, most of them painful. The federal government's negative response to the practice of plural marriage precipitated a series of events that almost brought The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to an end (Groberg 1).

From the very beginning, plural marriage had been a controversial tenet of Mormon doctrine. Even though the causes of the confrontations between Mormons and gentiles were equally divided between the Mormon tendency to carry out all political and economic affairs in a tight group and their desire to practice plural marriage, polygamy was always the excuse used by opponents to Mormon attitudes. Wallace Stegner comments the following about this topic:

Mormon polygamy was not the sort of Susannah and the Elders kind of thing that it was conceived to be. It was clearly a sociological instrument for holding together a church which was composed pretty heavily of women, and converts who were largely female, and finding a place for them in a new country where survival was difficult enough for strong men. It could hardly have been done under any other terms. There would have been an awful lot of lost, helpless women. (Stegner, *Stegner* 118)

As far back as 1862, Abraham Lincoln had signed into law the Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act, a measure introduced by Congressman Justin S. Morrill of Vermont (Bigler 217). President Lincoln, however, had decided to leave the Mormons alone once it became clear that there

was no money to enforce the law. In the 1870s, a series of laws tried to impede Church theocracy in the territory. First, the Poland Act, in 1874, tried to eliminate their involvement in the legal system. Later, in 1882, after the Reynolds vs. United States trial in 1879, when the Mormon George Reynolds, accused of bigamy, tried to defend himself on the basis of religious freedom and duty, the Congress passed the Edmunds Act. This law introduced strong measures to end polygamy, to the extent that any Mormon committed to plural marriage would be imprisoned, would have to pay a hefty fine and might lose his right to vote. And the law was to affect even for those who had practiced plural marriage before it had been passed.

A commission was established to ensure that the new law was enforced. An oath was required to prove that a man was not practicing plural marriage. More than 120,000 Latter-day Saints were disenfranchised and the trials began quite early: in 1882, Ruder Clawson was tried for committing the felony of polygamy, even though he did so prior to the Morrill Act of 1862. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Mormons were living in a state of suspicion and threat. Almost a thousand Mormons were imprisoned and many others built secret hiding places.

Because Congress suspected that Church members were disobeying the law, they decided to draw up an even more severe measure. The Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1887 was intended to be the ultimate mechanism that would provoke the collapse of the Church. The Church was shaken to its very foundations. President Taylor, who had gone underground to avoid being imprisoned, died after directing the Church by letter for five years. It took two more years for the Mormons to declare Woodruff their new President, but he too had to go underground. The law dissolved the Church and the Perpetual Emigrating Fund Company

as legal corporations. Most Church property fell into the hands of the federal government. The need to take the oath in order to exercise the right to vote and the profusion of trials made the situation even worse. The Church was quickly losing all its economic power and the authorities began to worry about the Church's future.

### 1890 First Manifesto

On September 24, 1890, President Woodruff issued the First Manifesto. In that manifesto, he announced that the Church officially renounced the practice of plural marriage and that no new plural marriages would be allowed by the Church. Less than a month later, a General Conference was held and the Manifesto was accepted; a few years later, it was incorporated into the *Doctrine and Covenants* (Ludlow 14).

A concerned Woodruff took this decision because the Edmunds-Tucker Act was leading the Church to certain death. By September, when he made public his decision, the federal government was ready to disenfranchise not only all polygamist Mormons, but all Mormons in general. The Mormons had no political rights and the federal government had confiscated Church properties. To avoid a general repudiation of the Manifesto, Woodruff reported that he took the decision after praying and receiving revelation. Since, until then, the Church had been defending the right to practice plural marriage as part of their doctrine, it was not easy to discard it practically overnight. Most Saints accepted the new standard, but some of them refused to obey. Some apostles, like John W. Taylor and Matthias F. Cowley, resigned from the Quorum of the Twelve. And in the next decade some new plural marriages were still performed. Michael Quinn has denounced the existence of Church retaliations against those Mormons who chose not to obey the

Manifesto. On the other hand, the federal government's resistance to accept Mormons into the mainstream systems continued after the First Manifesto was announced. Brigham Henry (B.H.) Roberts, for instance, a historian and leader of the Church, who was elected to Congress was denied a seat in the House due to his having practiced plural marriage.

Nevertheless, after the release of the Manifesto and the official renunciation of the practice of plural marriage, the Church moved towards integration into the gentile community; however, most Mormons retained a tenacious conviction to preserve their peculiar distinctions. In 1891, U.S. President Benjamin Harrison visited Utah and President Woodruff. A few years later, after many continued attempts, the territory was finally granted statehood. For many Mormons statehood marked the end of something, not only of a period but of some kind of substance that gave their faith the original flavour of truth. Vardis Fisher, in his 20<sup>th</sup> century narrative, illustrates this feeling in the closing scene of *Children of God: An American Epic*, when the main characters turn around to take a last look at a land that seems to be vanishing. Richard White, in a different style, also explains how important the consequences of this period of conflicts were for the Church:

In ending open polygamy, federal prosecution had broken the most distinctive aspect of nineteenth-century Mormonism. But prosecution had done far more. It also had crippled the church's corporate and communal activities, which had restricted the penetration of the free market into Utah. After the 1890s the Mormon church largely lost its appetite for social experiment and grew increasingly more conservative. (White 174)

### 1896 Utah Statehood

After the Manifesto, Church authorities returned to their administrative duties and initiated a final attempt to seek statehood. The U.S. Congress passed an enabling act in

1894. After President Grover Cleveland signed it, Utah wrote a new Constitution which included the prohibition of plural marriage and pronounced itself in favor of the separation of church and state. Finally, on January 4, 1896, Utah became a state.

In the final years of this decade, the Church attempted to retrieve normality and peace. Woodruff administered an important effort to recover from the tumultuous years of the anti-polygamist legislation. The end of that period and the achievement of statehood, allowed Utah to try to move into the American mainstream in terms of politics and economy. Many cooperatives were privatized and, in fact, the Church did not hesitate to effect a complete change in its economic ethics.

In contrast, the missionary effort of the Mormon Church nearly tripled in size, and missionaries were even sent to places like Samoa, Tonga, and Hawaii which altered the migration tendency. European immigrants receded. But this was not the only change in the Church's politics on migration. The focus of the Church was also new. Converts were encouraged to found churches in their homelands rather than to migrate to the United States. This was the first step towards the growing internationalization of the Church in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A second important and positive accomplishment was the completion and dedication in 1893 of the Utah temple, which had been a major project during several presidencies.

In 1902, Woodruff, who will be always remembered as the signer of the First Manifesto, passed away. Lorenzo Snow became the Church's fifth President and the first one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The turn of the century symbolized the end of a period of positive and negative experiences which forged a solid spiritual Mormon community. In the following

years, new perspectives and circumstances directed the Church and its community along different paths and singular challenges which implied modernization and progress.

#### **2.2.6. Sixth Period: 1900-Today. Consolidation, Integration and the Growing Internationalization of the Church.**

##### 1900 First Half of the Century. Second Manifesto (1904)

The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a period of internal efforts to combine the integration in American society with the defense of the values and peculiarities which formulate the ethnic self-perception of the Mormons<sup>64</sup> after two centuries of previous experiences. This is the time when the state of Utah enters the stream of modern fashion, global economy and urban life (Lyon, *Great* 12).

The 20<sup>th</sup> century began under the direction of Lorenzo Snow as President of the Church; Joseph F. Smith, from 1901 to 1918, and Heber J. Grant, from 1918 to 1945, followed. These three Presidents attempted to balance the changes endured by the Church during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the preservation of old values. The Church was trying to modernize its official structure, while simultaneously retaining traditional values and remaining faithful to the moral and cultural codes of the Mormons.

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<sup>64</sup> This ethnic self-perception has been complicated in these last years, as Ryan McIlvain points out: "Mormonism is much harder pressed to lay claim to collective ethnic heritage, especially as it works so tirelessly to add more ingredients to the mixed salad: Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Arabia, oh, if we could just get the missionary visas..." (McIlvain 178). A notion that Joanna Brooks also highlights as a considerable trend in today's Mormonism: "The church's vigorous missionary program and rapid expansion in Central and South America have made national boundaries increasingly irrelevant to the Mormon concept of 'Zion'" (*Genealogy* 294).

This period was also marked by the internal consolidation of the Church. President Snow proposed a redefinition of the Church structure and the implication of its authorities. This proposal was expanded by President Smith, who outlined a new program of progressive priesthood advancement for male youth. The tendency towards consolidation in the first half of the century was also tangible in the structure of the auxiliary organizations or in the clarification of the Word of Wisdom which, in 1921, confirmed abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, tea and coffee for Mormons. This propensity towards combining a new modern stimuli with a zeal for the traditional values of Mormonism is also perceived in the position of the Church towards the economy, the controversy over plural marriage, or the wars that took place during the first half of the century<sup>65</sup>.

The Church found itself heavily in debt after the federal laws banning polygamy provoked the disenfranchisement of most Church properties. Under his presidency, Snow launched a debate over the tithing system to free the Church from its debts. Members were encouraged to make cash donations and, thanks to these reforms, by 1907, President Smith was able to report that the Church was no longer in debt.

Plural marriage continued to be a controversial issue for the Church. From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century some plural marriages were still being performed, attracting national attention and causing mistrust and suspicion of the Church compromise. President Smith announced a Second Manifesto in 1904 (Ludlow 10), which provided for the Church to take action against those who continued to perform plural

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<sup>65</sup>Regarding the position of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints towards the wars, the authorities of the Church supported the Spanish-American War as well as U.S. involvement in both World Wars. This demonstrates that the gap between the Church and the federal government was closing.

marriages. This new measure came in the wake of the prohibition that B.H. Roberts and Reed Smoot, two congressmen-elect, take their seats in the U.S. Congress<sup>66</sup>.

The integration of Mormon politicians into mainstream U.S. politics was problematic because, as indicated above, there was still suspicion about the Church's compromise to negate the doctrine and practice of plural marriage. Perhaps the most famous example of the problems surrounding the question of plural marriage is that of Reed Smoot. In the 1903 elections to the U.S. Senate, Smoot was elected in Utah. He was a monogamous member of the Quorum of the Twelve. The so-called Smoot Hearings were held in 1904 to evaluate whether or not Smoot should occupy his seat as a senator. The congressional committee focused on The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its connection to polygamy rather than on Smoot himself, but he was finally permitted to take his seat in the Senate. After three years of investigations, he was reelected in 1908.

From the 1920s on, the time for dispersion and integration began. Mormon migration tended to move towards urban settings. The Church was becoming part of mainstream America. President Heber J. Grant (1918-1945), the seventh President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was clearly in favor of the integration of the Church into mainstream America, which is evidenced by his visiting different American Presidents, such as Hoover or Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

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<sup>66</sup> B.H. Roberts was elected to the House of Representatives in 1898, but he was denied his seat because he was accused of having practiced plural marriage, which was true. Reed Smoot's conflict about his eligibility began when he was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1902. Smoot never practiced polygamy. These two examples are different but they illustrate the difficulties Mormon will be facing when trying to integrate into American society.



At the time, the Church was affected by the general events taking place in the United States, such as the Great Depression of the 1930s. As White states, the West was severely affected by the general crisis, even more so than the national average:

From the outset of the Depression until Franklin Delano Roosevelt's inauguration in March 1933, about 5,500 banks with \$3.4 billion in assets had closed. Proportionately, the West suffered more than the nation as a whole. The decline in real income in the West was greater than the national average; 12 of the 20 states with the greatest declines in income were in the West, including 7 of the top 10. (White 463)

Some of the big projects that gave visibility and success to the New Deal launched by President Roosevelt were undertaken in the West. One of the most symbolic enterprises was the Hoover Dam, which involved the participation of many Mormon workers. However, the Mormon contribution reached the highest level, since one of the companies constituting the so-called Six Companies Corporation which was awarded the project was the Utah Construction Company of Salt Lake City. This public works agenda opened a new way in which the federal government's implication in Western business was enhanced. The Church also launched a Welfare Program in 1936, thus continuing the co-operative tradition of 19<sup>th</sup> century Mormon communities (Ludlow 13).

In summary, the first half of the century was a time for the social, cultural, political and even economic integration of the Church into mainstream American society. It was also a time for internal consolidation, with many changes proposed by Presidents Snow, Smith and Grant. These changes were not only manifest evidence of the new implication of the Church in the politics and the economy of the United States, but also a measure of the growing concern about the dangers of this integration. With the integration of the Mormons into the mainstream community, the Church authorities feared that the unique values and

foundations of the Church would be jeopardized. Thus, they promoted a zealous return to former traditions and a conservative spirit in the following years. Thomas O’Dea, for example, states that the 1950s were a time in which “the conservative, literalist, fundamentalist group seems now to control the church, and these principles of church organization [...] make the advancement of liberals into church leadership very unlikely in the next several years” (O’Dea, 230).

#### 1950 Second Half of the Century. September Six (1993)

The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century began with George Albert Smith (1945-1951) as President of the Church. Eight different elders<sup>67</sup> succeeded him in the Presidency. The elder in charge of the Church administration today is Thomas S. Monson who began his term on February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2008. From Smith to Monson, Presidents David O. McKay, Joseph Fielding Smith, Harold B. Lee, Spencer W. Kimball, Ezra Taft Benson<sup>68</sup>, Howard W. Hunter and Gordon B. Hinckley were witnesses and promoters of the growing internationalization of the Church which characterized the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In these fifty years, the Church redefined its meaning and nature, sometimes by looking back to former traditions and values in a controversial way<sup>69</sup>. For instance, in the 1980s, President Taft Benson called for a return to traditional values, urging the study of the Book of Mormon (Ludlow 7).

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<sup>67</sup> Elder is a priesthood office in the Melchizedek Priesthood of denominations within the Latter Day Saint movement. In the Church, male members who are at least 18 years old may be ordained to be elders. In order to be ordained, the member must be determined as worthy.

<sup>68</sup> Ezra Taft Benson was also United States Secretary of Agriculture under U.S. President Eisenhower.

<sup>69</sup> Joanna Brooks highlights that the “diasporic patterns of Mormon settlement and the tremendous growth of the international church have strengthened the power of church policies to determine who is considered a ‘member’ and who is not” (*Genealogy* 294).

The growth of the Church was noteworthy even by the end of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1947, the Church tallied one million members. The economic involvement of the federal government in Utah increased, mainly through military expenditure, a constant feature throughout the West which turned it into “a vast wartime workshop” (White 497). The Provo area in Utah was one of those places selected for this type of investment. The state economy was changing, leaving behind its agricultural identity of the early founders to become a state which, by 1942, had “ten major military bases employing 60,000 civilians” (White 497), all of them established by the federal government.

The presence of the federal government in Utah and the incorporation of the Church into mainstream America motivated other consequences which darkened the history of both the Church and the state. From 1942 to 1945, the federal government established in Utah one of the relocation camps which remain a symbol of the policy towards Asian Americans during the Second World War. Between 1942 and 1945, Topaz, even larger than Manzanar War Relocation Center (California), interned important artists and writers such as Miré Okubo, Yoshiko Uchida, Yuji Ichioka, the Japanese-American scholar who coined the term Asian American, and Goro Suzuki, the famous Detective Nick Yemana in the T.V. sitcom *Barney Miller*.<sup>70</sup>

As stated before, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the missionary effort changed its focus, encouraging the foundation of churches, stakes<sup>71</sup> and wards abroad rather than promoting migration to Utah. The Church also delegated the rule of these foreign stakes or wards to the local control. This change of focus is said to be based upon Smith’s former revelations, but it can

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<sup>70</sup> For farther information, read the article “Interned at Topaz: Age, Gender, and Family in the Relocation Experience” by Sandra C. Taylor or Leonard J. Arrington’s book *The Price of Prejudice* (1997).

<sup>71</sup> In the Latter-Day Saints Movement, stake is one of the units which structures the administrative organization of the Church. Thus, a ward is a local congregation, being called branches the smallest wards. A stake is a group of wards.

also be understood in practical terms. The Church begins to grow considerably in Latin America and Africa; besides, after the revolutions of the 1990s, it penetrates former communist countries. In 1950, the Church was present in fewer than fifty countries, but this number is double by the 1990s. The difference can also be measured in the percentage of Mormons living inside or outside of the United States. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, close to forty percent of all Mormons lived outside the United States. Richard G. Oman explains this internationalization:

However, the twentieth-century gathering, particularly since World War II, differs in two major ways from that of the nineteenth century. First, members have been encouraged to gather to wards and stakes in their own lands. Second, and of greater significance, the greatest number of converts outside the United States no longer comes from Europe. There are now more members of the Church in Mexico than in all of Europe, and Guatemala has more members of the Church than Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland combined. There are more Saints in the Philippines than in Germany, and almost twice as many in Korea as the Netherlands. (Oman 70)

All Mormon Presidents of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have shown great interest not only in missionary efforts, but also in improving Church structure. The work done by McKay, the first President to travel extensively abroad, was perhaps the most outstanding of all the late 20<sup>th</sup> century Church leaders. During his presidency, in 1961, the Church started up the so-called Priesthood Correlation Program, designed as a functional structure to control the multiple organizations of the Church and the consistency of the doctrines and teachings developed in these organizations. In fact, this system already existed at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a way to control the many organizations that revolved around the Church, thus providing a more tightly bound Church organization. It was later, in the 1960s when another reorganization improved the system. However, it is a system that has been widely criticized by many Mormon feminist writers and scholars since it dissociates women from priesthood. Virginia Sorensen illustrates the issue:

In the Mormon Church, every man can aspire to some sort of ordination – very small boy of any virtue whatever is a Deacon and can go on to be a Priest and an Elder and a Teacher and a High Priest and all sorts of important-sounding things. But a woman has no Priesthood and must depend on her husband to take her to The Highest Degree. (Sorensen 12)

Some other feminist writers, such as Maxine Hanks, sanction this structure as the main reason for the inequalities in authority between men and women within Mormon culture. In the introduction to *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, Hanks summarizes the procedure in the following words:

As a result, the Priesthood Correlation Program was conceived in 1908 to organize and streamline church structure in preparation for expansion and to bolster male involvement in all aspects of the church. As Correlation gained strength, women's authority diminished. During this time priesthood leaders began referring to the women's organizations as "auxiliaries." Female priesthood ordinance work was discouraged, and by 1930 it was forbidden. Tension grew between male priesthood leadership and feminists who were experiencing loss of authority and position. The correlation of male priesthood, gave birth to two binary oppositions in the church: priesthood holders (men) versus non-priesthood holders (women), and feminism versus republican motherhood. (Hanks xv)

Due to the growing internationalization of the Church, in 1978 the authorities extended admission to priesthood to all male members, without regard of race. The first steps in this direction were taken by McKay when the Civil Rights Movement was at its height and the Church was constantly being accused of racism. Nevertheless, these initial steps went unnoticed. It was not until after the growing enrollment of new members of color that additional measures by President Kimball proposed men of color for priesthood admission. The first black general authority was elder Helvecio Martins of Brazil in 1990. Fifteen years earlier, George Patrick Lee became the first Native American general authority of the Church. His term ended only one year before Elder Martins got his landmark position. Lee was actually excommunicated for "apostasy and other conduct unbecoming a member of

the Church” according to the official Church, even though he claimed that he had been excommunicated for criticizing Church’s policy towards Native Americans. In fact, George P. Lee is on the registry of sex offenders and in 1994, though he denied the charges a year before, he pleaded guilty to having sexually molested a child in 1989.

It is clear that the Church underwent several structural changes, the main ones, such as the organization of the First Quorum of the Seventy, proposed by President Kimball in the 1970s. In the early 1970s, administrative responsibilities at Church headquarters were also consolidated and a new direction in the economy took place. The Church, and even the state of Utah, moved from an agrarian based economy and the exploitation of natural resources through mining, towards a growing focus on industry. This change indicates that the mistrust of industrialization that tended to characterize the Church economy when the Mormons were in control of the state has disappeared. Provo, one of the main cities in Utah, is now an important steel center and there is a large concentration of industries in Salt Lake City, just to name two examples. Ten years ago, the editors of the first environmental anthology in Mormon history made the following assertion about the growing urban change to the land originally chosen to be the site of the kingdom of Zion:

Compare a population of a few thousand residents in the Salt Lake Valley in the 1840s to its current population of more than a million individuals. Consider the density of homes climbing up the flanks of the Wasatch Mountains and spilling out of Emigration, Parleys, Big and Little Cottonwood Canyons to the urban sprawl stretching north to Brigham City and south to Nephi, not to mention the burgeoning growth centers of St. George, Cedar City, and Moab. Traffic is gridlocked on Interstate 15 as asphalt arteries are widened to accommodate the 2002 Winter Olympics. (Williams, *New* viii)

In fact, through their entry into the mainstream economy, Mormons seem to lose some of their traditional identity. Terry Tempest Williams underlines the loss they suffered with regard to environmental issues:

Unfortunately, much of this ethic has been lost as the Mormon Church has entered modernity. Like so many other facets of American culture it has assumed a corporate and consumptive stance with an emphasis on growth and business. But I believe there is a change inside the membership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. (Austin, *Voice* 95)

In the late 1970s, the U.S. Air Force considered sites in Utah to develop and test a new missile system called the MX Missile Project. There was a certain degree of controversy and ambivalence about the economic relevance and the consequences for the environment and international policies involved. When the First Presidency issued a statement against the project, it was considered to be over but Utahns had to wait until Ronald Reagan finally confirmed the end of Jimmy Carter's MX Missile Project. The power of the Church was still visible in this affair; though some Utahns were doubtful about the project and the environmentalists were clearly against it, it was the Church that feared the arrival of non-Mormons and the rural Utahns from the south who had been exposed downwind to the test sites in Nevada who joined forces and determined the end after issuing their negative statement (White 566).

The involvement of Mormons in mainstream politics also offers some prime examples. From Reed Smoot to Michael O. Leavitt, former Governor of Utah and Secretary of Health and Human Services of the U.S. from 2005 to 2009, many Mormons have been elected to Congress or achieved important government positions. Harry Mason Reid, a Mormon Democrat from Nevada, is the first Mormon to serve as Majority Leader of the Senate (Ludlow 8) and Willard Mitt Romney, Republican Governor of Massachusetts who has a

brilliant record as a businessman and organizer of the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, came close to winning the Republican nomination for President in 2008. He is not the only Mormon to have engaged in this pursuit since his father, George Romney, an automobile industry executive and former Republican governor of Missouri, tried to run for President in 1967. In the year 2000, Republican Orrin Hatch launched a presidential campaign but ceded to George W. Bush in the end.

Another important controversial event that took place in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were the forgeries sold by Mark William Hoffman to the Church. Born in 1954, Hoffman was a member of the Church who, in 1980, announced the finding of what came to be known as the Anthon Transcript, the supposed transcription that Martin Harris gave to Charles Anthon, a classics professor at Columbia University, in 1828. Hoffman said that he found the folded transcript in a 19<sup>th</sup> century edition of the King James Bible. The event was publicly announced by the Church since it would have been a major discovery to demonstrate the truth of the Church's historicity:

Usually the Church does not advertise May's annual meeting of the Mormon History Association, but in 1980 Church Public Communications set out a press release. The media was recruited en masse to hear discussion of a brittle old paper found in a Smith family Bible. The paper contained hieroglyphs ostensibly copied by founding prophet Joseph Smith directly from the gold plates that Smith claimed to use in producing the Book of Mormon. This amazing artefact verifying Smith's translation story had been brought to the Church by a pre-medical student. This young husband was a returned missionary and priesthood holder, softspoken, deferential, not female or strident. (Sillitoe, *Off* 21)

In the following years, Hoffman continued to sell different documents, such as the Salamander Letter, written by Harris to William Wines Phelps, a personal letter by Smith in which he stated that Joseph Smith III was the person chosen to take his place after his death, or the Oath of a Freeman, a very important document in the history of the United



States. But the end of the story disclosed a truculent plot. In 1986, Hoffman was arrested for murder and forgery. Hoffman was accused of killing two people: Steve Christensen, a document collector, and Kathy Sheet, in 1985. Primary investigations, related the killings to business issues. In the subsequent investigation Hoffman was named the main suspect and the police discovered clues to his forgeries in his basement (Kimball 8).

Clearly, the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a period of revision and confrontation for a Church which could not avoid being influenced by the events that occurred in the country. Some of those changes were forcing a cultural and ideological redefinition of the identity which engaged members to the Church. There are still voices demanding these same changes and open-minded directions in relation to the share of authority and social power between men and women within the Church. The decade of the 1970s is a period of paradox and tension for the Church and for Mormon culture in general. The existing tensions between some Mormon intellectuals and the Official Church had their origin in the tensions that emerged during this decade, basically following the rhythms of American society at large. As Leonard J. Arrington points out, even though he is dealing specifically with feminism from 1965 to 1979, this is a time for variety, opposite directions and collisions (*Persons* 15). In fact, these tensions happening towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century bring forward the subsequent challenges that the Church will face in the second half of the century.

Women's issues, as the response to the Correlation Program by Hanks, were important in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and continue to be so today. Even though women are constantly involved in different societies promoting community service, all leadership roles are still bestowed on men. The clear line that administers responsibilities and power with

apparent equality is still being fought, because equating motherhood to priesthood as a source of social equality seems to fail in the eyes of women. In “Feminism in the Light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ”, B. Kent Harrison and Mary Stovall Richards explain why the equation of priesthood and motherhood is not a good solution:

If attempts to explain women’s lack of ordination to priesthood have led to the castigation of the male, they have also led to the patronization of the female. The notion that for mortal women motherhood is parallel to priesthood is equally spurious, since all women are not mothers; fatherhood, not priesthood, is the male counterpart to motherhood. Furthermore, motherhood and fatherhood are bestowed on the righteous and the wicked alike. (Harrison 187)

In fact, Harrison and Richards offer a useful approach to consider feminism through the perspective of Mormon gospel and they come to the conclusion that the inequalities promoted by gender roles are culturally constructed and have no place in a gospel that prizes individual agency and considers every individual as equal to the rest:

To the contrary, the gospel of Christ requires that we transcend erroneous cultural assumptions to view eternal truth. Recurrent in the Book of Mormon is the warning of the dangers of believing the false traditions of one’s culture – the “traditions of [the] fathers, which are correct” (Mosiah 1:5) – in preference to the full gospel (see also Alma 9:16; 17:9; Hel. 15:7). From a secular perspective, feminism also demands that we re-examine assumptions, particularly those traditions that inhibit our ability to see beyond gender stereotypes and that prescribe and proscribe one’s development solely on the basis of sex. (Harrison 192)

This serves as background to understand one of the most illustrative examples of the growing complexity towards which Mormon culture was moving in these years. An extensive feminist movement today still debates the place of women within the Church, and some of the Mormons working in this direction have been rejected by the Church. The first feminists to deal with women and Mormonism challenged the role of women within the Church provoking tension among Church authorities. This also led to a notable number

of excommunications. Women have been a topic for debate since the 1940s. As Carrie A. Miles states: “Official church interest in women’s roles does not appear to be very strong prior to the Second World War” (*LSD* 13). In any case, it would take some thirty years more before the women’s movement encouraged participation and action and, in the case of Mormonism, the debate still seems to be in progress.

One of the major examples of this critical stance took shape during the late 1970s and early 1980s campaign for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) when, as Miles explains, Church policies on women and family “exposed the Church to much unwanted attention” (*LSD* 19). Utah was one of the first states to ratify the nineteenth amendment that gave women the vote, fifty years before the whole country ratified that amendment, but the reasons why Utah ratified women’s right to vote so early reveal the complexity of the Church’s attitude towards women<sup>72</sup>. This had a clear reflection in the campaign for the Equal Rights Amendment and in the case of Sonia Johnson. Johnson, born in 1936, was one of the co-founders of the Mormons for ERA. She initiated a strong critique of the Church’s position on the ERA in the 1970s that finally led to her excommunication. The determining factor was her famous speech delivered at the meeting of the American Psychological Association in September 1979 titled “Patriarchal Panic: Sexual Politics in the Mormon Church.” In that speech, Johnson denounced the Mormon anti-ERA lobby organized by the Church and she presented some of her feminist ideas in the Mormon community. As Linda Sillitoe explains, in her speech Johnson spoke from “pain or anger” to cross “the line between equal civil rights and the patriarchal system of the Mormon

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<sup>72</sup> White says: “In Utah the motives were clearer. The Mormons gave women the vote to protect polygamy and to preserve their own social order from attack” (356-357). White affirms that the Church was concerned after the arrival of gentiles with the Gold Rush and the transcontinental road, fearing that dissident Mormons and gentiles could vote together against Young’s policies. Therefore, it was better to get the women’s support since the potential votes of Mormon women far outnumbered those of gentile women. The Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1887 put an end to the “enthusiastic political” participation of women, but this was restored after the signing of the Utah Constitution in 1895.

Church” (*Central* 38). Sillitoe, a journalist covering those events in the late 1970s, emphasizes Johnson’s profile as a very important figure in Mormon feminism and she criticizes the involvement of the Church in the campaign against the ERA: “She and her fellow Mormons for ERA via the media exposed the highly organized anti-ERA campaign which the Church claimed was only the independent effort of concerned citizens who happened to be Mormon” (*Off* 17). As Hanks asserts, the events preceding, paralleling and following the excommunication of Sonia Johnson “polarized feminists and non-feminists, fragmented feminists from each other, and left scars still evident to the present” (xviii).

The feminist tendency is still growing today in connection with a series of topics that range from cultural to sociological, from economic to theological. Mormon feminism has touched on many different facets of the same movement, encompassing socialist, psychoanalytical, existentialist, and radical feminisms; a complexity of approaches that increased during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1960s the history of Mormon feminism began with the work of Arrington, Linda P. Wilcox, Lavina Fielding Anderson and many others (Hanks xviii). Today, Mormon feminism still stretches out to different topics. On the one hand, special consideration has been given to the differentiation between priesthood for men and motherhood for women as a source of imbalance and production of roles. In “Mormon Women Have Had the Priesthood”, Michael Quinn revises the history of the Church to render the facts in detail in order to show that women have always exercised the ritual and spiritual derivations of priesthood ordinances without being recognized, ergo, without enjoying the privileges (or the obligations) of such condition:

Mormon women already have God’s priesthood of spiritual power. Without asking permission they may draw on the power of the Melchizedek priesthood that is theirs by birthright and by divine endowment. However, it is necessary for endowed women to receive permission of the church to use their priesthood in church settings to

administer the sacrament, baptize, confirm, or administer temple ordinances. Without ordination to priesthood *offices*, each endowed LDS woman already has the opportunity to fulfil in her life the prophet's promise: "I now turn the key to you in the name of God." (Quinn, *Mormon* 385)

Quinn's stress on the historical breadth of women's perspective links him to Margaret Merrill Toscano's ideas when she affirms that both "female priesthood" and the concept of the Heavenly Mother are "not merely feminist inventions imported from the world, but that they are true and important revelations given by God to Joseph Smith at the beginning of this dispensation, which continue to resonate in current LDS doctrine and ritual even if not widely accepted" (Quinn, *Put* 411).

Toscano maps this feminist struggle for equality in a line that goes from the foundation to the present day and includes the days of deception and anger that have transported women to a place close to the one where they were at the beginning.

Secondly, Mormon feminism also struggles to consider other theological matters, even those dealing with the gospel and including the persistent topic of the Heavenly Mother<sup>73</sup> or new perspectives on the Book of Mormon. This situation is basically based on the fact that, as Hanks points out, Mormon theology has long developed its doctrine over long and circumstantial periods and, because of "the absence of formal creeds" (xxiv), a Mormon theology which enjoys "speculative and dynamic freedom" (xxiv-xxv) has germinated. Carol Lynn Pearson, the renowned writer, analyzes the *Book of Mormon* from a feminist perspective. She states that:

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<sup>73</sup> The worship of a Heavenly Mother who is counterpart of God the Father is not unique to Mormonism. Other organized Churches and religious traditions had room for the teachings of a Heavenly Mother. In The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints this belief has been always origin of debates and controversy.

I believe that the Book of Mormon is indeed a book written for our day, that it contains many powerful lessons that can greatly benefit us. I propose that there is a lesson in this book that we have not really examined, one that is profoundly important. I propose that a society that negates femaleness will likely be a society that is militaristic-or that a society that is militaristic will likely be a society that negates femaleness; whichever the cause and whichever the effect, the result will be disaster. I choose to believe that the anti-female bias I find in the Book of Mormon is not there from malice but from lack of awareness. I also choose to believe that with awareness comes a desire to do better. (Pearson, *Could* 32)

Kevin and Shauna Christensen responded to this article in 1998, indicating that they were willing to deal with Pearson's proposal of a topic, the representation of women in scriptural writings. They conclude, however, that "the message of the Book of Mormon for women is a positive one" (Christensen, *Nephite* 10). Their analysis of the text regards the context, point of view and even a computational record of the language used. This type of conversation in issues dealing with theology shares concerns with other studies of the situation of Mormon women that are still up-to-date today. Pearson's critical analysis is only one example that illustrates the scope and relevancy of the feminist struggle in Mormon culture. From the 1970s to the present, this movement parallels other controversial topics which helped to complicate and improve Mormon identity in relation to the changing ideologies and ethics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The same criteria can be applied to other tensions surrounding the opinions of different scholars regarding new approaches and perspectives on doctrinal or historical subjects. A good example of this tension between the new liberal attitude of certain intellectuals and the traditionalism proposed by Church authorities is what came to be known as the September Six. In 1993, six noted Mormon intellectuals and feminists were expelled from The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints. Except for Lynne Kanavel Whitesides, all the rest were excommunicated. Avraham Gileadi was rebaptized after repenting but the other four, writer and attorney Paul Toscano, writer and feminist theologian, Maxine

Hanks, and Lavina Fielding Anderson and Michael Quinn, never attempted to join the Church again. In that same year of 1993, Cecilia Konchar Farr was fired from BYU after she “spoke on a pro-choice platform *as a Mormon woman* at a NOW-sponsored rally in Salt Lake City” (Brooks, *Genealogy* 293).<sup>74</sup>

Social scientist Armand L. Mauss declares that “every organized religion has trouble with its intellectuals” (20). Mormon controversies during the 1990s remain, in a way, as an open wound. In 1996, Mauss analyzes what he considers the close to “heresy trials” (21) that scholars have undergone during the 1980s and 1990s and with which he did not find any paragon if it was not by travelling back to periods such as “those in the 1850s and 1860s during the theocracy” (21). Mauss accepts that the 1990s is a period of “increasing retrenchment” (22):

This retrenchment seems to have been partially motivated by a growing perception of Church leaders, general and local, that the Church and its members are in grave spiritual and moral danger. Clearly our leaders are not without grounds for that perception. Yet their efforts to contain the perceived threats have somehow produced a “leaner and meaner” feeling in the Church, especially, I think, for scholars of my generation. It seems almost as though some of our leaders, in their efforts to protect the Saints from worldly subversion, have fallen back on organizational controls more familiar in an earlier theocratic era than in an age of Americanization. (Mauss 22)

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<sup>74</sup> Other affairs, both recent and old, regarding freedom and Brigham Young University have had the names of scholars such as David Knowlton, Brian Evenson or Gail T. Houston as protagonists. For different reasons all were expelled or resigned from the university. The Church expresses quite directly in its Church Educational System Honor Code its involvement in religious standards: “Brigham Young University, Brigham Young University—Hawaii, Brigham Young University—Idaho, and LDS Business College exist to provide an education in an atmosphere consistent with the ideals and principles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. That atmosphere is created and preserved through commitment to conduct that reflects those ideals and principles. Members of the faculty, administration, staff, and student body at BYU, BYU—Hawaii, BYU—Idaho, and LDSBC are selected and retained from among those who voluntarily live the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Observance of such is a specific condition of employment and admission. Those individuals who are not members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are also expected to maintain the same standards of conduct, except during church attendance. All who represent BYU, BYU—Hawaii, BYU—Idaho, and LDSBC are to maintain the highest standards of honor, integrity, morality, and consideration of others in personal behaviour.” (source: [www.byu.edu](http://www.byu.edu))

Mauss thinks that the reason for this retrenchment is that “the Church today is no longer so homogeneous and no longer has clear boundaries defining the limits of legitimate priesthood authority, on the one hand, or the requisite types and degrees of member obedience, on the other hand” (22). What he calls ambiguity and a change of values from one century to the other outlines the lack of definition of responsibilities. Mauss misses the concreteness that he finds fundamental to explain how scholars and authorities got entangled in situations of tension and controversy. Mauss asks for a clarification of the rules for membership so that everybody knows where the line of apostasy is. For Mauss, many reasons point to this indeterminacy: growth, social and intellectual diversity, family connections, church careerism, priesthood training (25-27). Mauss is talking about the fact that Mormon identity is not so stable and well-defined in contemporary times. After a demanding accommodation to the American mainstream, other authors, such as Stacey Burton, agree with this idea: “I suspect that, in some ways, we have a clearer conception of what it meant to be a Mormon in the nineteenth century than in the century just past” (*Toward* 30).

Despite its external growth beyond the United States, the Church is still based in Utah. Thomas S. Monson, the 16<sup>th</sup> President, currently serves a Church membership that exceeds 12 million<sup>75</sup>. The international growth of the Church is still visible and developing in places like Eastern Europe where, in 2007, the Church built the first temple in any former Soviet Union country in Kiev, Ukraine. In fact, that same year the Church announced that they have reached the one-million missionary mark which is a good illustration of the effort the Church has carried out in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today, more than fifty thousand missionaries serve in more than one hundred countries all around the world. This international emphasis

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<sup>75</sup> In fact, President Hinckley announced during his address to the New Mission Presidents Seminar on June 24, 2007 that Church membership had reached 13 million. The international emphasis of the missionary effort has produced a membership that resides mostly outside what is still the Church’s center, the United States.



is analogous to Mormonism's integration into the American mainstream economy and culture: in 2004, President George W. Bush awarded Mormon President Hinckley the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Eugene England states that this Americanization is one sort of "ethical decline" (Bradford, *Four* 176). It is true that many of the most original elements of Mormon theology were lost somewhere at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and that the accommodation to mainstream culture represented both took a general relief and a dangerous commodity to Mormons. In any case, this integration is kept in check by an official focus on traditional values and a conservative policy to develop and protect the specific characteristics of the Church. England himself expresses his disagreement with Harold Bloom's prediction that the Church was becoming "conservative, anti-intellectual, militant, powerful, resentful, and repressive of diversity" even though he also prophesied the growth of the Church in the United States (Bradford, *Four* 178). England, however, does admit that it is a good warning to bear in mind.

Social and economic change that take individuals in directions opposed by the moral institution of which they are part causes problems because it creates a new boundary between society and the organization, one that has not been considered when the adherents committed to the organization. (Miles, *LDS* 29)

Here Miles is talking about the position of women in the Mormon Church. However, because she uses such theoretical, abstract terminology, the theory of boundaries between society and an organization seems applicable in general terms when talking about the clash between mainstream culture and such a self-demanding culture as Mormonism. It is important to remember that the clash with secular culture threatens to corrupt or transform or, at least, tempt Mormons. England, quoting Hugh Nibley, talks about "our tragic turn in

the twentieth century” when Mormons came to be caught up in mainstream life and politics, thus feeling all the vices of “militarism, materialism, and anti-environmentalism” (Bradford, *Four* 179). In any case, not all the consequences of Mormondom’s progressive turn to American culture are negative.

Mormon place and function in an urban and cosmopolitan new space is still under debate and awaiting definition. Mauss, from a sociological point of view, or Levi S. Peterson, when talking about literature or history, both declare that the position and definition of Mormons throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century is unequivocally defined, but that to see how both Mormons themselves and those who interact with them would perceive Mormon culture at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is still in process. Robert Raleigh agrees when he says that the change in the perception of Mormons from “a radical sect” in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to a different concept after the long period of settlement in Utah leads to the conclusion that “Mormons face a very different world today from the one their religious forebears faced in the nineteenth century” (vii). As Burton says, this sense of community, this tight identity will be complicated in the years to come:

The future will see a much wider disparity among life experiences called “Mormon,” with a growing percentage of Church adherents who live their entire lives – and families who live multiple generations – far from what scholars have called the Mormon culture region. They will do so in postmodern societies in which people are generally wary of authority, hierarchical organizations, and absolute truth claims. All this suggests that what it means to *be* Mormon will be an increasingly complicated question in the century to come. (Burton, *Toward* 31)

Whether this is something negative or positive is a question that Mormons themselves need to resolve. In any case, and in the context of this dissertation, it helps to illustrate the historical, social and cultural circumstances that form the framework in which I will be placing my analysis of Phyllis Barber’s fiction.

### **3. THE LITERARY CONTEXT: *MORMON LITERARY HISTORY***

#### **3.1. Foreword to the Literary History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints**

If, in the previous section, my aim was to provide a historical context for Barber's fiction, it now seems convenient to place her books in the space of Mormon literary history as well. Again, limiting that space to her contemporary context would reduce the spectrum of information necessary to analyze the magnitude and significance of her contribution. Mormon literature requires a general overview to note the category and credit of its nature. As Karen Lynn states, "Since the early years of Mormon history, Church leaders appear to have granted the arts a legitimate place" (44); but there is a long and complex path from this statement to this one by William Mulder: "Mormon moderns are clearly stretching the old limits of theme and technique, displaying a mastery of style and structure, of voice and tone and point of view, all working together, all the words 'combed the same way'" (*Essential* 8). It is compulsory to explore that path to show how, even though it is going to be mentioned among those that Mulder calls "Mormon moderns", Barber's fiction can be said to emanate from Lynn's call for roots. That connecting path offers a wider context for Barber's fiction, just as a similar method was followed to locate her literary production within a historical context. Mulder himself states that "Mormon history weighs heavily on the Mormon writer, but it is a 'usable past'" (*Essential* 2).

The same conclusions could be attained from the Western dimension I propose here as a frame to situate Mormonism. If Mormon experience of the West opens new understandings to interpret this period of history, Mormon literature will give a necessary voice to this

experience, thus communicating, illustrating and defining it, unveiling its truth with the power of fiction. As Linda Sillitoe affirms, “Sometimes a deeper, subtler truth can be told in fiction” (*Off* 12).

Besides, as already stated in the general introduction to this dissertation, it is my aim both to claim that critical attention is given to Mormon literature, and to contribute to this visibility through a panoptic approach which posits a complex definition of Mormon literature. There is a tendency to segregate Mormon literature into two categories which seem impossible to reconcile yet, paradoxically, the Mormon literary canon proves incomplete if the two are not combined. William Morris states that “Mormon culture is based on LDS theology, membership, and history, but encompasses a broader range of attitudes and practices that can be engaged in no matter what one’s actual standing in relation to the Church is” (2). Based on this idea, Morris concludes that “the Mormon community remains divided and ambivalent” (15). Since my goal could (and should) not be to resolve this debate, I have opted to adopt the widest perspective in an attempt to encompass in my overview, “a broader range of attitudes and practices.” This method reduces the tendency to consider Mormon literature according to essentialist criteria of religious involvement or standards of faithful concern. At the same time, by bearing in mind the nature of Mormon culture, I have been able to observe the relevance of some works which might fall outside a canon validated by certain literary patterns.

Mormon writers and historians have had to wait until the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first ones of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to enjoy visibility in the non-Mormon academy (Duffy 1). In Europe, the number of colleges and scholars exploring this literature is even smaller than in the United States. Mormons play an important role in the field of minority

literature, with a new horizon of interpretations based on the derivations of their distinctive collective features. In fact, a considerable number of Mormon writers have succeeded in winning recognition. They deserve an attention unconstrained by vindicating labels such as “Western” or “Regional” or “Ethnic”. Works by writers such as Terry Tempest Williams, Orson Scott Card, Stephenie Meyer, Phyllis Barber, Linda Sillitoe or Anne Perry, all of them in different categories and styles, have accumulated sufficient importance to merit relevant scholarly research for each of them and for all of them as part of a group, whatever that group might be. John-Charles Duffy, in his detailed compilation of Mormon scholarly influence in non-Mormon universities, concludes that most of the scholarly work under way made in universities of non-Mormon affiliation since the 1990s has been directed in the line of the orthodox approach or what he calls “faithful scholarship” (Duffy 4). Duffy links faithful scholarship to orthodoxy, meaning by orthodox the “affirmation of the historical reality of LDS faith claims, of the church’s exclusive claim to divine authority, and of the obedience owed to church leaders” (1), even though he notes that the lines blur and the distinctions are not so sharp. In my opinion therefore, Mormon literature needs to encourage and promote a potential interest that comes from different contexts and education. Consequently, this introduction to Mormon literature, together with the subsequent analysis of Barber’s literature, is intended to function as an invitation to consider Mormon literature as a valuable corpus for drawing conclusions that not only will be applicable to a very peculiar and specific reality, but also to offer new assumptions of universal dimension that will enrich the scholarly approximation to the literature of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Mormon literature is peculiar, and this is not a loose statement. Mulder uses Henry James' confession of a "complex fate"<sup>76</sup> to explain how Mormon writers are born in a "closed and comfortable" world but they are involved in a literary world which is "open and secular", thus experiencing "a similar complexity, a complexity which pervades and enriches their work as individual talents explore tradition" (*Essential* 1). Through this resemblance, Mulder confronts one of the characteristics that other scholars have defined as an obstacle to or a deficiency in the excellence of Mormon literature: the lack of conflict. "There is not sufficient tension or tragedy," says England when considering what has been proposed as a criterion to discern the flaws of Mormon literature, "Mormonism answers so well so many basic questions and provides such a satisfying way of life for most of its people" (*Dialogues* 4). This is an idea that Lynn summarizes in her theory of the "disallowing of perplexity" (48-49), a complex theory that goes right to the core of Mormonism since it assumes that Mormons contemplate happiness as an inevitable and personal responsibility, available through dedication and consecration.

The second element that makes Mormon literature peculiar is its own nature. "It's so separate a culture that you could only write from within it, for people within it – unless you adopted the old Mormon-baiting stance, which is, thank God, dead" (*Stegner* xvii), replies Stegner when Richard Etulain asks him about Mormon literature.<sup>77</sup> But the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has proven that the narrative production of many Mormon writers renders enough conflict to elaborate tensions that deliver values, not only purely literary or aesthetic but also moral values. Its peculiar nature turns out to be a perfect source for

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<sup>76</sup> Because he was an American writer writing in Europe.

<sup>77</sup> Stegner expands on the topic: "One of the problems of Mormon fiction is precisely that Mormon society is so special that a Mormon writer can't project outside of it. He has to write his fiction from within, for a purely Mormon audience, or else he has to treat it as if he were a tourist, a foreign visitor coming to see the strange aberrations of the locals" (*Stegner* 127). In any case, Stegner was talking in the 1980s, and England does not agree altogether with his own statement about the insufficiency of tragic ingredients.

arguments, but Mormon writers have shown that the limits are ineffable. Tension between religion and literature has shown itself to be a narrative source of social, cultural and even religious interest. Literature has shown, in fact, that fiction can be found everywhere. Marilynne Robinson in *Gilead* (2004), outside the Mormon context<sup>78</sup>, illustrates that literature and fiction can be found anyplace:

There have been heroes there, and saints and martyrs, and I want you to know that. Because that is the truth, even if no one remembers it. To look at the place, it's just a cluster of houses strung along a few roads, and a little row of brick buildings with stores in them, and a grain elevator and a water tower with Gilead written on its side, and the post office and the schools and the playing fields and the old train station, which is pretty well gone to weeds now. But what must Galilee have looked like? You can't tell so much from the appearance of place. (Robinson 173)

But to give coherence to such a label as Mormon literature, there is a need for something else besides a fiction that renders conflict in writing. In “Essential Gestures: Craft and Calling in Contemporary Mormon Letters,” Mulder states that he sees three important developments in contemporary Mormon writing: expansion of content, discovery of techniques and a growing body of literary criticism (*Essential* 5-6). Precisely, Mormon criticism is a key aid to understanding the improvement of Mormon literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In the 1960s, Mormon criticism began to find its space<sup>79</sup>. As Mulder states, the progress experienced in scholarly work, both in production and in quality, is a valuable element to understand the betterment of Mormon literature. In any case, Mormon criticism has always

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<sup>78</sup> Or Gregory Martin in *Mountain City* (2000), where all the action takes place in a little town “one mile long, limit to limit” (Martin 7).

<sup>79</sup> Dates invite us to think that Mormon criticism was born very late, but Edward Said's opinion about American literary theory changes that perspective: “Despite the pioneering studies of Kenneth Burke well before World War Two, [American criticism] came of age only in the 1970s, and that because of an observably deliberate attention to prior European models (structuralism, semiotics, deconstruction)” (1).

been subject to division and debate, as Morris already shows in his analysis of the slippery balance between religion and culture. England follows this pattern to state that:

Mormon literary history can, in fact, be imagined as a continual struggle between the two concepts of chosen in literature that encourage one kind of writing at the expense of the other. One can set the “home literature” of the late nineteenth century, which emphasizes our being choice and favored, over against the “lost generation” literature published with national presses by Mormon authors in the 1940s, which focuses on our failures and need to repent. Or, as I have done, one might devalue the “jack-fiction” of both home literature and lost generation works in comparison to some more recent work which takes our theology more seriously. Recently, BYU Professor Richard Cracroft has set “mantic” literature, which encourages our sense of being uniquely spiritual and focused on “a sense of God in our lives,” over against “sophic” literature, which places us too firmly in the real world around us. Meanwhile, his colleague Bruce Jorgensen’s nearly opposite reading affirms the superiority of a literature that opens up to the sacredness of all people and their experience, capturing differences rather than being focused solely in Mormon essences. John Bennion, another BYU literature professor, has tried valiantly to value both what he calls “popular” or “faithful” fiction, with Jack Weyland as an example, and what he calls “literary” or “ambiguous” fiction, like that of Maurine Whipple, but he still sees them as essentially different in kind. (England, *Good* 76)

This debate was positive for Mormon letters since it enrolled many scholars that collaborated to attain a better definition of Mormon writing. The best example to illustrate that Mormon criticism is still, in spite of the considerable amount of work done in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in its beginning stage is the fact that the general debate to construct the Mormon canon continues. The division between those who claim for a Mormon literature which deals mostly with Mormon themes written for a Mormon reader and those who encourage a literature that incorporates disruptive topics still exists in Mormon culture. Film director Richard Dutcher admits that

LDS writers who eliminate Mormonism from their work are either ignorant or cowardly. Or greedy, thinking that by stripping their story of Mormonism they will appeal to a broader audience. I believe they are wrong, and I believe the lack of an identifiable LDS presence and influence in American fiction and cinema is the result of artistic and spiritual cowardice. (Bigelow 12)



The controversy, in any case, is not only related to content, but also to form. Brian Evenson states that “Mormon writing has less to do with making statements about Mormonism than it does with having something integrally Mormon about it” (Bigelow 34) and he mentions language among the elements that can determine the Mormonness of a text. Jana Riess, publisher and editor, encounters this division in the market:

LDS commercial fiction and “Mormon literature” are not necessarily the same thing. So, the next step will be to develop more of the latter, to tell stories that are darker and deeper. If the LDS model continues to follow the CBA trajectory, these will not sell particularly well. That’s a sad market reality. But courageous writers who are willing to tell authentic stories – Terry Tempest Williams, Levi Peterson, and Brian Evenson come to mind – will still be read and discussed when copies of faith-promoting pabulum sell for ninety-nine cents on eBay. (Bigelow 141)

In fact, Riess advocates for the erosion of the line that divides “self-consciously literary and the writing that is done to sell books” (Bigelow 142). In this connection, she predicts that, in the future, Mormon culture will see “the emergence of more independent voices” (Bigelow 143), meaning by independent not that they express some kind of criticism of the official Church but that they “connect the Mormon experience – which has been all too insular – to the wider world” (Bigelow 143). One of the founding fathers of modern Mormon literature, Douglas Thayer, affirms in an interview for *Irreantum*, that what “serious Mormon writers and readers need is a press that publishes book-length fiction, poetry, biography, autobiography, and memoir – maybe even creative nonfiction” (Bigelow 199). Thayer is trying to find an outlet for his complaint about Mormon adults not having any interest in reading.

The debate about Mormon literature being didactic or not goes to the very core of its nature. Barber herself, reflecting upon Nadine Gordimer’s words over political issues, concludes that “the differentiation seems to be promotion vs. exploration” (*Writing* xviii).

Apparently, every Mormon writer has to pay a toll before achieving a work of art. Some might see this as an uplifting challenge, others as a hindrance to favor the promotion of good literature and the possibility of balance, but it seems unavoidable that tension between religion and literature be encountered when they are dealt with at the same time, just as it is unavoidable when talking about the literary production of a specific religious group.

Although the work by scholars such as Austin, Anderson, Jorgensen, Cracroft, Burton, Bennion or Mulder has been fundamental to establish the structure and content of this section, the main source of its design is England's "Mormon Literature: Progress and Prospects." Thus, this section is divided into four different periods that span the years from the foundation of the Church to the present. In the first period, from 1830 to 1880, attention centers on *The Book of Mormon* and the unsophisticated works produced by the members of the Church during the pioneering days, including the important 19<sup>th</sup> century sub-genre writing known as the Mormon-menace novels (Peterson, *Mormon* 849)<sup>80</sup>. The second period, from 1880 to 1930, starts with Orson F. Whitney's speech and deals mostly with the literature produced after Whitney requests a literature based on the Restored Gospel. The third period, from the end of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the second half, analyzes the Lost Generation, a valuable group of writers who wrote some of the most interesting books in Mormon literary history. Finally, the fourth period, which extends to the present day, provides a general survey of contemporary Mormon literature and criticism, with special emphasis on the new perspectives introduced by the most recent Mormon writers.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> I will be using this denomination as a label to gather all the novels being published in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and which had some kind of reference to Mormonism from a negative point of view. I borrowed this term from Levi S. Peterson, who, in "Mormon Novels", gives an accurate chronological account of all these novels.

<sup>81</sup> Morris states that this overview shows that "Mormon literary history becomes a story of failure combined with promise for the future" (4).

Michael Austin maintains that “to a very large degree, texts by Mormon women *are* the Mormon literary canon, and when we discuss important, influential, and critically acclaimed books by Mormons, we will find our conversations nearly dominated by women author’s works” (*Some* 23). From a feminist point of view, this demonstrates that Maxine Hanks is right when she talks about it being “more empowering to consider female authority as creativity and authorship” (xxii). In her survey of the new poetry being written by Mormons during the 1980s, Sillitoe, who praises the valuable disruption of a new tone that these poets add to their literature by introducing “evident individual struggle, adjustment and aching” (*New* 54), reinforces Austin’s opinion about the importance of women writers when she points out that the number of women poets included in the contemporary poetry section of the anthology *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints* denotes a substantial increase in comparison to the number of women poets considered for the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>82</sup> England shares that perception:

In the first generation of writers after the Restoration, roughly 1830-1880, Mormon women wrote more than fifty percent of our best journals, diaries, letters, autobiographies, poems, and hymns. But that was not just an unusual, anomalous nineteenth-century phenomenon. In the twentieth century, after a fallow period from 1880 to 1930, a second generation of first-rate writers developed, from 1930-1960. Our best two Mormon novels, which come from that period, are by women. Our two most innovative histories were also written then – and by women. In the third generation of Mormon writers, since 1970, which contains such quality it looks to many of us like “The Dawning of a Brighter Day,” *all* of our collections of personal essays, about fifty percent of our finest individual essays and poems, and many of our best short stories are by women. Scanning down a select bibliography of Mormon literature I compiled lately, I find it clear that in every period and most genres more than half of our best, most challenging original work is by women. The most challenging, insightful, and successful independent journal in nineteenth-century Mormonism was the *Women’s Exponent*. And in 1982, when I began to make this investigation, the three modern independent journals of Mormon thought and literature, *Dialogue*, *Exponent II*, and *Sunstone*, were all edited by women. Contrary to the claim that the Mormon patriarchy suppresses its women more than its men –

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<sup>82</sup>*A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints* was the first published anthology in Mormon literature. Sillitoe’s emphasis is therefore significant even from an historic perspective: “[It] includes twelve men and four women in the section of nineteenth century poetry, but sixteen men and thirteen women in the twentieth century selection” (*New* 47-48).

and does so more than other cultures, I can find no other culture, or nation, contemporary or historical, in which such a preponderance of creative thought and writing is by its women. (England, *We* 1)

The position of women in Mormon patriarchal society has always been a matter of debate, especially in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, a Mormon literature that can be also analyzed from a feminist perspective reveals an improvement. When approached from an extensive or historical point of view, the works accomplished by a varied number of Mormon writers reveal a sense of development towards complexity and diversification, both in content and aesthetics, that overcomes Stegner's or Lynn's admonitions about the difficult nature of Mormon literature. Barber quotes Italo Calvino who declares that it is necessary to give "a voice to whatever is without a voice, when it gives a name to what as yet has no name, especially to what the language of politics excludes or attempts to exclude" (*Writing* xix). This introduction is an attempt to give voice not only to Mormon writers in general, but specifically to those Mormons who have complex meanings to communicate, whether from an outsider's point of view, and, certainly, or, even more importantly, from an insider's point of view.

## **3.2. The Literary History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints**

### **3.2.1. First Period: 1830-1880. Foundations**

That Mormonism began with a book is a statement held by various Mormon scholars such as William Mulder or Neal Lambert. This book is *The Book of Mormon* and the Mormons are considered to be the people of that book. John Bennion, another famous Mormon scholar, explains how Mormons relied on references to the great stories of Mormon culture to construct their identity (*Popular* 173).

From the very beginnings of the Church, different leaders and the prophet Joseph Smith encouraged their people to acquire wisdom and culture to achieve their goal in this life. One of the best ways to obtain that wisdom was through literature. Accordingly, writing became very important for the foundation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and for the construction of Mormon identity and culture. Similarly, religion and literature have shared a close relationship in Mormonism from the very beginning, which has generated different consequences throughout the history of Mormon literature. Those consequences are still alive and active in contemporary Mormon literature and criticism, as I will illustrate later on this dissertation.

In the early years of the Church, Mormons produced non-traditional literature in unsophisticated writing. During the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Mormons had better things to do than writing fiction. In their frontier culture, the accent was placed on the practical. Thus, as Dale L. Morgan says, “under these circumstances, it would be extraordinary if any Mormon writer to 1900 had produced a novel of distinction” (4).

Whether they were intended for the practical needs of the Church (hymns and sermons) or as personal records of the convert's experience in those hard days (diaries, memoirs and letters), these early texts can be considered an important legacy. In their historical dimension, they can be seen as a fundamental aid to understanding the convert's experience and the struggle to settle and develop the community. In their literary dimension, even though they are unrevised and unsophisticated, some scholars, such as Mulder, long for the Mormon "genius" that these first works exhibited. Mulder considers that the later works, limited by literary types, have lost that genius (*Mormonism* 1). From a strictly Mormon perspective, these early texts provide a valuable legacy of the sense of community and tradition that Mormons still enjoy today: "Their diaries, letters, and hymns capture, sometimes in moving detail and often in homely but spiritually empowered rhetoric, both the costs of discipleship and the experiences and convictions that made people able and willing to pay those costs" (England, *Good* 77).

### The Book of Mormon

An accurate chronological approach to the history of Mormon literature requires that we start from the very beginning: the *Book of Mormon*. Over five million copies of The *Book of Mormon* are published in more than eighty languages a year. The *Book of Mormon* is one of the sacred texts of the Mormon Church, and, as Christians do with the Bible, Mormons appreciate not only the religious merit of their sacred book but its literary merit as well. In addition, Catherine L. Albanese emphasizes that the *Book of Mormon* was an attempt to open a new source for American faith through the story of Lehi and his sons and the Lamanites and the Nephites which "established the Hebraic origins of American Indians and supplied America with a biblical past" (226). The book has long been rejected and

refuted through analyses that claim to prove the historical inaccuracy of a text that tried to link America to Jerusalem: “ [It] served as a conduit to bring Christianity’s mythological base into the New World more or less directly” (Shipps 46-47). Many different scholars have worked to show that the ideas developed in the book, whether symbolical or metaphorical or not, had no base in truth. The book maintains its sacred status and many readers are still moved by the story and the ideas presented in the narrative:

Since the days of its first telling, intense efforts have been made to explain the Mormon story away by citing contemporary reports of the unsavory character of Joseph Smith and his entire family, and by compiling a wealth of commonsense information about obvious Book of Mormon parallels to other nineteenth-century accounts tying the American Indian to Israel’s lost tribes; also by pointing out the book’s descriptions of situations, incidents, characters, and theology suspiciously like those within its so-called translator’s ken, and its echoes of Masonic lore, its Isaiah passages, and its bountiful anachronism supply. But while new accounts ringing the changes in the anti-Mormon version of Smith’s story have continued to appear, at what sometimes seems regular intervals since Alexander Campbell first analyzed the Book of Mormon in the *Millennial Harbinger* in 1831, the prophet’s testimony endures, unchanged in any particular, a stumbling block to scientific history and foolishness to many. (Shipps 44)

As pointed out in the introduction to the history of the Church, the book is regarded as a divine revelation which prophet Joseph Smith translated from the golden plates where the prophet-historian Mormon engraved the story “of the people of Nephi, and also of the Lamanites,” as indicated on the title page of the book. The first leaders of the Church perceived the book as an instrument to enlighten and indoctrinate new members, so they implemented an important system to teach and promote reading and writing. Thus, the *Book of Mormon* itself came to be the motor behind the culturization of the Mormon people.

Douglas Wilson, a non-Mormon American scholar, was the first to say that the *Book of Mormon* should be studied from a literary perspective. He is not the only one who

advocated such a perspective. Brodie, in her controversial autobiography of Smith, considers the literary quality of the book while she points out the sociological relevance of the text:

The Book of Mormon was a mutation in the evolution of American literature, a curious sport, at once sterile and potent. Although it bred no imitators outside Mormonism and was ignored by literary critics, it brought several hundred thousand immigrants to America in the nineteenth century. (Brodie, *Nobody* 67)

Most of the early critiques of the *Book of Mormon* tried to prove the historicity of the texts, but since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many scholars, including those named here and others such as Richard Rust, Robert K. Thomas, Roy West, Franklin S. Harris Jr. or Terryl Givens have approached the book from a literary point of view, analyzing the aesthetic values of the text while pointing out the significance and interest of researching the *Book of Mormon* from a literary approach. In a postmodern age of canon expansion that aims at appraising all writing, Wilson underlines the critical interest of the archetypes described and developed in the book. England adds that the book “has the verbal and narrative power, linguistic and historical complexity, ethical and philosophical weight and mythic structure of a great epic” (*Mormon* 1). Both of them point to the significance of the *Book of Mormon* from a different viewpoint, through a literary perspective rather than from its religious or historical relevance.<sup>83</sup> Many other scholars make claims for the verbal weight and complexity of the book and Mulder states that the *Book of Mormon* has added words to the language and transformed Mormon literary tradition by introducing a whole new set of names, images

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<sup>83</sup> The importance of the Book of Mormon from a different perspective is given by Ishmael W. Stagner, II in his article “Art, Culture, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ: A Hawaiian Perspective” when he explains its capital importance to the Hawaiian language: “One of the great losses to the Hawaiian community is the Hawaiian language. Few Hawaiians speak the language, and those who do, do not speak the Hawaiian of earlier times. Thus, much that was written and recorded in earlier times is almost totally inaccessible. In this respect it is interesting to note that the 1854 Hawaiian edition of the Book of Mormon stands out as a major document exemplifying the clarity and beauty of the nineteenth-century Hawaiian language. Certainly, if culture helps to give a people an identity, then language, as an aspect of culture, plays a critical role in establishing and defining that identity. The gospel emphasis on preserving cultural records is not lost on the Hawaiians or, for that matter, on any other Polynesian peoples” (64).



and symbols, including unique place names from New York to Utah and a gallery of specific heroes, which even today are identified as part of a distinctive culture (*Mormonism* 1).

Focusing solely on its dimension as a work of art, the *Book of Mormon* has a literary intensity all of its own. Not only because it has added a distinct literary type to native literature, the Nephite legend, the subject of several Ph.D. dissertations (Mulder, *Mormonism* 1), but also because it has enriched Mormon literature with poignant psalms and lyrics that provide a starting point to Mormon literary tradition (Mulder, *Mormonism* 3). Many of the writers mentioned in the four different periods find the main source for their literature in the *Book of Mormon*. On the other hand, Harold Bloom, who, in his book *The American Religion*, praises Smith for his genius both as a poet and a prophet, disapproves of the *Book of Mormon*'s "wholly tendentious and frequently tedious" (*American* 85) aroma and he reduces the applicability of the book for present day Mormons. This opinion coincides with what Mark Twain expressed many years before: "The book is a curiosity to me, it is such a pretentious affair, and yet so 'slow', so sleepy; such an insipid mess of inspiration" (110). Twain's analysis, one of the first literary analyses of the book, branded its content as "moungrel"<sup>84</sup> (110) and concluded, employing his characteristic sense of humor: "It is chloroform in print" (110). Nevertheless, Twain does not coincide with Bloom in the specific details of his analysis of the book. Bloom's opinion contains an obvious contradiction when he lifts Smith above poets like Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson or Emily Dickinson, in spite of his negative general appraisal of the book. In any case, as he does with Southern Baptist Edgar Young Mullins

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<sup>84</sup> In any case, Twain offers an illuminating and relatively positive perspective of Mormons when he says that the book "is rather stupid and tiresome to read, but there is nothing vicious in its teachings. Its code of morals is unobjectionable – it is "smouched" from the New Testament, and no credit given" (110).

or the Congregational preacher and theologian Jonathan Edwards, Bloom analyzes Smith's work as a whole rather than any single piece of writing:

So self-created was he that he transcends Emerson and Whitman in my imaginative response, and takes his place with the great figures of our fiction... So rich and varied a personality, so vital a spark of divinity, is almost beyond the limits of the human, as normally we construe those limits. To one who does not believe in him, but who has studied him intensely, Smith becomes almost a mythology in himself. (Bloom, *American* 127)

In fact, Smith's impact on Mormon literature cannot be reduced to that of his translation of the *Book of Mormon*. His sermons and speeches have been translated and widely read and studied, and, apart from working on some other texts, he was also responsible for encouraging the promotion of literature among the members of the Church he founded:

Ever aware of the importance of literary symbols, Joseph Smith worked on a revision of the Bible, published the Book of Abraham, published works of his own with poetic qualities, and encouraged our finest literary people, Parley Pratt and Orson Pratt, to publish tracts and pamphlets, some of which had distinct literary merit. (Arrington, *Mormonism* 2)

### Other Religious Texts

Apart from the *Book of Mormon* and the *King James Bible*, two other books form the body of scriptural literature for Mormons: the *Doctrine and Covenants* and the *Pearl of Great Price*.<sup>85</sup> Together with these texts, Mormons appreciate some other minor genres,

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<sup>85</sup> Apart from their sacred books, many others have become semi-sacred books. When published in official publications or approved by the Church, these texts acquired some sort of doctrinal status. Today, what is published in *Ensign* or works by the highest members of the councils still acquire such status. This has been a tendency from the beginning, even for those texts published in *Deseret News* or *Millennial Star* in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. After naming the books *Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Century I* and *Essentials in Church History*, both by B. H. Roberts as examples, Shipps adds that "the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the development of an entire genre of quasi-official LDS history that received tacit, if not direct, ecclesiastical sanction if it had been written by one of the LDS General Authorities (members of the First Presidency, apostles sitting in the Council of Twelve, or high priests sitting in the First Council of Seventy), or was published by a church press" (88-89).

such as articles, essays, dissertations, hymns or speeches, all of which became fundamental to the formation of a literature anchored in Mormonism.

Outstanding among these other important texts in the Mormon tradition is the *King Follett Discourse*. This sermon given by Smith, and first published in 1844, remains as one of the best examples of discursive literature produced in the Church and it is still the object of literary analysis. This sermon stands not only as a valuable piece because of its content, but also because of its style and energy:

But once in the spring of 1844, at the funeral of a certain King Follett, he delivered one of the most profound sermons of his whole career. For the first time he proclaimed in an unified discourse the themes that he had been inculcating in fragments and frequently in secret to his most favored Saints: the glory of knowledge, the multiplicity of Gods, the eternal progression of the human soul. (Brodie 366)

In addition to their sacred and doctrinal interest, sacred books are the basis for many other later literary works. As Karen Lynn says: “Yet the sacred texts cast their shadow, standing as an inimitable comparative standard and demanding that certain assumptions be made about any subsequent act of creativity, particularly verbal creativity” (47). Besides, they have been also used as sources of different literary versions that attempt to retell the stories already told in these texts. Modern examples of this tendency are interesting; for example, the serialized approach that Orson Scott Card takes when using a science-fiction point of view to tell scriptural stories. Gideon Burton considers this tendency a genre in itself and he points to B. H. Roberts as “the most prominent early author in this genre, composing a serialized novel published in the *Contributor* magazine starting in 1889 and based around the controversial Book of Mormon character, Corianton.”<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> From his introduction to the section titled “Scripture-based Fiction” in his online Mormon Database.

## Hymns and Sermons

In this context of literature intended to meet the practical needs of the Church, the hymns must be underlined. The poetry and religious passion inherent in some of these hymns is relevant for Mormons. Sermons and hymns can be regarded as literary types in the sense that they all follow a general structure; they look back to tradition either to use it as a base or to revise it, and they genuinely form part of Mormon history. Emma Smith, Smith's wife, collected and published the first hymnal in 1835; it was actually a brief volume of poetry (the music was borrowed from favorite popular melodies). Hymns constitute an important legacy and oral tradition in Mormon culture, as J. Spencer Cornwall explains in the preface to his book *Stories of Our Mormon Hymns*: "Those hymns in the Latter-day Saints hymnal which have been written and composed by Latter-day Saints authors and composers represent a distinct religious heritage to the members of the Church of which they can be justly proud" (vii).

Five hymns written by W.W. Phelps and Parley P. Pratt are also considered an important contribution to the Mormon hymnal. Phelps, who was born in 1792 and died in 1872, is a very important figure in the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints since he witnessed or participated in many of the most important events of the Church, such as accompanying Smith, for instance, when he was sent to the Carthage jail. Phelps was converted by Rigdon and excommunicated in 1839, but he returned to the faith in 1841. His most famous hymn is "Come, All Ye Saints of Zion," still a popular hymn among Mormons; but other hymns written by him, such as "The Spirit of God Like a Fire Is Burning", sung for the first time at the dedication of the Kirtland Temple in 1836, or his tribute to Smith, "Praise to the Man", are valuable icons in Mormon cultural history. Pratt,

an important leader and Church authority, was a versatile writer who composed hymns, poetry, historical and religious writings and wrote a popular autobiography. His *Dialogue between Joseph Smith and the Devil*, first published in the New York Herald in 1844, is considered the first piece of fiction in Mormon literary history, even though its main didactic objective was to improve the Mormon image and to indoctrinate its gentile audience. Pratt's *Autobiography*, edited and published after his death in the 1870s, is still popular among Mormon readers today. Some Mormon scholars praise the eloquence and almost fictional intensity of many of the scenes that Pratt describes in this autobiography (England, *Mormon* 7), but some of its flaws have also been pointed out: "prolixity, repetition, and triteness, then, are Pratt's general faults" (Christmas 109).

### Personal Writing

In this early period, a long neglected style of writing was industriously produced. Valuable from a historical point of view, personal writing was one of the most important genres that Mormons practiced initially. A custom encouraged by leaders and performed by many individuals became so popular and refined that it developed into a tradition that still persists among Mormons. In fact, many scholars are returning to these records because they offer a privileged insight. James Olney's ideas place these works within a new autobiographical framework that derives from Wilhelm Dilthey's ideas about the importance of autobiography from the point of view of historicity:

I have in mind such "studies" as American Studies, Black Studies, Women's Studies, and African Studies. According to the argument of these critics (who are becoming more numerous every day), autobiography – the story of a distinctive culture written in individual characters and from within – offers a privileged access to an experience (the American experience, the black experience, the female experience, the African experience) that no other variety of writing can offer. (Olney 13)

In addition, scholars also turn their attention to these texts because they initiate a line that connects to the present, establishing a unified collection of different biographies. This unity helps to clarify the development of Mormon literature. This interest in personal writing is not specific to Mormons. Georges Gusdorf underlines the importance of Christianity in the emergence of autobiography:

Christianity brings a new anthropology to the fore: every destiny, however humble it be, assumes a kind of supernatural stake. Christian destiny unfolds as a dialogue of the soul with God in which, right up to the end, every action, every initiative of thought or of conduct, can call everything back into question. Each man is accountable for his own existence, and intentions weigh as heavily as acts – whence a new fascination with the secret springs of personal life. (Gusdorf 33)

Robert F. Sayre, following these same ideas, explains in “Autobiography and the Making of America”, the relevance of personal writing in the communication of Americanness:

In any case, autobiography in America is somehow both a part of our daily vernacular and our earliest heritage, reaching back to the Puritan diaries and the seventeenth – and eighteenth – century travel narratives, the Indian captivity narratives and the “biographies” and “autobiographies” of notable Indian chiefs, the countless success stories of businessmen and celebrities, the protest stories of exslaves and victims, the tales of pioneering and the “Americanization” of immigrants, the deceitful apologies of scoundrels and rogues, the utterly artificial “True Confessions” in magazines of romance and pornography, the formulae of high-school yearbooks, photograph albums, *curricula vitae*, and *Who’s Who*. (Sayre 147)

The personal writings produced by the members of the Church in the early days include diaries and letters which reveal the accomplishments and frustrations of the converts, immigrants and settlers. Their testimony offers new insights into understanding the experience of the West. These primary sources, considered a sub-literature until fairly

recently, have generally been dismissed by formalist critics<sup>87</sup>. In the last twenty years, post-structuralism and various forms of ethical criticism have looked beyond such distinctions to identify and appreciate the different but equal values of all kinds of literature. The formalist criterion says that good literature is concerned with aesthetic qualities, structure, style and organization, but this does not work for Mormon personal writing because, although it has affected many people, it is not outstanding in terms of its formal or aesthetic qualities. England names some critics who have approached literature from a different perspective: “critics like Yvor Winters, Ian Watt, Wayne Booth, Robert Scholes, Ed Hirsch or John Gardner have explored some of the neglected social, moral and religious values in literature and the critical means for understanding and evaluating literature in terms of such values” (England, *Dawning* 8). A close reading of Mormon letters, journals, hymns, biographies and autobiographies provides significant glimpses into the minds of these members of the Church who comprised one of the most distinctive and remarkable groups in 19<sup>th</sup> century America. From the earliest days up to today, personal writing has been a constant in Mormon writing, a tendency that, as Steven P. Sondrup suggests, can be rooted in the spirit and nature of their religious beliefs:

Among Mormons, autobiography has been for decades one of the most widespread modes of literary expression and can be related to the larger tradition of the genre in terms of the nineteenth century origin of the Church. Some of the finest and most moving examples of Mormon autobiography owe their very existence to the

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<sup>87</sup> The personal essay is a good example of the importance of these sub-genres in Mormon culture. The Church promoted the writing of personal journals or diaries to bear testimony from the very first days of the Church. Today, personal writing is still a popular genre among Mormon writers. Secondly, as a literature characterized by the faith shared by writers and readers, this genre is also part of a tradition that has its source in the religious sermons which are a very important part of Mormon literary and cultural history. Even though, in this introduction, sermons have only been named in passing, they are a very important part of Mormon literary history, since both readers and scholars regard them actually as valuable texts for understanding Mormon culture and history as well as the creation of a Mormon aesthetic. B.H. Roberts, James E. Talmage and Joseph Smith are good examples of the origins of a genre that has been expanded in contemporary days by writers stretching the style and format to wider fields. Elouise Bell, Mary Bradford, Lowell Bennion, Eugene England, Edward Geary, Terry Tempest Williams or Phyllis Barber herself have produced good examples of personal writing.

admonitions of early church leaders that institutional as well as personal histories should be kept. (Sondrup, *Literary* 75)

Among these personal recollections, William Woodruff's journal, almost a daily record over sixty years, provides both a rich source of cultural history and an interesting autobiography to understand the development of an apostle and Church President. Eliza R. Snow's *Trail Dairy* is one of the best descriptions of the crossing from Nauvoo to Council Bluffs after the death of Smith; George Laub's record of the effort to build and develop the city of Nauvoo; Mary Goble Pay's rendition of the 1856 handcart tragedy; and the detailed and intense diary of Joseph Millett, covering both his 1853 mission as a teenager to Nova Scotia and his later life as a settler in southern Utah and Nevada are only some examples of the many that have survived to narrate the initial stages of Mormon history. Many other personal journals also serve as primary texts that reveal Mormon identity: the diaries and journals of William Clayton, Hosea Stout, Charles L. Walker, George A. Smith and John D. Lee are personal memoirs written in the authentic first person voice of the narrator. Though often didactic, they are usually thrilling in the telling of the many experiences that these pioneers went through. As literary types, their simplicity and lack of formal excellence is sometimes balanced by the fascinating recollection of the events experienced by those pioneers and the vivid characters that stand as skillful stereotypes of human endurance. Sondrup, in his analysis of Pratt and Smith's personal writings, points out one of the flaws of these autobiographies: the lack of doubt or personal insight. Mormon autobiographers, rather than looking inside for self discovery, try to formulate a direct and powerful declaration of their certainties: "what is particularly noteworthy here is the motivation to inform and instruct others to the extent of the author's competence; it is clearly not, at least not primarily, a quest for the authentic self" (Sondrup, *Literary* 76). Perhaps, that "spiritual security" (Sondrup, *Literary* 76) is what gives them the literary



worth that Mormons enjoy, the moral dimension that makes rudimentary literature a successful act of communication between the reader and the writer.

The custom of record keeping continues even today with the *Book of Remembrance*<sup>88</sup>, the missionary experiences and the oral witnesses at monthly testimony meetings, all of them elements of Mormon culture and part of an exceptional oral tradition. Apart from being a source of identity, this custom has proven incalculable to attain information about the history of the Church and Jan Shipps is aware of this:

There is evidence aplenty about the Mormons themselves since, as religious duty requires, they have been prodigious record-keepers from the very beginning, preserving for their posterity full accounts of what happened to them personally and what happened to the movement corporately. (Shipps 43)

To sum up, these personal literary expressions are less concerned with the aesthetics of form and style than with the practical matters of defense, instruction and preaching. The diaries, journals, letters and hymns and the autobiographies by Smith, Pratt<sup>89</sup> or John Taylor draw a significant portrait of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and thus, a valuable tool for understanding the foundations of Mormon identity and culture. This is where England sees their literary value and importance for Mormon culture, in terms of the content and vision:

This other example is a better one also because it, even more clearly than that novel, helps make another point that must be considered in our Mormon aesthetic – that a literature such as ours, which I have suggested may be inferior in form to that conventionally recognized as great but which is superior in content and vision, shows

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<sup>88</sup> It is customary in the Mormon Church to keep a personal written record in a book called *The Book of Remembrance*. The official Church encourages this custom.

<sup>89</sup> Pratt's *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (1874) is a widely researched autobiography in Mormon literature. His work and the work by Joseph Smith, whose brief annotations of personal writing were collected in one of the sacred books of the Mormons, *The Pearl of Great Price*, are considered by scholars like Sondrup to have literary qualities superior to their moral benefit.

to best advantage in certain genres – those characterized by personal witness to faith and experience, ones in which the truth of actual living and of direct confession is at least as important as aesthetic or metaphorical truth. I mean journals and diaries, letters, sermons, lyric poetry (especially hymns), autobiography and autobiographical fiction, and the personal essay. (England, *Dialogues* 66)

### Mormon-menace Novels

In this initial period, a group of literary works, rather than being written by Mormons, were written by gentiles who took advantage of the mythical and mysterious characteristics of the Mormon idiosyncrasy to fuel their narrative, known as the Mormon-menace novels. If what Leonard J. Arrington states, “a literary history of Mormonism is largely a story of creative plot and counterplot” (*Mormonism* 1), is true, the so-called Mormon-menace novels are no more – but no less – than one half of Mormon literary history.

These writers found material for their fiction in the more sensational aspects of Mormonism: polygamy, the secret police (also known as the Danites<sup>90</sup>), secret Mormon rituals in temples, the golden plates and so on. In fact, Arrington charts a sort of variable pattern that almost all the Mormon-menace novels followed, both in the plot development and the portrayal of the Mormons:

The plots of the hundred or more anti-Mormon novels of the period revolve around a number of different motifs. There is the personal experience motif, in which a lovely and high-principled woman becomes associated in some way with the Mormons, and tells of her various experiences with the sect, all of which are designed to demonstrate that the Mormons were cruel, treacherous, and depraved. Or there is a flight-escape motif, in which the narrative features encounters with vengeful Danites, and thrilling escapes as the Destroying Angels pursue the pure-hearted heroine, in some cases across the seas. A third type is the loosely-drawn portrait of life in a polygamous household; polygamous husbands are shown to be materialistic, insensitive, and lecherous. In most treatments the Mormons are represented by two stereotypes: a

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<sup>90</sup> The Danites was a fraternal organization founded in 1838 that later became a sort of militia which played a central participation role in the Mormon War. Diverse folklore and legends have been written about this group's different crimes.

hierarchy of wily, insincere leaders, and the rabble of ignorant, fanatical followers. (Arrington, *Mormonism* 6)

In 1843, Captain Frederick Marryat published his three volumes of *Monsieur Violet*. Only a small part of Marryat's work deals with Mormonism, limited exclusively to Mormon activities in the Eastern states, but Arrington perceives some kind of opportunism here: "Although the Mormon episode comprises about fifteen percent of the total volume, it is not well integrated and appears to have been an afterthought." (*Mormonism* 2)<sup>91</sup>

In any case, *Monsieur Violet* reveals a pattern in Mormon-menace fiction: the theme of polygamy. Eight years later, Edward Bulwer-Lytton used polygamy in his book *Alice; or, The Mysteries* (1851). Other anti-polygamy Mormon-menace novels using the same topics and tone soon followed. These include Orvilla S. Belisle's *The Prophets; or, Mormonism Unveiled* (1855); Maria Ward's *Female Life Among the Mormons* (1855); W.J. Conybeare's *Perversion; or, The Causes and Consequences of Infidelity, a Tale of the Times* (1856); and Metta Victoria Fuller's *Mormon Wives* (1856, retitled *Lives of Female Mormons* in 1860). In his book *The Viper on the Earth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy (Religion in America)*, Terryl L. Givens gives a good summary of how the theme of polygamy was used in fiction to shock rather than attending to its profound meaning:

Depictions of polygamy [in works of fiction] were also, and as predictably, wildly distorted. But then, the actual practice of plural marriage was seldom the stuff of steamy fiction. Writers of pulp fiction were unanimous in their claim that, in one author's words, "what was planned by Young for man's paradise proved woman's

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<sup>91</sup> Arrington adds that according to research that traces the source of the text, this has a significant number of antecedents: "Comparison shows the Mormon section of Captain Marryat's book to be almost identical to sections in John C. Bennett's *History of the Saints* (New York, 1842) which is in turn essentially a reprint of *Mormonism Portrayed*, a pamphlet published in 1841 by William Harris and probably written by Thomas Sharp, editor of the *Warsaw Signal*. Sharp was one of the men tried for the murder of Joseph and Hyrum Smith" (*Mormonism* 2).

hell.” [Mrs. W.A. King, *Duncan Davidson; A Story of Polygamy* (Philadelphia: Dorrance, 1928)] But from Brigham Young’s pronouncement that he would rather be the corpse in a funeral procession than have to accept the doctrine of polygamy [*Journal of Discourses*, 3:266] to the dozens of elders incarcerated in Territorial prison for their devotion to the practice to a generation of uniquely stressful marital relations for men and women alike, polygamy was far removed from the male paradise of fiction. Plural marriage was in practice a painful struggle against consciences shaped by Puritan values that most members, converts from Protestant faiths, shared. Domestic arrangements were inconvenient, fraught with jealousies, and, after the first wave of antipolygamy legislation, hampered by flight, concealment, and frequent relocations.

Also at odds with the fictional portrayal of the practice is the fact that in 1852, the same year that polygamy was publicly announced as a principle, Utah passed a divorce statute. (Givens, *Viper* 144)

The Church became a literary resource for these writers and by the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was quite popular to resort to the legendary distortions that these books promoted. Langdon E. Mitchell’s *Two Mormons from Muddlety: Love in the Backwoods* (1876), Charles Bertrand Lewis’ *Bessie Bawe; or, The Mormon’s Victim* (1880), and G.A. Mearnsin’s *The Geese of Ganderica, Their History, Their Sense, and Nonsense, by a Utah Goose* (1882) followed what was becoming a tradition. The majority of the novels continued to contain anti-Mormon sensationalism such as John Hansen Beadle’s *Life in Utah; or, The Mysteries and Crimes of Mormonism* (1870), even though Beadle’s work was closer to reality than those of many other 19<sup>th</sup> century writers because he was editor of the *Salt Lake Reporter*.

Mark Twain in *Roughing It* (1872) and Artemus Ward in *Artemus Ward among the Mormons* (1869) contributed to the development of that sensationalist pattern that Marryat had begun thirty years earlier. Both these popular writers wrote articles and gave lectures after actually spending a few months among the Mormons which is why some Mormon scholars (Cracroft, *Distorting* 5) consider the misconceptions and attitudes promoted in their books to be negligent or even premeditated. Although they received a warm welcome

and were able to learn from Mormons firsthand, Twain and Ward disregarded the facts preferring, once again, to provide a distorted account of enigmatic Mormon doctrines. By exaggerating them, they achieved a humorous tone which guaranteed commercial success.

In *Roughing It* Mark Twain registers his travels through the West. When talking about Utah, his humor reveals a superficial knowledge of the Mormons<sup>92</sup>. Complexity is only present in a synchronized vision of preposterous awareness that hides behind the weight and light given to such shocking elements as the destroying angels or polygamy, even though Twain himself reports that he had no time “to make the customary inquisition into the workings of polygamy and get up the usual statistics and deductions preparatory to calling the attention of the nation at large once more to the matter” (101).

After talking briefly about Bill Hickman or Porter Rockwell, Twain proceeds to discuss polygamy and he raises the stakes even higher. Twain exploits the voice of a tiresome Brigham Young who enters into a pseudo-comic spiral of sincerity: “Bless my soul, you don’t know anything about married life. It is perfect dog’s life, sir – perfect dog’s life” (107-108). To his benefit, Twain relies on a character called Mr. Johnson, a gentile with a tendency to embellish his stories, but Twain invests in him enough relevance to let him talk freely about the Mormons, only until Twain displays “a synchronized slide of preposterous awareness” saying that

[S]ome instinct or the other made me set this Johnson down as being unreliable. And yet he was a very entertaining person, and I doubt if some of the information he gave us could have been acquired from any other source. He was pleasant contrast to those reticent Mormons. (Twain 109)

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<sup>92</sup> Using the same irony, Mormon humorist Robert Kirby accepts the book as a piece of humour and says that it is “one of my favorite books. What I liked about it was the part wherein Twain recounts his visit to Salt Lake City. It was a humorous, even punishing, account of Mormon-dominated early life and a pleasant switch from the corporate spin on Mormon history that I was used to” (Bigelow 78).

Even a respected author like Arthur Conan Doyle relied on these sensational features in his first Sherlock Holmes novel, *A Study in Scarlet* (1887). Later though, in 1924, Doyle admitted in *Our Second American Adventure* that he had used a distorted picture of the Danite episodes to construct the plot of his novel. Meta Victoria Fuller's first novel was also an anti-polygamy novel about the Mormons (Arrington, *Mormonism* 4). All these authors were not the only respected writers to appropriate this anti-Mormon tendency for the benefit of their fiction. In his detailed study of the books that employed this pattern, Arrington found the names of important writers in American literary history such as Theodore Winthrop whose novel, *John Brent* (1861), Arrington sanctions as anti-Mormon or Zane Grey's two novels, *Heritage of the Desert* (1924) and *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912) (*Mormonism* 5).<sup>93</sup> Other 19<sup>th</sup> century writers followed the same pattern. Good examples can be found in the novels by Marie A. Walsh, Max Adeler, Joaquin Miller, A. Jennie Bartlett, Jeannette Ritchie H. Walworth, Albion W. Tourgee, Mary W. Hudson, Alvah Multin Kerr, and Grace Wittour Trout.

Givens, in his book *The Viper on the Earth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy (Religion in America)* gives a report of how the influence of popular literature of that time exercised pivotal importance in creating Mormon identity from a different perspective, not so much self-referential but resulting from the formula against manipulated and biased images that these books constructed out of Mormon symbols and legends:

Historical reasons for ridicule of and even hostility toward the Mormon religion vary with both the period and the setting of the Mormon story. The earliest recorded complaints concerned the church's religious peculiarity based on ongoing revelation

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<sup>93</sup> Leonard Arrington even adds Prosper Mérimée, the French writer, to this list. Arrington labels Mérimée as "the man who first interpreted the Mormons to the French. His sixty-page article appeared in the leading French magazine of the time" (*Mormonism* 5).

and additional scripture and the threat its phenomenal missionary success posed to mainstream churches. In addition, Mormons preached an irksome doctrine of exclusivity and engaged in communalistic economic practices (and prosperously besides). Unlike the Shakers, who considered their unconventional way of life a higher order of existence but only for those who felt the call to so live, the Mormons claimed a monopoly on the path of salvation.

These irritants would later be exacerbated by polygamy, the most notorious of their religious practices. Although this doctrine was not publicly announced until 1852, was never practiced by more than a small minority, and was abandoned in 1890 or shortly thereafter, Mormonism from the mid-nineteenth century to the present has been synonymous in the minds of many with plural marriage. Add to this the Mormons' role in frontier politics and the theocratic inclinations of the early Mormon leaders and we begin to get a sense of the complex of factors that contributed to the "Mormon problem." (Givens, *Viper* 5)

Arrington, agreeing with Givens, states that the work of these writers, together with other public lectures and writings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century humorists, turned national attitudes against Mormons and precipitated some of the national policies issued by the federal government in those years (Cracroft, *Distorting* 2). L.L. Lee explains the superficial and archetypal nature of this fiction:

Most nineteenth century and twentieth century works by non-Mormons, for instance, on the Mormon experience are rabidly, or foolishly, anti-Mormon; social values crowd out language. The Mormons tend to be demonic, but asininely demonic --or they are stupidly comic. They are destroyers of the family, but for the purposes of building up their own totalitarian community (the image of the Mormon family is too strong to be ignored and so must be attacked). (Lee 68)

Clearly, this pattern of resorting to exaggerated misconceptions produced commercially successful writing<sup>94</sup>. And that success promoted an image of the Mormons based on a distorted recreation of their contradictory features. Besides, this denouncement was made through fiction, instead of being reported "by objective on-the-spot reporters" (Arrington, *Mormonism* 3). In fact, as White indicates, there was a socially accepted proclivity to marry Mormons with vices that were almost totally based on myth and mistaken idealizations:

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<sup>94</sup> Arrington calculates that "more than two hundred book-length accounts were published detailing travel through Mormon country; more than a hundred novels were printed giving fictional accounts of experiences with Mormons; and perhaps a dozen books of anti-Mormon humor were published" (*Mormonism* 4).

They branded Chinese and Mormon men, for example, as immoral defilers of women because Mormons and Chinese were already pariahs in the nineteenth-century West and thus relatively safe targets. But in efforts to help polygamist wives, Chinese prostitutes, and unwed mothers, Protestant missionary women had identified unrestrained male lust as the major force victimizing women. Their attack on male lust led some of them to a critique of their own society. (White 312)

Again, Givens, but also William R. Handley, expounds that this tendency was born not only from a pragmatic response, or a moral dispute, but also from a new American challenge to construct its own identity. By confronting Mormonism as a wicked, alien culture, the new country could shape its own burgeoning identity, resolving its own doubts and struggles for definition. Handley's analysis shows the instrumentality of fiction in this crusade: "the Western formula's fiction – and a key to its popularity – is not simply to demonize an other but also to resolve American contradictions about religious, sexual, and racial identity by casting the American hero and Mormon villains in distinct but eerily similar roles" (Handley, *Marriage* 98).<sup>95</sup>

Even though most of these Mormon-menace novels only expressed a fantastic quest of heroes and heroines, it is true that, just as Mormons bore half of their identity from their site as victims of such perceptions, the United States found in its comparison to them and the demonizing of those groups a source for the embellishment and strengthening of their own sense of community. Thus, when Edward Said expresses his belief that pertaining to any culture demonstrates the notion of how cultures compete against each other to discriminate and define the basis of belonging, this theory fits into the context of Mormon and American history: "What is fitting for us and what is fitting for them, the former

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<sup>95</sup> Handley's study of Mormon perception in the America of that time is carried out mostly through the analysis of Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage*. It is interesting how Handley states that Grey was aware of the need to use those exaggerated characteristics of Mormonism rather than attaching himself to the friendly feelings he had for people like his Mormon guide David Dexter Rust (*Marriage* 103).



designated as inside, in place, common, belonging, in a word *above*, the latter, who are designated as outside, excluded, aberrant, inferior, in a word *below*” (Said 13-14). In this sense, as Lee Clark Mitchell states, *Riders of the Purple Sage* was a key book:

If the persistence of the “captivity plot” suggests that Americans have from the beginning felt insecure in their cultural identity, *Riders of the Purple Sage* works nonetheless a special moment in the history of that narrative form, appearing at a moment of particularly acute anxiety about American culture that the novel itself helped to form. That paradox – of Grey inscribing his own conception of American culture in a novel that claims to be only describing the way things have always been – needs to be unpacked in the following pages. But first we need to acknowledge how fully the Western in general – and, more particularly, Grey’s novels – represented a popular response not simply to vague, generations-old misgivings but to an explicit set of emerging anxieties about the nation in an industrializing, imperializing age of new global power. The achievement of *Riders of the Purple Sage* lay in its convincing ability to explain his vision of America – of a place where individuals would be transformed in certain important contemporary ways and yet still remain recognizably the same – even as he convinces the reader that that vision is what American identity has always represented. (Mitchell 136)

Meanwhile, however, Mormons continued to develop a literature with a practical intention, born from a very personal point of view. Nevertheless, this did not prevent Mormons from feeling obliged to defend themselves against the attacks contained in the so-called Mormon-menace novels.

### Literary Works

Apart from those two important bodies of Mormon literature produced during the early years (the literature written for practical needs and the group of personal writings), there were also a few attempts to write fiction or poetry. The most significant achievements in traditional literary forms during this first period are the poems by Eliza Roxcy Snow (1804-

1877), an accomplished poet before her conversion to Mormonism,<sup>96</sup> who was named Zion's poet by Smith. After becoming a Mormon in 1835, she turned her talent to long, didactic poems about Mormon history, leaders and beliefs. Snow, who was a polygamous wife of both Smith and Young, wrote poems at a time when no other Mormon women attempted to do so, as Maureen Ursenbach Beecher underlines in her study of Snow's production during the Nauvoo period: "Among Nauvoo women, she was in this way unique. Other women left us letters and a few diaries; only Eliza published prolifically throughout the five-year period" (Beecher 95).

Author of nearly five hundred poems on diverse topics, from history to doctrine, she also produced some short lyrics and a number of hymns. The poems were published in two volumes<sup>97</sup>, and the hymns are still highly valued as part of the Mormon hymnal, especially "Oh, My Father", which has been the source of much controversy within Mormonism because it is regarded as the first written record in which the unique Mormon doctrine of the Heavenly Mother is formulated. In the third stanza, the hymn projects this original religious philosophical theory: "namely, that we have a Heavenly Mother in the courts on high" (Cornwall 144). For this reason, "Oh, My Father" remains "one of the most popular and influential Mormon hymns" (England, *We* 3).

Two other women who tried to accomplish good books of poetry in this first period are Sarah Elizabeth Carmichael, whose poems published in 1866 have been anthologized nationally, and Hannah Tapfield King, a prolific writer who collaborated in *Woman's Exponent*, Mormon publication of the time, and who published the collection *Songs of the*

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<sup>96</sup> In her article "Inadvertent Disclosure: Autobiography in the Poetry of Eliza R. Snow," Maureen Ursenbach Beecher dates Snow's first published poem nine years before her conversion to Mormonism took place: "the 1826 publication of her first newspaper verse" (94).

<sup>97</sup> Most of her poems were anthologized in two volumes published in 1856 and 1877 under the title *Poems, Religious, Historical and Political*.

*Heart* in 1879. But the most important volume of poetry from this period is John Lyon's *The Harp Zion: A Collection of Poems etc.* (1853). In fact, this volume by the Scottish poet is regarded as the first book of poetry in Mormon literary history which converted Lyon into the official poet of the Church.

These narrative texts and poems comprised the earliest Mormon attempts at writing fiction. Mainly aimed at promoting faith among the members of the Church, these works preceded the next period in the history of Mormon literature, which sanctioned and promoted the close relationship between literature and religion for didactic purposes. Karl Keller calls this early narrative, poetry and personal writing "'unconscious' literature" (*On* 14) which may explain why the following movement reacted consciously against the historical circumstances and the non-Mormon literary production of the previous years.

### **3.2.2. Second Period: 1880-1930. Home Literature**

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Mormon enterprise in the West was under threat. The coming of the transcontinental railroad favored the arrival of non-Mormons to the kingdom that, until then, had blossomed in isolation. In 1877, Brigham Young's death, like that of Joseph Smith, threatened to shake the foundations of the Church. William Morris states that:

It was during this time that the Latter-day Saints began to feel the pressure of secularization as "gentiles" began to move into their communities, as Utah became part of the United States (which led to the official renunciation of polygamy and thus an end to persecution from the government), as modernization began to take place in the West, and higher education became more available, the institutions and culture of the Mormons began to stabilize and there finally arose a class, a second generation of intellectuals who could aid in building the kingdom because they didn't have to scratch a living from the land. (Morris 9)

As we have seen, from the very beginnings of the Church there was interest among the main leaders to promote wisdom and culture. Again, the relationship between literature and religion existed without the trouble and tension that was to emerge in the near future. In any case, the belligerent content of the Mormon-menace novels, as could be expected, produced a reaction among Mormons. Orson F. Whitney's speech was only the spark of a reaction that was partly based on the historical circumstances of Mormondom in those days.

### Whitney's Speech

It was Bishop Whitney who, in 1888, tried to defend the Mormon community from attacks against Mormons by stressing the importance of literature, culture and wisdom in achieving the mission for which the Mormons had been elected. In a famous speech that became fundamental in Mormon literary history, Whitney rallied for a Mormon literature based on the Restored Gospel, a literature rooted in Mormon tradition and aimed at defending the Saints from the attacks of gentiles. This called "Home Literature" was constituted basically in Utah some years after the speech was delivered at the Y.M.M.I.A.<sup>98</sup> Conference on June 3, 1888 and published a month later in *The Contributor*. The register of Whitney's speech was that of a sermon:

What can my poor pen indite, what can my feeble tongue utter to rouse within you this determination? I can only call upon God, in humility, to make my words as sparks of fire, to fall upon the tinder of your hearts and kindle them into flame that from this hour your souls may be lit up with the light of your glorious destiny, that you may live and labor for God and his kingdom, not simply for yourselves and the perishables things of earth. (Whitney 3)

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<sup>98</sup> The acronym stands for the Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association, a youth organization.

In his speech Whitney stands for a tradition that it is not that of Milton, Dante, Homer or any other classical writer from the Greco-Latin or English traditions. He advocates the “best books” tradition: the *Bible*, the *Book of Mormon*, and the other sacred books of the time. He asks his listeners first to read, then to pay attention to the press<sup>99</sup>. In short, written literature is equivalent to preaching for Whitney and, consequently, he defends the close connection between religion and literature: “The writer of a book is not he a preacher, preaching not to this parish or that, but to all men, in all times and places?” (5)

Several attempts to offer Mormons a line of defense against the attacks contained in the so-called Mormon-menace novels existed before Whitney’s address. These were mainly articles, some of them published in eastern magazines by people like George Q. Cannon, Theodore Curtis, Susa Young Gates, Edward Tullidge or Colonel Thomas L. Kane (Arrington, *Mormonism* 7). Yet the repercussion of Whitney’s words transcended the work of these previous writers. The aim of his speech was to propose and define a specific intellectual attitude which, finally, produced a literary sub-genre which came to be labelled “Home Literature”.

### Home Literature

This sub-genre was encouraged and supported by other leaders such as B.H. Roberts, Emmeline B. Wells and Susa Young Gates, Young’s sister. It consisted of didactic fiction and poetry whose purpose was to defend the Mormon community from external attacks and to spread orthodoxy among the members of the Church. An exponent of this period,

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<sup>99</sup> Whitney writes: “[T]he great engine of power. How mighty its mission, how far-reaching its influence, how invincible its power. Write for the papers, write for the magazines!” (3)

probably the one that has best resisted the passage of time, is Nephi Anderson, whose highly acclaimed novel, *Added Upon*, is a sophisticated and didactic work.

Nephi Anderson published *Added Upon* in 1892. It was the first of nine novels written to explain the major Mormon beliefs. All these works were intended for Mormon readers, or for those sympathetic to their theology. Although the author recognized the limitations of his first novel, and proceeded to revise it twice, today, *Added Upon* is still in print (by 1979 it had more than forty printings) and is a highly successful book among the members of the Church.

Most of the narrative written during those years was short fiction, published for young Mormon readers in Mormon periodicals such as the *Young Men's Journal*, *The Contributor*, *The Woman's Exponent*, *Utah Magazine* or *The Improvement Era*. This first major output of narrative in the 1880s and 1890s consciously intended to strengthen young Mormons and convert others interested in Mormonism. Nevertheless, occasionally a novel was released. Susa Young Gates published *John Steven's Courtship: A Story of the Echo Canyon War* in 1909; not only is this the first novel written by a Mormon, but it is also the first to be published in Utah, a romance based on historical fact that some scholars define as the precursor of the present-day preference for historical fiction among Mormon writers. B.H. Roberts, "a consummate intellectual" (Cracroft, *Didactic* 118), also published a novel that was adapted for theater and was performed on Broadway<sup>100</sup>. In fact, even if he is known mainly as a theologian, he was also, as Morris affirms, "a co-conspirator in the movement with Withney and Susa Young Gates" (10). Cracroft adds that Roberts' fiction, especially "A Story of Zarahemla" and *Corianton* "will stand as original and instructive

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<sup>100</sup> *Corianton* (1902) was a serialized novel that B.H. Roberts published in Mormon periodical *Contributor*. The Mormon Literature Database specifically mentions Ardis Parshall to state that the play was produced in Broadway for at least one week in September 1912: [http://mormonlit.lib.byu.edu/lit\\_work.php?w\\_id=13389](http://mormonlit.lib.byu.edu/lit_work.php?w_id=13389)

experiments by one of the most complex and brilliant minds of the Restoration” (*Didactic* 131).

There were also poets like Josephine Spencer and Auguste Joyce Crocheron, who published didactic narrative poems. Josephine Spencer’s *Wild Flowers of Deseret* was published in 1881 with the help and advice of Emmeline B. Wells, an important figure in Mormon literary history, both as a poet and editor. Charles Walker performed his Southern Utah folk poetry. Whitney himself published hymns, lyrical poetry, and a book-length poem entitled *Elias, an Epic of Ages* that was published in New York by the Knickerbocker Press in 1904. Most of these works, as already stated, were published in periodicals such as *The Contributor* (1879-1896), the *Young Woman’s Journal* (1889-1929), the *Relief Society Magazine* (1915-1970) and the *Improvement Era* (1897-1970), all of which enjoyed increased success thanks to these works of fiction.<sup>101</sup> Thanks to these periodicals, such as *Women’s Exponent*, whose editor was Wells, also President of the Relief Society<sup>102</sup>, or *Young Woman’s Journal*, many women wrote and published poetry or autobiographical fiction. Especially noteworthy is Mary Jane Mount Tanner’s *Book of Fugitive Poems*, published in 1880.

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<sup>101</sup> Periodicals play a very important role in Mormon literary history. From the beginnings of the Church, with *The Evening and The Morning Star* (1832-1834), *Times and Seasons* (1839-1846), *The Millennial Star* (1840-1970), *The Juvenile Instructor* (1866-1930), *The Children’s Friend* (1902-1970), *The Instructor* (1930-1970), or *Wye* (1939-1974), to present-day publications such as *The New Era* (1970-today), *The Friend* (1970-today) or *The Ensign* (1970-today), currently the official magazine of the Church, periodicals have been of great importance for Mormon literature and they were home to many writers that found in them a perfect outlet to publish their works. Today, heirs to this tradition, in addition to official periodicals like *The New Era*, *The Friend* or *The Ensign*, other magazines display different approaches and goals. These include *BYU Studies* (1959-today), *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* (1966-today) or *Exponent II* (1974-today). *Irreantum: A Review of Mormon Literature and Film* (1999-today), currently edited by Chris Bigelow, Benson Parkinson and Laraine Wilkins, is the official publication of the Association for Mormon Letters; *Sunstone* (1975-today), an independent magazine with more than thirty years of history, still explores and offers Mormon literature and criticism.

<sup>102</sup> Wells’ career was recognized before her death, “in her last years, received an honorary Doctor of Letters from BYU” (Arrington, *Persons* 13).

By 1900 Mormon women had published more than three dozen books of poetry, autobiography, and history. These, plus the hundreds of interesting autobiographical essays, some still not published, contributed to women's sense of self and demonstrated a rising sense of awareness of womanhood and a willingness to engage in introspection. (Arrington, *Persons* 12)

### Theological and Historical Writings

Apart from the production of fiction, there is also an attempt during this period to refine Mormon theological and historical writing, especially in the work of James E. Talmage and B.H. Roberts. A number of non-fiction works written during this period continue to be valued and carefully read because of their intellectual and literary excellence as well as their orthodox and faith-promoting power. These included the didactic biographies of Smith by George Q. Cannon and John Henry Evans. B.H. Roberts published several persuasive theology and history texts: *Joseph Smith the Prophet-Teacher* (1908) and *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (1930) which are still read today. In fact, this last book is considered a Mormon history standard text for many Mormon scholars. James E. Talmage combined intellectual commentary with personal testimony in two books: *The Articles of Faith* (1899) and *Jesus the Christ* (1915), texts which have achieved almost scriptural status among Latter-day Saints.

Back to fiction, due to its didacticism and religious devotion, this literature lost a lot of its power and quality. By trying so hard to be Mormon, it became less Mormon: its extreme orthodoxy often narrowed the complexity and freedom of Mormon thought and life. In consequence, most scholars consider the period from 1880 to 1930 a barren time where hardly anything of lasting value can be found (Anderson, *Masks* 7). The literature produced in this so-called "Home Literature" period is represented by most scholars by an outpouring of poems, stories and novels designed for the edification of the Saints and published mainly



in Church magazines by the Mormon press. As Arrington states, “the Latter-day Saints produced no imaginative literature for the national market” (*Mormonism* 8) and the works by Anderson or Susa Young Gates were condemned to obscurity due to the profusion of hymns, sermons, apologetic pamphlets and didactic poetry produced for practical purposes and which did not trespass the boundaries of Mormon interest. Literature was conceived during these years as an instrument for the spreading of the Gospel. But, for many scholars, it even failed in this sense. Geary states that “[Home Literature] is not a powerful literature artistically, nor is it pure. In most cases its distinctive Mormon characteristics are only skin deep, marking an underlying vision which is as foreign to the gospel as it is for real life” (*Mormondom’s* 3).

In some ways, this period emerged in response to the Mormon-menace novels which insisted on the pattern of sensationalism. Alfred H. Henry defended the anti-Mormon bias in *By Order of the Prophet* (1902), explaining that he was trying to show the flaw in Mormon theology. His novel, however, is merely an imitation that propagates the same mistakes as the earlier novels that followed this pattern: main characters that are stereotyped, minor characters that remain undeveloped, and geography and climate that is adjusted to fit the plot. Following this trend, Henry Leon Wilson set *The Lions of the Lord* (1903) within a historical Mormon framework.

As already indicated, the popularity of these novels increased when well-known authors such as Zane Grey or Jack London wrote about Mormons. Grey wrote two novels, *The Heritage of the Desert* (1924) and *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912), in which the hero is an outsider who saves the innocent from the wicked Mormon. London used the Mountain Meadow Massacre as the historical base for his novel *The Star Rover* (1915). At the sight

of it, it seems reasonable that Whitney was compelled to promote a strong literature specifically designed to respond to such attacks against the Mormons.

Keller stated in 1969 that “perhaps when we realize that literature cannot be written or read in the service of religion but that like religion it is an exercise in otherness, an exercise in faith, an exercise in renewing our grounds for belief, then we will have an important body of Mormon literature” (England, *Mormon* 10). Nevertheless, as late as 1976, Elder Boyd Packer continued to advocate the foundation of such a highly didactic literature, indicating at the time that those foundations had not yet been established. However, this kind of promotional literature is still present today in the popular Mormon romances encouraged and eventually published by both the official and semi-official press and magazines. This highly didactic, orthodox literature promoted in official Church publications led to a controversy in Mormon scholarship which still illustrates the special nature of this literature today. Mormon scholar Cracroft declares the importance and usefulness of authors like Anderson, and he continues to demand a Mantic literature and criticism.

It was not until immediately after World War II when a group of writers who began to write in the 1930s, but only gained visibility in the 1940s provided the first glimpse of a second reaction in Mormon literature. As early as 1924, Bernard DeVoto, an author known for his contribution to the new American fiction which characterized that decade, wrote *The Crooked Mile* (1924). In the words of John L. Thomas, DeVoto’s first novel is “a piece of juvenilia which traces the decline of the frontier from the energetic founders and builders of the first generation to the pillagers and spoilers of the third” (23). DeVoto was a non-Mormon historian and writer who had been born and raised in Ogden, Utah. He was

highly critical “of the authoritarian structure of the Church hierarchy”<sup>103</sup> (Thomas 97), even though, according to Thomas, Brigham Young was an important reference for him: “Despite DeVoto’s curt dismissal of Mormonism itself, no other hero in this collection is more clearly marked with authorial grace than Brigham Young” (Thomas 79). Two years later, in 1926, DeVoto wrote *The Chariot of Fire* which Dale L. Morgan<sup>104</sup> suggests “drew upon Mormon materials sufficiently that members of the church heartily disliked it as a caricature of Mormon beginnings” (6).

In 1938, DeVoto predicted the failure of any attempt to write fiction based on Joseph Smith and the Mormon people (Geary, *Mormondom’s* 24). But even though there is a gap in Mormon literature from 1900 to 1940, the post-war generation will fill this gap and break DeVoto’s prophecy.

In summary, this period helped to establish a trend in Mormon literature that is still successful and accepted by its members. As Morris says “[T]he Home Literature movement trained a Mormon audience to read, enjoy, and privilege didactic works” (10-11). This is more or less the same opinion which Cracroft shows when he defines the time of this period up to the present and converts it into a standard: “[T]hat movement, which began circa 1888 and survived, in muted form, well into the 1940s and beyond, instructed LDS youth, by means of fiction and poetry, in the eternal verities, Utah standard” (*Didactic*

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<sup>103</sup> In fact, Thomas, while revising the common Mormon background of DeVoto and another author, Stegner, two important American writers and scholars that maintained certain relationships to Mormonism, parallels how both were critical of certain considerations of the Church. However, he gives Stegner a different connection: “he clearly recalled the general good will fostered by Mormonism and the family solidarity he had never experienced before” (Thomas 97). In fact, Stegner in *Mormon Country* was simply delivering his pattern of middle way, setting up a place in between those who attached themselves to the obscure tenets of Mormonism and the fundamentalism that reigned among many Mormons.

<sup>104</sup> Morgan adds an exotic new name to the list of non-Mormons writing about the Mormons, that of the French writer Pierre Benoit and his novel *Le Lac Salé*, published in France in 1921, then in English in 1922 under the title of *Salt Lake City, A Romance*. Morgan has described Benoit’s novel as “a projection of the writer’s interior fantasy into the Mormon environment” (5).

117). In any case, the next period will initiate a new approach by inviting into the Mormon literary canon novels without Mormonism as their central subject matter. This new literature focuses on the individual rather than on a particular set of beliefs and it illuminates the progression and expansive complexity of themes and perspectives that Mormon literature is to enjoy in the years to come.

### **3.2.3. Third Period: 1930-1970. The Lost Generation**

After the unfruitful period of the so-called Home Literature, a new group of Mormon writers was able to publish nationally in the 1930s and 1940s. This group reacted against the provincialism and didacticism of the Home Literature period, but, because they were rejected by many Mormons and published outside Utah, Edward Geary called them “Mormondom’s Lost Generation” (*Mormondom’s* 26), thus drawing a parallel between these authors and the Lost Generation of American literature which included Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound, Sherwood Anderson, Gertrude Stein and other expatriates writing during the 1920s and 1930s. Up until the early 1970s, this group of well-educated, third and fourth generation Mormons reacted to what they perceived as the loss of “the heroic pioneer vision and a decline into provincial materialism” (England, *Mormon* 6). They were published and praised nationally, but their works, often critical, were either largely rejected or unknown by Mormons.

#### Common Characteristics

This generation of writers share different features and characteristics, not only literary but also biographical ones. Their work displays varying degrees of criticism of their provincial

culture, but all of them try to balance the weight of their heritage, memory and nostalgia for the place and the culture in which they were born and raised. Susan Elizabeth Howe, for instance, describes how these writers share a common set of historical circumstances and a certain level of reaction towards it:

these novelists of the 1940s as responding to a cultural breakdown in Mormon life; the pioneer era had ended, and the vision and ideals required by the struggle to establish the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Mormon settlements in the West were being replaced by “the stagnation and decline of rural Mormondom. (Howe v)

England suggests that they were too regional in focus, and too nostalgic for a heroic Mormon past, but ignorant or hostile toward the richest dimensions of Mormon theology and contemporary life (*Dawning* 10). In this same line, Wayne C. Booth adds that “writers such as Vardis Fisher or Bernard deVoto could not resist portraying Utah as a cultural desert, always with the implication that when religious values and artistic culture clash, it is obvious that religion is culprit” (*Religion* 27).

In any case, their works constructed a new image of Mormonism. If the period of isolation in Mormon history ended with the arrival of the transcontinental railroad and the migration movements derived from the Gold Rush, together with the increased federal government intervention, these writers, who published for a major audience, helped to widen the scope and repercussion of Mormon literature. Arrington, in his study of the three phases which the Mormon public image underwent, links the third one, the one that changed the prevailing image “of disloyalty, criminality and degradation” (*Mormonism* 1), to this literary movement:

The third phase began in the 1930s when some scholars and writers, products of our culture, having received their undergraduate education in Utah, wrote theses and dissertations in eastern graduate schools, wrote works of fiction and non-fiction, and created works of art which helped the nation to understand that Mormons were human, rational, loyal as other Americans were loyal, and basically honest, hard working, and friendly. (Arrington, *Mormonism* 1)

The writers of the Mormon Lost Generation belong to a time when Mormon isolation began to break down<sup>105</sup>. The conception of the Mormon community as rural and self-sufficient was coming to an end, and a new urban, modern Mormonism was developing. Economically and culturally, Utah was integrating into the American mainstream due to the crisis in the old rural-agrarian economy which became a pattern after the affairs with the federal government and the growing involvement of gentiles in business and political spheres. Rural depopulation, the signing of the Manifesto or the new status of statehood illustrate the approximation of the isolated Mormon society to America.

Most of the writers in this group were born during the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a transitional time in the Mormon community and culture. They grew up in small towns where tradition was perhaps most strongly felt. The pioneer era was over but the sense of change was still alive because there were reminders of the past, people who still possessed vivid memories of those early days. Thus Geary, the Mormon scholar who has studied this generation in depth, considers that these novels of the 1940s are regional not so much because they deal with place but because they contemplate the cultural breakdown of Mormon society in those years (*Mormondom's* 1). Several of these writers participated in the exodus from Utah in the 1920s and 1930s when this stream of change forced many members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to migrate to the cities. Some of them even left the Church, since this was something that they linked culturally and even

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<sup>105</sup> See pp. 112-133 for the Introduction to Mormon history, Sixth Period.

spiritually to the landscape of Utah. Through their literature, most of them tried to come to terms with their Mormon heritage and its new, modern perspective. They embraced the ambivalence between a tradition which seemed to have failed and the fact that this tradition was still the bond between them and their sense of identity and belonging.

### Two Groups

Geary classifies the novels written by these writers into two groups, depending on the setting they used. The ones set during the pioneer era include the works by authors like Vardis Fisher, Paul Bailey, Virginia Sorensen (in *A Little Lower than Angels*), Maurine Whipple or Lorene Pearson. The second group consists of novels set during the provincial period of Mormon history, once the valley had been settled and rural communities began to emerge: Blanche Canon's *Nothing Ever Happens Sunday Morning* (1948), and most of the works by Sorensen, together with the novels by some other writers such as Jean Woodman, Richard Scowcroft or Samuel Taylor are included in this group, according to Geary's classification.

In general, similar themes can be found in almost all of these novels, regardless of the setting used. In order to differentiate between them, Geary proposes an almost invisible pattern for each of the two distinctive groups, but, in general, he reasons that the novels set in the pioneer period depict a more heroic lifestyle with a protagonist who is generally torn between the community and his personal desires (Geary, *Mormondom's* 26-27). Thus Geary perceives that this individual tension within the community is probably the main sharing element among these books and he consequently concludes that "the central conflict is nearly always between individualism and authority" (*Mormondom's* 26). This

theme resembles some of the historical tensions that I underlined for this period in Mormon history.

### Vardis Fisher

Using Geary's classification as a framework, most critics recognize the publishing of Vardis Fisher's *Children of God: An American Epic* (1939) as the birth of this period<sup>106</sup>. But Fisher's novel was quickly followed by the publication of Bailey's *For This My Glory* (1940) and Woodman's *Glory Spent* (1940), which helped to avoid that Fisher's landmark work vanish in the fleeting moment of a single phenomenon.

Nevertheless, Fisher stands out as the main figure of this period. *Children of God: An American Epic*, winner of the Harper Prize, is considered by Wallace Stegner to be one of the best novels in the history of Mormon literature (Stegner 114). It illustrates the relationship between the history of the Mormons and the specific problems facing individuals. Fisher viewed Mormonism as a 19<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon, a temporary religious-social movement that reflected 19<sup>th</sup> century American culture. Thus, when the McBrides, at the end of the book, turn around to look back at the valley they helped to build and that they are about to abandon, they look beyond the reach of their eyes (Fisher 768).

The novel is divided into three parts: Morning, Noon and Evening, which seem to make reference to the relevance for Mormon history of the historical period of time in which the

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<sup>106</sup>Geary states that this was a sudden movement. He considers that the breaking out point was the publication of Fisher's *Children of God: An American Epic* in 1939 which was followed by the publication of at least twenty novels on Mormon subjects, all of which retained the same traces or had something in common (Geary, *Mormondom's 2*).



novel is settled. In the first part, the main figure is Joseph Smith, founder and prophet of the Church; it ends when he is killed in Carthage Jail. The novel reports the early attempts to found the Church, and its fast growth. In the second part, prominence is given to Brigham Young as the focus moves to the pioneering of the West. This part too ends with Young's death. The third part revolves around the fictional McBride family, especially the men of that family, Nephi, Tim and Moroni. Throughout all three parts, Fisher's voice is only present to make clear that its desire is to remain silent. In his strife for objectivity, Fisher encompasses a sense of balance that tries to show both sympathy and anger, dark and light. Fisher was equally accused of being too sympathetic to Mormons or just the opposite even though it is obvious all throughout the book that he tries hard to exercise objectivity. However, he does make clear what he praises in Mormon history, focusing on determination and idealism as two attributes that Mormons exercised and virtually lost by the end of the book when the battle against the federal government was lost by surrendering. The characteristics that Fisher sanctions in his characters and that he seems to admire in Mormon history are the ones accentuated by Young and the McBrides: courage, loyalty, vigor, sincerity, strength in adversity. His description of Smith and the founding of the Church, in any case, is, rather than trying to convince, trying to make it obvious that humanity has always aspired to god-making as if it was part of their nature. This is something that he shared with other members of this group as LuDene Dallimore stresses the same idea when analyzing Sorensen's writing: "Sorensen does not argue whether Mormonism is a "true" religion but rather uses it to show the effect of religion and society upon people" (1). In his book, Fisher makes clear that his sympathies are placed with Mormons not because of their faith, but because of their enterprise and courage.

Fisher maintained that *Children of God: An American Epic* was his only Mormon novel; however, he wrote seven others that used the Mormons or their influence as a backdrop. Fisher's autobiographical tetralogy, *In Tragic Life* (1932), *Passions Spin the Plot* (1934), *We Are Betrayed* (1935) and *No Villain Need Be* (1936) narrates the story of Vridar Hunter's struggle to leave his Mormon environment behind and go to New York in search of a sophisticated life only to return to Idaho eventually where he tries to maintain his independence. His single volume, *Orphans of Getsemane* (1960), where he included and refined all four novels in the tetralogy, uses Mormonism to show how all religions have always enslaved the individual. He was also renowned for his overwhelming twelve novel series about the history of civilization, *Testament of Man*, which took him almost a lifespan. His novel *Mountain Man: A Novel of Male and Female in the Early American West* (1965) was the source for Sydney Pollack's film *Jeremiah Johnson* (1972).

#### Virginia Sorensen, Maurine Whipple and Others

Other writers, including Whipple or Sorensen, also made their most important achievements in works of fiction. One of the finest examples is Whipple's rich and moving novel about the pioneer experience, *The Giant Joshua* (1976). Whipple is normally said to belong to this generation because of her sense of independence and disillusionment, but *The Giant Joshua* has gone beyond the boundaries of that specific period to become a successful and highly praised book, even today. Lavina Fielding Anderson states that Whipple "wrote steadily, even compulsively" (*Masks* 3), but no other noteworthy literary work was published by Whipple after *The Giant Joshua*. Sorensen's *The Evening and the Morning* (1949) is considered one of the best novels about the 1920s. However, it shares some of the flaws that characterize the Mormon Lost Generation, such as its patronizing

attitude towards Mormon thought. Nevertheless, if Whipple is the best interpreter of the pioneer period in her fiction, Sorensen, “Mormonism’s most prolific and proficient novelist thus far,” (*New* 49), according to Linda Sillitoe, is the author who writes most perceptively about the provincial period.

In 1942 Sorensen published her first Mormon novel, *A Little Lower than Angels*. Other novels followed such as *On this Star* (1946) or the already commented *The Evening and the Morning*. Sorensen examined the major problems faced by Mormons when the second, third and even fourth generations tried to rebel. Geary concludes that Sorensen’s “sympathetic characters are all sceptics and rebels to some degree, but they also acknowledge the inseparable ties that bind them to the community and a nostalgic loyalty which amounts to a kind of faith,” (*Mormondom’s* 32). In Geary’s opinion Sorensen’s works played a fundamental role in the critical depiction of this period and provided a comprehensive model of the characteristics shared by this group of writers. Her first Mormon novel was also a feminist novel long before the feminist movement had even began. Both Dallimore and Helynn H. Hansen praise Sorensen’s use of female characters at a time when the tendency was to oversimplify or simply skip them.

Maxine Hanks makes a feminist reading of Whipple and Sorensen, together with historians such as Juanita Brooks and Fawn M. Brodie who were active participants and main figures in the so-called New Mormon history, not only because the four of them are women but because they offered a new and different critical perspective which exercises some feminist critique:

During the 1940s some important social-historians and literary feminists emerged. Social historians Juanita Brooks and Fawn M. Brodie re-evaluated the past with an

insight that gave birth to Mormon revisionist history or “the New Mormon History.” Virginia Sorenson and Maurine Whipple wrote feminist critiques of Mormonism’s patriarchal culture. Sorenson’s *A Little Lower than the Angels* revealed some negative aspects of Mormon culture through a woman’s eyes; Whipple’s *The Giant Joshua* critiqued nineteenth-century polygamy in the reflections of a young feminist protagonist caught in a hopelessly degrading lifestyle. (Hanks xvii)

Bailey’s novel, *For This My Glory* (1940) and its sequel, *Song Everlasting* (1946) are also worth mentioning. Bailey tried to blend modern realism and the traditional story of polygamy in early Utah in *For Time and All Eternity* (1964). Two other interesting novels form part of this valuable body of literature: Scowcroft’s *Children of Covenant* (1945) and Taylor’s *Heaven Knows Why* (1948). Taylor’s unique, comic novel, full of the kind of characters that make Mormons laugh, tells the story of Jackson Skinner Whitetop, a lazy, indolent jack-Mormon<sup>107</sup> who receives a visit of his dead grandfather who instructs him to straighten up and marry the bishop’s daughter. The humorous tone gives the book a praiseworthy quality since, as Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer suggest, “the expression of comedy is somehow more culture specific and more enigmatic to outsiders than tragedy” (136). Many other writers could be added to these, such as Ardeth Kennelly whose book *The Peaceable Kingdom* has been praised by Anderson.

In poetry, the period includes the work of a significant and peculiar poet, Olephia “Leafy” King who published two volumes of poetry in her last years. In these, she gathered many of her poems, most of them dealing with her life as a cowgirl on a ranch in Nevada. A native of Nevada, born at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, King’s sincere sense of beauty was

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<sup>107</sup> Jack-Mormon is a term used to refer to the members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who are not committed to the activities of the Church or someone who has positive feelings toward the Church. I prefer Ryan McIlvain’s term “secular Mormon” as a substitute for “jack-Mormon”. As McIlvain himself states, the term is much more connotative, accessible and descriptive (McIlvain 177) and the definition is given by himself: “It is a member of the Mormon Church or community who identifies with the culture and its mores if not its doctrines. It is a behaving Mormon if not a believing one. It is a believing Mormon if not a behaving one. It is anyone who wants the Mormon sans the orthodoxy” (McIlvain 177). This term helps to understand the cultural baggage of Mormon culture, enough to determine when you call or label someone as Mormon even if she or he is no longer a believer, or at least not in the orthodox manner.

sharpened by the surrounding nature and the natural tasks and chores of a farm. The daughter of Joseph Brigham Nay, and a descendant of a long family of pioneers, King was not very close to her religion during the years she stayed on the farm. In later years, she came closer to her faith, even though her poems deal mostly with Western themes. Glenda Riley mentions King in *Women and Nature: Saving the "Wild" West*:

During the 1930s, the Mormon poet Olephia "Leafy" King combined a love of the outdoors with writing poetry. She established a reputation in Nye County, Nevada, as an adept hunter, shooter, and all-around outdoorsperson. In 1933, a local newspaper proclaimed that since childhood Leafy King had always bagged a deer on the very first day of hunting season. It was not surprising that King, who favored no-nonsense boots and trousers, wrote poetry that equated life in the West with freedom for women. She placed "cowgirls" and "cowgirls wives" in the center of her poetic dramas, noting that the West gave women the "ability to roam." (Riley 77-78)

After the Second World War, more and more writers use Mormons and Mormon themes as a backdrop to their novels, but not in the stereotyped pattern of the Mormon-menace novels. A good example would be Wallace Stegner's novel *The Preacher and the Slave* (1961) which, although it is not, in the strict sense, a Mormon novel, it does not incorporate the prejudices and misconceptions of the novels about Mormons written in previous decades. But Stegner cannot be considered an anti-Mormon writer, if that label can be still of use to classify literature, because, as John L. Thomas has quoted him saying, "I write as a non-Mormon but not as a Mormon hater" (181). Thomas goes on to recapitulate and chronicle how important a trace Mormonism left in Stegner and how he approached the topic with care and depth:

As an outside investigator he pored over the hundred of pages of Mormon diaries, journals, and reminiscences that were made available to him and uncovered the predictable mixture of the admirable and the deplorable. "Suffering, endurance, discipline, faith, brotherly and sisterly charity, the qualities so thoroughly celebrated by Mormon writers, were surely well distributed among them, but theirs was a normal amount of human cussedness, vengefulness, masochism, backbiting, violence,

ignorance, selfishness, and gullibility.” It was this odd combination of heroism and intransigence that challenged the role that Stegner had decided to play in reconstructing but also evaluating and judging people and events. (Thomas 182)

### Folklore and History

This new effort in fiction extended to two different areas as well. First, Arrington states that Mormons “contributed a significant body of appreciative folklore under the energetic leadership of Thomas Cheney, Hector Lee, Wayland Hand, and Austin and Alta Fife” (*Mormonism* 9). The work by these folklorists will be essential to much of the fiction written by Mormons in the following years. Through the work by folklorists such as Austin E. Fife, Mormons discover new ways of approaching the burden of their tradition, but their contribution to Mormon writing is also to be found in their attitudes and ideology:

At the very outset we should remind you that the Mormon folk tradition is part and parcel of Anglo-American folk tradition, despite the peculiarities which it has inherited from Mormon theology and from the unique Mormon sociological experience. I have at times felt that not only is the Mormon folk culture uniquely American but excessively so, that in some areas we actually exaggerate American qualities. With nearly all Americans we share a common European heritage and voluntary migration into a wilderness by individuals and family groups who were searching for an improved way of life in a new and hostile land. (Fife 5)

Secondly, the influence of these novels of the 1940s caused a significant change in the approach to Mormon history made by scholars. They shared the Lost Generation’s move towards a more realistic and less didactic view. The way they were ignored by Mormons actually parallels the treatment given to the novelists.

Worth noting is Fawn M. Brodie's *No Man Knows My History* (1945), a psychological approach to Smith, which led to her excommunication.<sup>108</sup> Brooks' *The Mountain Meadow Massacre* (1950) is also a cardinal book in Mormon history, the first thorough study of the most tragic event in Utah Mormon history. Important also are the works about Mormons written by non-Mormons, one of the best examples being Stegner's *Mormon Country* (1942), of which Thomas says that the "faithful dismissed the book as a product of misinformation and bias while critics of the Mormons like DeVoto considered it much too generous" (96).

This surge of less didactic biography and historiography produced by faithful Mormons was given the somewhat controversial label, New Mormon history.<sup>109</sup> The intention was neither to defend nor attack the Mormon faith, but rather, based on the belief that Mormonism deserved a proper study, these writers intended to broaden the understanding of its history.

The first anthology of Mormon literature ever published, *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints* (1974), contains no sample of the literature from this period which,

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<sup>108</sup> This book is still the object of controversy and analysis. Brodie's approach and conclusions forced many Mormon scholars to reject its content even though they accidentally praised Brodie's methodology. England's opinion could be shown as a good example of this tendency: "It has many faults, the main one being that Brodie's considerable rhetorical skill is used, under the guise of objective scholarship, to bring Joseph Smith powerfully alive – but only as the engagingly clever charlatan Brodie had to see in him after she had rejected his Church. But the scholarship, particularly in non-Mormon sources, really is there, for the first time, and much Mormon historical scholarship since has been spent in responding to or imitating that breakthrough" (*We* 5).

<sup>109</sup> John-Charles Duffy noted that this movement "came under attack during the 1970s from instructors in the Church Educational System and a trio of apostles with strong antimodernist and anti-intellectual sentiments: Ezra Taft Benson, Mark E. Petersen, and Boyd K. Packer. Packer's landmark 1981 address, 'The Mantle Is Far, Far Greater Than the Intellect', denounced the new Mormon history's quest for objectivity, its emphasis on the human, and its efforts to bracket off supernatural claims" (3). This author explains in this article the presence of Mormon scholars in non-Mormon educational institutions, and he defines Mormon academia in terms of a dual division, that first orthodox group he calls "Faithful scholarship" and a second one that he defines in opposition to the first group. In any case, Duffy states that "orthodoxy encompasses a certain diversity of belief and practice, and its boundaries are not sharply defined" (1), then asserting that scholars may not fit perfectly in one or the other group.

precisely for this reason, Lavina Fielding Anderson has called “The Great Gap”. Anderson underlines the fact that most of the best writers of this period were women and she advocates for their recognition. Focusing on the works by Sorensen, Whipple and Kenelly, Anderson points out the act of defiance made by these women in writing their novels (*Masks* 6). Another writer, Taylor, displays a similar concern when he states about the period that

There have been so very few Mormon novels published by our internal press that it’s difficult to give you market tips – particularly since every Mormon novel published in New York has been, so far as I am aware, frowned upon. The greatest one of all, Vardis Fisher’s *Children of God*, has in fact become a Mormon touchstone: a good word for it brands a man as a negative thinker. (Taylor, *Little* 34)

From that statement, it is obvious that Mormons rejected those books which Geary listed around the label Lost Generation. In the rest of his article, with his innate humour but sharp skills for analyzing, Taylor discusses the objectives and goals of Mormon literature, advancing a popular topic of debate among Mormon scholars in future years. Taylor concludes his article with a seemingly ironic but profound conclusion disguised as a piece of paternal advice that summarizes much of the conflict that could have been sourced from this period but is still latent in Mormon literature and criticism:

For authors who want to broaden their horizon by writing Mormon material for the national market, I must tell you flatly that New York editors will not buy Mormon propaganda. If you give this market what it demands – reasonable objectivity, accuracy and truth – you run a grave risk of being accused of “sensationalizing” our history, selling out for gold (part of our mythology is that anti-Mormon books make millions, which isn’t so). At the best you will be damned for negative thinking: while if you dig up enough fascinating truth that cuts too close to the bone, you may risk your Church membership for publishing it – not for printing lies, but for stepping on corns we insist must be avoided. (Taylor, *Little* 38)



### **3.2.4. Fourth Period: 1960-Today. Faithful Realism and New Mormon Fiction**

Periods, like borders, are always easy to cross. If Werner Sollors deliberates over the condition of invention for ethnicity, borders or periods in literature are also artificial inventions which collaborate to make topics easier to classify and possess.

The writers in the previous period did not stop writing in the 1960s, but continued to work through the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, eventually overlapping with a second generation that begins in the 1970s. Called Faithful Realism by scholars like England (*Mormon 7*), these writers produced a literature that was considered artistically worthwhile and ethically deserving by the Mormons. Some of the writers that could be gathered under that label kept on writing in the following decades, thus forming part of what we call New Mormon Fiction, as well. The timelines and the labels in this second group collapse in an amalgamation of generations which gives only a glimpse of what this state of affairs entails: writing is so diverse that no easy classification is possible. In any case, the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century shows some sort of continuation in Mormon fiction. In fact, the researcher can even prefigure the existence of some degree of evolution. The so-called Faithful Realism encompassed a group of writers that did not reject what was called Home Literature or Mormondom's Lost Generation. On the contrary, they evolved, producing a literary corpus which had learnt from both generations. The previous two periods, thus, proved to have been compulsory steps towards this new period. Those writers kept on writing, progressing, developing and seeking new ways. And many others came after them that either followed their example or opened up new paths. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the diversity in Mormon literature parallels the variety of possibilities and options opened by popular and not so popular currents, fashions and genres that have emerged since the Second World

War. Mormon fiction, in any case, retains some flavor or specialness of its own. In that sense, the tension between orthodox and unorthodox approaches shows a tendency to dichotomize a literary community that proves to be more complex and less easy to classify.

To sum up, this fourth section covers a long period of time. The survey starts in the late 1960s and early 1970s with new writers that improved Mormonism's literary production, defined as Faithful Realism. It follows with an overview of the writers who, in the last decades of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, delivered fiction and poetry which, in many cases, departed so much from Mormon tradition that they opened ways which seemed hard to explore. Finally, the section offers a general map of present-day Mormon literature, with a wide approach that shows a broad scope of fiction, from orthodox, conservative, or popular literature to experimental, untraditional or refined literature, always with a mistrust of the reliability of labels assigned to each of them.

### Faithful Realism

An increasing number of Mormon writers began producing literature based on experience but which was also profoundly faithful. Even though a prolific number of novels was produced in the 1940s and the following years, the official Church was not satisfied because they wanted a more orthodox and worthy literature. This explains why in 1976 Elder Boyd Packer denounced the unfulfillment of Whitney's prophecy.<sup>110</sup> In his 1976 address, Packer defined writing as a gift from God which binds the writer's responsibility. He explained that the writer has no freedom and that no art is useful unless it is of interest or serves as inspiration to Mormonism. Finally, he gave instructions to musicians and

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<sup>110</sup> See p. 165, the second section of this introduction to Mormon literary history to read about Orson F. Whitney's speech.

writers to fulfill the desire of the Church for a more orthodox literature than that produced during the previous decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Packer 10). His address shows his deception with the literature produced in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the distance between this generation and part of the Mormon audience.

In any event, the literature that emerged in the 1970s did not follow the ideas of any of the two previous periods, if Home Literature and Lost Generation are understood as opposite extremes. Instead, it sought to revise the mistakes and virtues of both periods. In “The Dawning of a Brighter Day” (1982), England defines these writers as those who sincerely committed themselves to a broad analysis and deep criticism of Mormon mistakes and tragedies. These authors produced a powerful literature, drawing mainly on their own experiences, conflicts and failures, something which is central to Mormon ideas. However, their writing was in no way designed or conceived as a tool to promote either religion or anti-religion. England underlines their commitment to the Church, explaining that their increasing quality is related to their spiritual growth as Saints (*Dawning* 12).

#### Clinton F. Larson

This literature of the 1970s and 1980s was constituted mostly by works of fiction. Paradoxically, the man who is signaled as forerunner and main writer of this period is the poet Clinton F. Larson, who was praised for his skill in combining didacticism with an ability to delight his reader.

Larson, a former professor and poet-in-residence at Brigham Young University, is considered the first Mormon poet. Both the quality and quantity of his work contribute to

his being regarded as the first outstanding Mormon artist and the herald of a generation of writers who tried to construct a Mormon aesthetic for a literature balancing previous mistakes and wisdom. In “Mormon Literature: Progress and Prospects”, England explains that Larson was influenced by the “craftsmanship and religious passion of T.S. Eliot and other modern poets in the 1930s and 1940s, mainly through his teacher at the University of Utah, Brewster Ghiselin” (7). Larson departed from the didacticism of the first and second periods and the criticism of the Lost Generation to write a poetry of modernist sensibility but intertwined with his Mormon culture and spiritual concerns. His first collection was published in 1967 under the title *The Lord of Experience*. He also strengthened the new tradition of faithful but realistic Mormon literature by founding, in 1959, the first Mormon scholarly and literary periodical, *BYU Studies*. He contributed his poetry regularly to this journal and to *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*<sup>111</sup>, founded later in 1966. Larson pursued other genres as well. His work has been also an important influence in Mormon drama.

### Poetry

Other important poets from this period include Edward L. Hart, Marden J. Clark, John S. Harris, Carol Lynn Pearson, Lewis Horne and Emma Lou Thayne. The work by these writers is still anthologized and praised in the Mormon literary context. All these writers

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<sup>111</sup> The founding of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, together with that of the magazine *Sunstone* offered new outlets for different voices within Mormon scholarship and culture. This mission was jeopardized when in 1983 Elder Mark E. Petersen investigated the work that some authors were sending to these magazines. His deductions led to, as Armand L. Mauss explains, the fact that these journals “were characterized as ‘apostate publications’” (23). That tendency extended in time and Mauss wrote an article in 1996 which he opened with the following statement: “Employees of the Church Education System have long been quietly enjoined from participating in Sunstone symposiums and from publishing their works in *Dialogue* or SUNSTONE; and many BYU faculty, who had long felt free to take part in such scholarly activities, now feel constrained to avoid them” (20).

follow the line opened by Larson when he tended a bridge between traditional, orthodox Mormon poetry and new modern approaches.

Thayne, a former professor at the University of Utah, is the author of more than a dozen books of poetry, fiction, essays and travel stories. She has been awarded the AML<sup>112</sup> Award in poetry twice and the Brigham Young University's David O. McKay Humanities Award. Pearson is another good example of Mormon literature's achievements. In any case, Pearson crosses the borders between these two generations which mix in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, since her career stretches throughout the period. Born in 1939, this prolific writer, author of many books since her first publication in 1969, *Beginnings*, is better known for her theatrical pieces and her autobiography, *Goodbye, I Love You*<sup>113</sup>, published in 1986 after which she became a gay rights advocate. Pearson is the author of a powerful cornucopia of poems which differ greatly in theme and style. In an interview for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, after the release of her play, *Facing East*, in 2007, Pearson declared that "issues are more important than art to me."<sup>114</sup> In 1996, Gold Leaf Press published an important selection of her works, *Picture Window*, which presents her poems thematically under headings such as motherhood, death, God and eternity, self-development, healing, pregnancy, adoption, friends or women. Such a thematic diversity can be summarized in two words: women and faith but, in fact, her work actually reveals an even wider scope of approaches and performance. For example, among the poems included in *Picture Window*, we find examples such as "The Steward", a narrative poem, with a solemn pace that allows readers to feel the weight of looking back and the noise behind the silence. In the poem, Margaret's quitting of her dreams and Heber's final

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<sup>112</sup> AML is the usual acronym for the Association for Mormon Letters.

<sup>113</sup> The book was published with the subtitle *A True Story of a Wife, Her Homosexual Husband, and a Love That Transcended Tragedy* which significantly summarizes the content of the book.

<sup>114</sup> Report by Steven Winn, Chronicle Arts and Culture Critic. *San Francisco Chronicle*, Saturday, August 18, 2007. <http://www.sfgate.com/>

comment, “Better get movin’. Margaret will be // Needing me for supper right away” (Pearson, *Picture* 83), illustrate a recurrent topic in Mormon women’s writing which here is delivered in words that reveal their power precisely in what they do not say. In “Millie’s Mother’s Red Dress,” Pearson again says what she did so subtly in the above poem, but instead of doing so with the vulnerable voice of the poet, she puts the words into a final dialogue between a dying mother and a daughter who learns the meaning of a red dress, thus enabling the reader to identify more closely with the scene. In her “I did you the worst of wrongs. // I asked nothing – for me!” (*Picture* 75), Pearson introduces a healthy but painful realization that closes beautifully with a determined request for a promise at the end of the poem: “Do me the honor, Millie // Of not following in my footsteps. // Promise me that” (*Picture* 77). In other poems in this collection, Pearson talks directly about couples and marriages. In “Position,” she makes poetry out of physics; in “Not a Pair” she touches on the inspirational poems that deal with spirituality or God. Pearson reveals herself as one of the most important poets in the history of Mormon literature.

### Fiction

In fiction, many other writers took a modern approach to literature, stretching the limits of both technique and content in their fiction, trying to produce books worthy of praise for their mastery of style and of structure, but also for the tone and point of view of the voice. The work of authors like Douglas Thayer, Donald R. Marshall and Eileen Kump should be noted. Thayer influenced subsequent Mormon writers because of his skill in showing the exploration of the internal conflict between doubt and faith. As he himself says:

I write about wilderness and contemporary man’s largely unsuccessful attempts to understand it and gain some kind of spiritual attachment to it. But mostly I write

about righteous, or near righteous, contemporary Mormons trying to live their somewhat conflicted lives as they seek their salvation, or whatever else they might be after. I'm not interested in writing about evil people, but about good people and their inevitable joys and sorrows. (Bigelow 196)

Thayer's crude but intense narrative style in short stories such as "The Red-Tailed Hawk," included in his collection *Mr. Wahlquist in Yellowstone and Other Stories* (1989), initiated a pattern which would be followed by subsequent Mormon writers. Marshall wrote skillful tales which explored Mormon thought and culture in a critical but fundamentally affirmative way. Marshall's *Frost in the Orchard*, published in 1977, is a collection of short stories with an experimental and refined perspective. Kump's *The Willows* is also an important novel from this period. Her collection of short stories *Bread and Milk and Other Stories*, published in 1979 also deserves attention. Nevertheless, perhaps the best illustration of what the work by these authors means in the context of Mormon literature came in the year 1986 when Levi S. Peterson's *The Backslider* and Linda Sillitoe's *Sideways to the Sun*, two of the most successful novels ever written by Mormons, were published. Mormon experience is the background to both these two stories, but they appeal to any reader interested in acquiring insight into human distress and anxiety. Both novels also provide interesting approaches to a different experience of the West, drawn mainly from a Mormon perspective that enlarges the Western experience of place and culture, describing Mormonism as a part of the whole West rather than as an isolated realm.

#### Levi S. Peterson and Linda Sillitoe

These two novels and their authors served as a symbolic bridge between that first generation and the new perspectives that emerge in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their works could be placed under the heading New Mormon Fiction, but standing separate

they connect different generations of writers in a linear pattern which illustrates the development of Mormon literature announced at the beginning of this introduction.

Peterson is the author of an autobiography, *A Rascal by Nature, A Christian by Yearning: A Mormon Autobiography* which was published in 2006 by the University of Utah Press. Many of his short stories have been published in two collections, *The Canyons of Grace* (1982) and *Night Soil* (1990). In addition, he wrote a second novel, entitled *Aspen Marooney* (1995). Two other important works have given him an important place in Mormon literature: *Greening Wheat: Fifteen Mormon Short Stories* (1983), an anthology of Mormon short stories and a biography of Juanita Brooks, *Juanita Brooks: Mormon Woman Historian* (1988).

*The Backslider* tells the story of confused and innocent Frank Windham who is trying to find a balance between his doubts and desires<sup>115</sup>. It is the powerful story of the conflictive relationship between man and God that makes this novel a very valuable example of the improvement in Mormon literature. Peterson's novel, occasionally humorous, is regarded as one of the best pieces of fiction in Mormon history and the author himself reflected on the success of his novel by saying that:

I think many people like *The Backslider* because the characters and setting strike them as authentic. Many like it because of its hopeful religious message. Many seem to like it for its tough realism – that is, its R-rated treatment of Mormon life. Perhaps many like it for its quality of pace. (Bigelow 129)

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<sup>115</sup> In England's opinion, Peterson had "a clear, almost didactic, project: to help his fellow Saints overcome the pernicious effects of our frontier past when our isolation in provincial chosen-ness and the very hardships and consequent brutality of our ancestors' lives inflicted on Mormon culture an obsession with God's punishment for our sins and failings and a tolerance for violence that are still with us" (*Good* 86).



Sillitoe, apart from writing poetry and fiction, was also an acclaimed journalist, famous for covering the affairs of Sonia Johnson and Mark T. Hoffman. Her book *Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders* (1989), written together with Allen D. Roberts, was a best-seller about the Mark T. Hoffman's forgeries. In *Sideways to the Sun*, Sillitoe explores the paradox of individualism and society. The novel deals with Mormon theology, but not for ideological reasons. The reader observes the challenge a woman faces once her husband has disappeared. The challenge is not only economic or social, but personal and she confronts her own new identity by reshaping the categories into which she fit until the disappearance of her husband:

Poor Mama and Papa, Megan thought. First Paula, now me. Ruined. In what way she was ruined she couldn't say, but that was the word that came to mind. She was not a widow, not a divorcee. She had no right to grief or anger or comfort. Or alimony or insurance benefits. She was nothing. Nowhere. (Sillitoe, *Sideways* 28)

### The Second Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: from Faithful Realism to the Present

Mormon fiction continues to grow and develop. Today, Mormon writers are trying to come to terms with their origins and traditions as well as with the literary world at large. It is feasible to talk about two different generations that overlap in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first is the one called Faithful Realism, a label proposed by Eugene England. The second comprises a broad generation of Mormon writers who are setting different trends in present-day Mormon literature. The Mormon writers publishing today reflect and parallel the changes undergone in Mormon culture and community. These new writers produce Mormon literature in different fields, from different perspectives, and with different intentions or objectives.

In fact, even if scholars still rely on the two sides of Mormon fiction<sup>116</sup> to label different works, they also state that the lines that divided them are fading away, as Gideon Burton and Neal Kramer stated in their article “The State of Mormon Literature and Criticism” which introduced a substantial review of the Mormon literature of the 1990s when it was published in the periodical *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*:

Today, even though the national market/LDS market division remains, the lines are blurring considerably. More and more authors of LDS literature are finding national publishing venues, and regional presses such as Deseret Book<sup>117</sup> are both raising their standards and reaching out to non-LDS markets. (Burton, *State 2*)

Consequently, the steady increase of Mormon letters in the 1970s and 1980s, a decade that Mulder calls “another productive decade in Mormon literature” (*Telling* 156) both in terms of quantity and quality, continued in the last years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century even though it doubled in two different directions, one following the traditional legacy and the other attempting to view literature and theology from a new perspective.

### *Traditional Forms*

Traditional forms are being developed by writers such as Shirley Sealey, Jack Weyland, Susan Evan McCloud, Brenton G. Yorgasson, Blaine M. Yorgasson, Carol Hoefling Morris

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<sup>116</sup> I am referring here to the already explained division between literature which could be said to be orthodox or faith-promoting and the literature which embraces experimental and wider approaches. Again, the definitions proposed by many scholars both help to define this division and to show that it is possible to establish a common ground in between. That will be the tendency in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>117</sup> Deseret Book is a Church-owned publisher whose main market is that of Mormon culture. In the late 1990s, Deseret Book acquired Bookcraft, another Mormon publisher, thus enhancing its leading role within the Mormon market. In recent years and through its imprint Shadow Mountain, the company has tried to reach a wider market. Nevertheless, Mormon literature possesses a varied range of publishers with different levels of attachment to the official Church. Signature Books could be considered the second in importance and it is considered as “more literary” and even controversial in some of its published works. Apart from these two, there are many different minor publishers that perform a valuable service for Mormon literature. Among them, we find publishers such as Covenant Communications, Aspen Books, Horizon Books, Chris Bigelow’s Zarahemla Books (Bigelow is also responsible for *The Sugar Beet*, a satirical Mormon news blog), Motet/White Crow Press, Parables Publisher, Eborn Books, Tabernacle Books or Hatrack River, which was founded by renowned Mormon writer, Orson Scott Card, in 1989.

or Gerald Lund. Many of these authors are responsible for the creation of a Mormon market and audience that eagerly and fruitfully buys and reads their books. Orson Scott Card says of Sealy:

Whatever else you may think of it, Shirley Sealy's first novel created Mormon fiction as a viable commercial category. Her book made it possible for Latter-day Saints to go into a bookstore and find a wide variety of books by many authors – more all the time. (Card, *Storyteller* 126)

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, sales experienced substantial growth in the Mormon market, thanks basically to the successful publication of popular books. The main genres which could be said to be commercially satisfying and spiritually uplifting are romance and historical fiction, particularly in the young adult market.

Prior to 1979, Latter-day Saints publishers concentrated mostly on non-fiction, such as faith promoting stories, biographies, songbooks and doctrinal discourses. In that year, Latter-day Saints Church-owned Deseret Books published its first novel, *Under the Same Stars* by Dean Hughes, a novel for the young adult market. In fact, the growth of this genre is so significant that today it represents a large part of the Mormon market and a reason for Mormon success, both within the Mormon market and also beyond it. The growing popularity of these traditional novels erupted in the 1990s when Gerald Lund released his first work in the series *The Work and the Glory*, the chronicles of the fictional Steed family. Subsequent releases were very successful and other Latter-day Saints fiction series like Chris Hemerdinger's *Tennis Shoes among the Nephites* (1999) boosted the rise of Mormon popular fiction. Today, Hughes, Louise Plummer, Jack Weyland, Carol Lynch Williams and Anne Edwards Cannon are successful authors writing for young adults. Catherine

Hapworth, Steve Wunderli, Michael O. Tunnell and Phyllis Barber have also achieved success writing literature for children, another important market for Mormon publishers<sup>118</sup>.

This field of youth writing has become one of the most important fields in contemporary Mormon fiction, basically, because publishers are aware of the fact that there is a big market for this kind of fiction. Stephenie Meyer is probably one of the most successful writers today. The novels which formed her praised series *Twilight* have sold over 42 million copies and they have been translated into 37 different languages worldwide. Meyer said that the story came to her in a dream and that it took her three months to write down that dream. Later, she expanded *Twilight* into a series with three more books: *New Moon* (2006), *Eclipse* (2007) and *Breaking Dawn* (2008). Winner of the British Book Award, her books have gone far beyond literary success. In recent times, Lev Grossman stated in *Time Magazine* that:

What makes Meyer's books so distinctive is that they're about the erotics of abstinence. Their tension comes from prolonged, superhuman acts of self-restraint. There's a scene midway through *Twilight* in which, for the first time, Edward leans in close and sniffs the aroma of Bella's exposed neck. "Just because I'm resisting the wine doesn't mean I can't appreciate the bouquet," he says. "You have a very floral smell, like lavender... or freesia." He barely touches her, but there's more sex in that one paragraph than in all the snogging in Harry Potter. (Grossman 1)

Even though Grossman is right when he underlines Meyer's skill at playing with tension and temptation in her characters Edward and Bella, this approach seems too narrow to

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<sup>118</sup> Whether or not these works are produced for a Mormon market, scholars such as Burton and Kramer still consider that the success of the Mormon market represents a good opportunity to improve the Mormon aesthetic through a proper literary analysis of these works which sometimes do not meet high literary standards: "The explosion of the LDS market for fiction, especially genre and serialized fiction, has made the literary component of our culture inescapable, but it also makes that component more difficult to grapple with – not simply because of the number of works published, but also because the ways of reading texts have multiplied. Measured by the varieties of criticism practiced in academic literary studies today, that is quite a lot. Rather than be dismayed at this, we see this as an opportunity to revisit the past with the new literary tools of today, while using that traditional canon to help situate the newer works and genres that are populating Mormon bookshelves" (*State* 2-3).

determine the Mormonness of the story. There are more important parts or elements of her books in which Meyer shows that she is part of the Mormon Church. In a recent article entitled “Forever Your Girl”, Holly Welker analyzes Meyer’s series using *Fascinating Womanhood* by Helen Andelin as a reference. In Welker’s opinion, Bella’s turning into vampire before turning 19 could be interpreted as a new example of what she calls “the pixie-dream-girl” stereotype, revisiting Andelin’s stereotypical image of women as childlike, passive and frivolous (Welker, *Forever* 3). Welker underlines the fact that both Andelin and Meyer were Mormons. Meyer, who has confessed her commitment to the Mormon faith, slips some cultural ideas into her fiction. A closer look reveals certain features in her characters which invite the reader to ponder their Mormonness. Some of these are superficial, others require a deeper knowledge of the faith and culture, but, in any case, the story deals with people from far off and, consequently unaware of those elements. Thus, Meyer’s books have shown that universal feelings can be delivered by a Mormon writer dealing with vampires. The meaning obtained from this fact exceeds religious conclusions.

Finally, the third genre that leads in Mormon sales rankings is romance. Anita Stanfield is regarded as the queen of LDS Romantic fiction<sup>119</sup>. She is a best-seller in the Mormon market and a prolific writer who usually classifies her novels in series or sagas. In 2007, she was recognized with the Lifetime Achievement Award in the Whitney Awards, the same year these awards were organized for the first time. Other authors, such as Rachel Ann Nunes, have followed her path.

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<sup>119</sup> As already explained, LDS stands for Latter-day Saints as a shortening of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For coherence and commodity, in this dissertation I have tried to avoid the use of LDS as an adjective when possible, always resorting to the much more familiar term Mormon, but LDS fiction or LDS romance are popular terms in a literary context.

## *New Mormon Fiction*

A large number of faithful Mormon writers publish nationally and yet have gained recognition and attention among Mormons. These writers have been grouped under the name of New Mormon Fiction by England (*Mormon* 14), although they display considerable diversity. Some of them have opened new paths in Mormon literature, either in style or in content or both. Some of those new ways are delivered through approach. A new openness in Mormon literature is visible today in the presence of feminism or the improved utilization of different genres and types.

Sillitoe and Michael Fillerup both explore feminism and multicultural issues from a Mormon perspective. Women's writing has acquired importance in Mormon writing through the work of these authors, but also through the writing of Phyllis Barber or Margaret Young Blair. Sillitoe's stories in *Windows on the Sea and Other Stories* (1989) and her novel *Sideways to the Sun* (1987) explore dimensions of identity for Mormon women testing themselves against the limitations of their society, their family obligations, and their beliefs. Marilyn Brown still publishes novels, such as *Serpent in Paradise* (2006), even though the work of this former President of the Association for Mormon Letters and editor of *BYU Studies* has remained active since she published her famous novel *Earth Keepers* in 1979. Lewis Horne and Neal Chandler live and write about Mormon life outside Utah. Chandler, former editor of the independent literary journal *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, together with his wife Rebecca Worthen Chandler, found success with his collection of short stories *Benediction* (1985), winner of the AML Award that same year. This is a book that Mulder defines perfectly when he says that "he puts a new spin on clichés of Mormon thought and diction, working them into startling secular contexts, now

comic, now sinister, that give familiar words and phrases new currency” (*Telling* 161-162). Even writers that could be labelled as “expatriates” and would probably reject the label of Mormon writer, such as Lauren Kalpakian, Judith Freeman<sup>120</sup> and Walter Kirn, are considered members of New Mormon Fiction:

The term “Mormon writer,” by the way, which serves well enough loosely applied, may irritate expatriates. Judith Freeman, for one, has voiced her objection: “I do not consider myself a ‘Mormon’ writer and have a somewhat adverse reaction to being grouped as such.” “Mormon-born” or “Mormon-bred” may be better terms, suggesting a Mormon heritage and a continuing affectionate connection through family and community. “Mormon-born” writers may be cultural rather than doctrinal Mormons, a term I find hospitable and ecumenical, although in some quarters sure to be regarded as a soft equivalent of secular humanist. Some may be Mormons “by yearning.” (Mulder, *Essential* 4)

Some other promising authors are, for example, Coke Newell or Brady Udall. Udall’s book *The Miracle Life of Edgar Mint* (2001) was celebrated nationally, even if he himself considers that “I don’t have any special message to offer the world about what the Mormon experience is like – I have only the individual experiences of my characters, some of whom happen to be Mormon” (Bigelow 206). Udall, in fact, extends these considerations to some other contemporary writers such as Walter Kirn, Paul Rawlins or Brian Evenson. He says that “I don’t really see these people as Mormon writers. They’re writers who are Mormons or who write about the Mormon experience in some significant way”<sup>121</sup> (Bigelow 206). On the other hand, Newell’s *On the Road to Heaven* (2007) won the prestigious Whitney Award and hit the market with a lot of success and good reviews. Darrell Spencer’s *Woman*

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<sup>120</sup> Together with Paul Mortensen, Judith Freeman is included in the group of writers that Lavina Fielding Anderson considers to illustrate her idea of the outsider/insider writer in “Masks and Music: Recent Fiction by Mormon Women Writers.” Freeman is a writer who uses Mormon West as a cultural backdrop to her fiction, even if he is not a member of the Mormon Church, but always with a frank, non-tenuous point of view. Freeman is a nationally considered author, especially thanks to her novels *The Chinchilla Farm* and *Red Water* of which Barber said that “inspired by the writings of the late Juanita Brooks and her own rich imagination, author Judith Freeman has produced a fascinating account of three of the nineteen wives of the infamous John D. Lee: Emma Batchelor Lee, Ann Gordge Lee, and Rachel Woolsey Lee” (*Where* 159).

<sup>121</sup> And this is an opinion shared by other Mormon writers, whether faithful or not, such as Darrell Spencer who says: “I don’t really write about Mormons, though there are Mormons in some of my stories. I don’t think about Mormon themes. I’m not interested in the religion as a subject” (Bigelow 184).

*Packing a Pistol*, a collection of short stories published in 1987 and winner of the AML Award for Short Story was praised for its technique. Spencer, who has published three other collections of short stories and a novel, *One Mile Past Dangerous Curve* (2005), is a renowned professor at Ohio State University and winner of two of the most relevant awards in short fiction, the Drue Heinz Literature Prize and the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction. Franklin Fisher's *Bones* was also a very successful book that won the AML award for Novel in 1990. Pauline Mortensen's *Back Before the World Turned Nasty*, winner of the Utah Arts Council first prize for short stories in 1987 and the AML Award for Short Story in 1989, is a blend of fiction and personal essay. These are significant examples of how Mormon fiction has developed during the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### *Orson Scott Card and Science Fiction*

Important examples of talented contemporary Mormon writers who are also widely known on a national level include Orson Scott Card in mainstream science-fiction. Card is clearly one of the most prolific and innovative Mormon writers. After working as a playwright in the 1970s, he became a mainstream science fiction writer with no specific reference to his Mormon culture. The first writer to win the Hugo and Nebula awards in consecutive years, 1986 and 1987, Card scaled to the top of his field with the Mormon science-fiction stories *The Folk of the Fringe* in 1989. By that time, he had turned to writing openly Mormon fiction, beginning with *A Woman of Destiny* (1984). Next came a fantasy series, *The Tales of Alvin Maker* (1987-2003), based on the life of Joseph Smith, and a science fiction series, *Homecoming* (1992-1995), based on the *Book of Mormon*<sup>122</sup>. In 1992, he contributed to Mormon literature with a novel of contemporary Mormon domestic

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<sup>122</sup> Card felt compelled to confess that the *Book of Mormon* was a source of inspiration when a controversy over "plagiarism" began after the publication of the first novel in this series *The Memory of the Earth* (1992).



realism, *Lost Boys*. Michael R. Collings's critical assessment of Card's work, *In the Image of God: Theme, Characterization and Landscape in the Fiction of Orson Scott Card* (1990), is the first book to have been written about a Mormon writer from the latest generation. It can be taken as an indication of Card's enormous success.

In fact, science-fiction has become one of the most successful genres practiced by Mormons. Apart from Card, who has been translated to many different languages worldwide, the number of Mormon writers following his path with science fiction and fantasy novels are many. The reason for this inclination is the object of study by scholars in Mormon academia. Card himself provides an explanation:

At first inadvertently, but later by design, I did most of my storytelling within the genre of science fiction and fantasy. It is the one genre that allows a storyteller to create worlds that function by different rules; I needed that possibility of strangeness, that control over milieu, in order to tell the stories that seemed most important and true to me. (Card, *Storyteller* 150)

One of his most skillful followers is Dave Wolverton. Card himself highlights Wolverton in his discussion of the group of new Mormon science-fiction writers; he also mentions Shayne Bell or Virginia Baker. Card underlines Wolverton's name because he "sets high standards for intelligent and emotionally powerful fiction, regardless of genre" (*Storyteller* 161).

Wolverton won the L. Ron Hubbard "Writers of the Future" award in 1987 with his novel *On My Way to Paradise*. Four years later, he co-wrote a very successful novel, *A Very Strange Trip*, with Hubbard. This was the beginning of a prolific career progressing along two different paths. Under the pseudonym of David Farland, Wolverton writes fantasy works. His series, *The Runelords*, made up of seven different novels to date, is a good

example. In these books, Wolverton (Farland) tells the story of Gaborn Val Orden and his sons, together with a motley array of different characters who gave shape to a fantastic world where a magical system delivers attributes to the characters. Under his real name, Wolverton has published a highly-praised series of science-fiction novels. His writings that revisit *Star Wars* are especially well-known. This prolific writer has recently been exploring other fields, such as filmmaking or video games. Again, Wolverton has his own explanation of why Mormons have paid so much attention to science-fiction literature: “I could name a dozen contributing factors, but in the end I think they’re attracted primarily because science fiction and fantasy are literatures that allow you to express moral themes” (Bigelow 248).

*Terry Tempest Williams and Anne Perry*

In a different field, the equally successful Mormon writer Terry Tempest Williams exemplifies the complexity and quality that Mormon literature enjoys today. Williams, naturalist, professor and writer, is one of the most powerful voices in Western American literature dealing with environmentalism. Her engagement with environmental issues won her a position on the Governing Council of the Wilderness Society in Washington, D.C. In fact, her books, a mixture of biography, memory, poetry, scientific reporting and socio-political commitment, go beyond any label. In many of her books, Williams has talked critically and earnestly about her identity which, in her own words, is formed by her own biases “which are gender, geography, and culture” (Austin, *Voice* 68). Probably, her best known book is *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, published in 1992. But even her recent books, such as *Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert* (2001) have received warm recognition. Nevertheless, as Michael Austin points out, “Mormon readers

often express frustration with her unorthodoxy and her criticisms of the faith's emphasis on conformity, authority, and patriarchy" (*Voice* 7).

In a totally different genre, Anne Perry has become the best selling author in Mormon literature: "I would guess that current sales leader among Mormon writers is not Orson Scott Card, but Anne Perry" (Austin, *Some* 23). Most of her books could be classified under the detective story genre. It is precisely the Pitt and Monk series which has pushed Perry into the higher sales rankings. Perry, born Juliet Marion Hulme in 1938, has been a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for over forty years. She converted in 1967 and confesses that Mormonism plays a role in her life: "[I]f you believe a religion to be true, it has to be the driving force of everything and at the core of who you are" (Bigelow 123). She has indicated that books such as *Tathea* (1999) or *Come Armageddon* (2001) deal, albeit allegorically and from a personal point of view, with religious matters.

### *Poetry*

In the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, young Mormon poets came to be thoroughly influenced by contemporary American poetry which led them to write poetry that challenged traditional forms, methods or language and showed interest in current issues such as feminism or multiculturalism. My survey of Mormon poetry in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century comes within the framework of research carried out by Linda Sillitoe and Dennis Marden Clark, incorporating additional sources which aid to encompass all the varied poetry being produced in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Sillitoe, a poet herself, assessed the women poets beginning to publish in the mid-1970s. In the late 1980s, Clark,

the co-editor of the first anthology of Mormon poetry, *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems*<sup>123</sup>, wrote a series of articles for *Sunstone* that gave a general overview of the development of Mormon poetry at that time.

Sillitoe saw in the women poets she analyzed a development that stressed individuality, thus departing from traditional shores to approach the disruptive coasts of new landscapes:

The new voices in the poetry written by Mormon women question, wrestle, explore and affirm. Even in loneliness or anger, there is a determined note of survival; there is also irony, realism and affirmation. A unity of theme is evident as these poets seek to discover one another and the world, to build, link by link, a chain to heaven from mothers, sisters, grandmothers, scriptural and historical role models, temple priestesses and at last God, Herself. (Sillitoe, *New* 59)

In her analysis, Sillitoe studies the work by previous poets such as Kristine Barrett, Lisa Bolin Hawkins, Helen Cannon, Susan Hafen, Emma Lou Thayne, Fae Swinyard or Carol Lynn Pearson<sup>124</sup>. Writers, all of them, that together with new poets such as Sillitoe herself, Susan Howe, Lance Larsen and Kathy Evans were taking Clinton F. Larson's Faithful Realism towards interesting and valuable contemporary directions. Nevertheless, some Mormon scholars are of the opinion that, because of their themes or styles, their poetry cannot be regarded as strictly Mormon literature.

Under the title of "Mormon Poetry Now!", Clark published a series of three articles, from 1985 to 1987, that analyze poems sent for publication in *Sunstone*. In his first article,

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<sup>123</sup> Five years ago, Sheree Maxwell Bench and Susan E. Howe edited the collection *Discoveries: Two Centuries of Poems by Mormon Women* (2004). In this collection, poets from the beginnings of the Church, Augusta Joyce Crocheron, E.B. Wells, Eliza R. Snow or Josephine Spencer, share space with contemporary poets such as Linda Sillitoe, Karen Marguerite Moloney, Carol L. Pearson or Dixie Lee Partridge, together with many other names that have not been included in this introduction. In any case, this anthology continues in the steps of Clark's *Harvest*.

<sup>124</sup> Even though Pearson considers herself to be "not a great poet. But, very importantly, I am a useful poet. My poems have been used by thousands of people to help them make sense of life and give them encouragement" (Bigelow 115).

Clark talks about poems that center on the poet, his family and friends. The poems discussed in the second article deal with religion in general, Mormonism and Christianity. The third article broadens the scope to talk about poems dealing with the natural, social and political worlds. A fourth part, presented in the form of an epilogue to the third article, closes with Orson Scott Card's fictional world shaped in a long poem entitled "Prentice Alvin and the No-good Plow." Among the poets discussed in these articles are renowned contemporary Mormon writers such as, again, Sillitoe, R. A. Christmas, who totals the largest number of poems in this collection, or Dixie Lee Partridge. Clark indicates that content is not of major importance when dealing with poetry: "The subject matter doesn't matter. And the only criterion of less value than subject matter in determining the quality of a poem is message" (*Mormon-c* 20). Even though I do not agree entirely with Clark's ideological or critical approach to poetry<sup>125</sup>, his approach does attest to the broadening of approaches to poetry and literature among Mormon scholars. In his analysis of specific poems in these articles, he introduces a special perspective on the value of poetry which is more fully developed later in his prologue to *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems*. Richard Cracroft, in his review of this groundbreaking anthology edited in 1989 by Clark and England, criticizes the Mormonness of Lance Larsen's poem "Passing the Sacrament at Eastgate Nursing Home." Another prominent Mormon scholar, Bruce W. Jorgensen, in turn, responds to Cracroft's review by advocating for a broader conception of Mormon

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<sup>125</sup> Clark puts the stress on the reader, making him or her responsible for the meaning and effect of the poem, an idea that I understand and share, but he also stresses that "poetry what it is – twists of word rather than plot, language reminding us of how much more we know than we normally use" (*Mormon-b* 25). Language is plot in itself. It provides the mystery of the plot. A narrative poem is poetry as well. Language gives the polysemic, the complex, the truer perspective. Plain, clear, easy language always delivers what is said and how it is said, but poetry is a marriage of image and content whose object is merely the perfect cohesion of both. Clark clearly states that poetry must be fiction to be successful, even though "the poem's fiction should represent stories of our lives, compressed, polished, sculpted for the tongue" (*Mormon-c* 20). Examples of poets all around the world, from the American Raymond Carver to the Spaniard David González show how poetry is not detached from its power and nature when dealing with reality that has been stripped of any disguise as fiction. If fiction is the exercise of transforming facts into words, Clark is right, but if by that statement he is referring to the need to transform the real into fantasy as a compulsory element of poetry, contemporary narrative poetry has long and wide disproved such a statement.

literature. Jorgensen thus opens the ground for a discussion that entails the dichotomy of Mormon criticism and literature and, in this case, the growing influence of modern and secular poetry on Mormon writers, even though they continue to use Mormon themes. The controversy is only the reminder of a reality that illustrates the growing diversity in Mormon writing, a diversity that, as Clark's series of articles shows, began early in Mormon literary history. Clark, in fact, emphasizes that these poems share a certain peculiarity that makes them both Mormon and American, even if it is in unusual ways:

Indeed, all these poems are little unusual as contemporary Mormon American poetry, as much in their open avowal of faith as in their creation for an audience who share the author's culture and beliefs. As Mormon poetry they're also unusual in their fight against sentimentality. The hardest task most poets face is avoiding sentimentality, for whether the sentiments are fashionable or not, using them to appeal to the reader's emotion is always easier than capturing emotion in words. The reader's task is to avoid being suckered by the poem. (Clark, *Mormon-b* 25)

The critical opinions of Sillitoe and Clark are helpful because they facilitate familiarity with many of the poets who improved Mormon literature in the 1970s and 1980s, especially those that no longer deal solely with faith and Mormon orthodoxy. Those writers were producing good literature in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Mormon poetry branches out into different directions after a long tradition of rhythmic modes that began with hymns and ends with a complex content-focused modern poetry which embraces universal ideas and forms. Apart from these names mentioned by Sillitoe and Clark many others could be listed, names that were also listed in *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems*, or that produced creditable poetry around the turning of the century: Dixie Lee Partridge, R. A. Christmas, Bruce W. Jorgensen, Eloise Bell, Marden J. Clark or Warren

Hatch. Three important names still active in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are Susan Elizabeth Howe, Kimberly Johnson and Lance Larsen<sup>126</sup>.

Susan Elizabeth Howe, a former poetry editor of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, is a renowned Mormon poet who teaches creative writing at Brigham Young University. Her first collection of poems, *Stone Spirits* (1997) won the Charles Redd Center Publication Prize in 1996 and the AML Award in poetry in 1998. Kimberly Johnson, born in 1971, is professor of creative writing and Renaissance literature at Brigham Young University. She is a celebrated scholar on the 17<sup>th</sup> century and in the fields of translation from Greek and Latin. Her first collection of poetry, *Leviathan with a Hook* (2002) won the AML Award in poetry and led to her reception of a Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in order to complete her second book *A Metaphorical God* (2008). Lance Larsen has published his work in the *New York Review of Books*, the *Paris Review* and the *Times Literary Supplement*. A recipient of many awards and grants, in 2004 he obtained the Tampa Review Prize for his second collection of poetry, *In All Their Animal Brilliance*, published in 2005. Previously, he authored a collection of poetry called *Erasable Walls*.

### *Personal Writing*

Perhaps as a result of the tradition of sermons and its combination with the modern trend of autobiographical writing, personal essays are an important genre in Mormon letters<sup>127</sup>,

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<sup>126</sup> In recent years, Sarah Jenkins and Gideon Burton began working on a list of 75 important Mormon poets that they presented in digital format. The list is divided into two periods: Early Mormon Poets of Note, covering the 1830s to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and Contemporary Mormon Poets of Note. Interestingly, in the first period, men slightly outnumber women while in the second period there are more women than men.

possibly even one of their most significant contributions to cultural life, as England suggests in “Mormon Literature: Progress and Prospects”. In her review of the Mormon literary production of personal writing in the last four decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mary Lythgoe Bradford also indicates how important a genre this writing has become for Mormons and she points out some of its flaws and virtues:

Certain characteristic themes recur throughout all the personal essays: the loss of old buildings and old towns; the difficulty of living one’s religion creatively; the search for authenticity and wholeness; the need to mend fences, to preserve eccentricity. And through them all, there is the desire to reach out without striking out, a striving for the right word, the delicate balance. (Bradford, *I* 157)

Parley A. Christensen and Edward Geary have both published relevant works in this genre. Of particular interest is Geary’s *Goodbye to Poplarhaven* (1973). Mulder qualifies this book as representative, together with others such as Don Marshall’s *Rummage Sale*, Wayne Carver’s *Plain City: Portrait of a Mormon Village* or Virginia Sorensen’s *Where Nothing Is Long Ago*, of a “distinctive regional literature” that he calls “realistic” but “reminiscent of the local colorists” and which emerges from “affection and nostalgia” (Mulder, *Essential* 6-7). Mulder stresses the fact that it has to do with both place and religion.

Essays have been afforded visibility thanks to the work of academic journals such as *BYU Studies* or *Sunstone*. Often these essays are then published in anthologies or individual collections which receive critical attention. Today, some Mormon writers have expanded the concern for, and importance of, the personal essay form and non-fiction writing with regard to issues like feminism or ecology. Terry Tempest Williams’ work, *Refuge: An*

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<sup>127</sup> “The personal narrative, so akin to the spiritual bookkeeping of Puritan autobiography, is certainly another, endemic in the conversion experience, the struggle between faith and doubt” (Mulder, *Telling* 164). Mulder’s statement is good example of the weight this genre carries among Mormons.



*Unnatural History of Family and Place* (1992), is one of the most successful books in the new trend in literary criticism known as ecocriticism. Essays by Phyllis Barber, Laura L. Bush and Lavina Fielding Anderson have contributed to feminism from a Mormon perspective. Phyllis Barber's *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir* (1992) won the 1991 Associated Writing Programs Award in Creative Non-Fiction. In addition, her autobiography expands the limits and characteristics of traditional Mormon women's autobiography. Barber herself talks of a new kind of biographical writing, that she calls "candid" or "confessional", as an opportunity to show the tensions and conflicts that Mormon culture entails (*Pros* 12-13). Among the authors that she mentions some writers have been already listed or quoted in this introduction, like Levi S. Peterson or Holly Welker, but Barber is successful in drawing a chronology of biographical writings which seems to propose a long tradition. From Annie Clark Tanner's *A Mormon Mother: An Autobiography* (1941) to Heidi Hart's *Grace Notes* (2004), Barber names authors such as Rodello Hunter, Stephen Carter, Deborah Laake or Elna Baker who have been able to produce autobiographical works which openly confess a certain level of compromise and criticism: "a deep commitment and a reverence for their religion, but who have also felt at odds with some of the practices of the church" (Barber, *Pros* 13-14).

### *Drama*

Mormons have cultivated an old interest for drama. Either when intended for entertainment, as it happened in the beginning of the Church, or for exploring new realms of creativity, as recent playwrights have been doing in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, drama constitutes a fundamental area within the context of Mormon literature. A brief historical analysis reveals three major characteristics in Mormon drama: first, that it is built

on a solid aesthetic foundation; second, that it enjoys broad theological support; and third, that it stems from an earnest desire to produce great works (Graham 14).

Card states that “theatre is a disease that the Mormon Church caught early in its childhood” and he adds that “it has never quite recovered” (Bliss 55). Card tries to illustrate the importance of drama in Mormon culture and in Mormon life as a fundamental part of entertainment. Although drama enjoyed little success until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mormons have a long history of writing and producing drama. In most cases, this effort aimed to entertain and did so in an amateur fashion. In recent years, drama has become a relevant genre, especially musicals. As Card’s study reveals, Mormon drama has played an important role from the very beginning of the Church, mainly with plays based on sacred books and biblical stories or plays that portrayed historical events. Since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, contemporary Mormon plays have emerged as a useful genre to develop and represent different topics concerning Mormons or using Mormon culture as a backdrop. England was the first to point out, in the late 1970s, that “fine Mormon drama was being quite regularly written and produced at Brigham Young University and James Arrington inaugurated a fine tradition of first person plays” (*Mormon* 11). In the 1970s, an increase in Mormon drama was launched by the work of established playwrights such as Robert Elliott and Thomas F. Rogers. Elliott’s *Fires of the Mind*, first produced in 1974, was a clever piece of drama on a recurrent theme among Mormon writers, filmmakers and playwrights, the missionary. Thomas F. Rogers wrote two of the most important Mormon plays in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: *Huebner* (1976) and *Fire in the Bones* (1978). *Huebner*, which tells the story of a young Mormon convert in Germany during the Nazi period was a “happening” when it was produced at Brigham Young University in 1976 (Mulder, *Essential* 12). Both these plays, though overtly Mormon, digress on the idea

of mob psychology and the ethical controversies of heroes. Martin Kelly's *And They Shall Be Gathered* (1969), proposed by Card as a potential classic of Mormon theater, has been a resource for the study of Mormon theater for a long time. Card also mentions the musical *The Order Is Love* (1971) with text by Carol Lynn Pearson, and music composed by Lex D'Azevedo. D'Azevedo was also the main composer for Douglas Stewart's successful musical *Saturday's Warrior* (1974). Douglas Stewart is a well-known screenplay writer (*Where the Red Fern Grows*) at the Brigham Young University Motion Picture Studios. Together with D'Azevedo, who has composed and arranged music for many TV shows and movies, Stewart wrote *Saturday's Warrior*, which charts the story of the Flinder family from their pre-existence to their worldly period. Stewart has said that the play attempts to romanticize the Mormon belief in pre-existence which is seriously challenged by the temptations of physical life. This idea, which narrows and strengthens the Mormon sense of identity by making it predetermined, transforms any choice to be something other than a Mormon into a rejection of one's natural identity. At the same time, the Mormon concept of pre-existence, since it is applicable to families, reinforces one of the most important tenets of Mormonism, the idea that families are nuclear and bound together. The constant stress, even in the subtitle, on the utterance, "who you are", and the clear reference to the search for one's identity, seem to indicate that identity is only related to religion and family. Identity is even described in aggressive comparison to ideas often considered as positive, such as friendship, experience or even reading. "What's happening to you, Jimmy? All this free thinking... those radical ideas!" (Stewart 43) This is a highly didactic text which skillfully uses humour to communicate its aim which, in my opinion, is to defend procreation and large families in the face of abortion and birth control rather than to discuss pre-existence and the promises made in the celestial world. By the time the book was published in 1974, the baby boom was over and the pill was in wide use. In spite of its

subject matter, the plot lacks the tension caused by disruption because the conflicts experienced by the characters seem rather obvious, even simple. Instead of presenting conflict in the form of personal crisis, it surfaces in the story as palpable and easy to fix. In any case, the play is well-written and technically skillful, particularly in the way D’Azevedo and Stewart sequence the music and the text. D’Azevedo’s contribution to Mormon drama, by the way, does not stop here, because he was also the main composer for the already named *Fires of the Mind* and his own production, *Stone Tables* (1973), was directed by Charles W. Whitman<sup>128</sup> at Brigham Young University in 1973. Whitman also directed Kelly’s *And They Shall Be Gathered* in 1969 and *Fires of the Mind* in 1974.

In Card’s opinion, all these plays take different approaches to Mormonism, sometimes realistic, sometimes sophisticated, but each breaking the common pattern prior to the 1970s (Bliss 56-63):

Before that time Mormon plays could be divided into two rough classifications: miracle plays and hero plays. The miracle plays, like *Promised Valley*, were essentially inspirational anecdotes expanded to a couple of hours. The characters were almost all righteous, God-fearing people who struggled against nature or enemies and were saved from disaster by their faith and by divine intervention. Occasionally, for realism, a leading character would be plagued by doubts. The hero plays stressed the conflict between whiter-than-white good guys and blacker-than-black bad guys who always lost in the end. *The Tragedy of Korihor* and *A Day, A Night, and A Day* fall into this category. Some good writing often went into these works, but by and large they were primitive, simplistic, and acceptable only to an unsophisticated Mormon audience. They almost never dealt with serious questions. (Bliss 56)

Even before this outpouring of Mormon drama in the 1970s, Clinton F. Larson was the author of many different plays, but, because of his praised poetic merits and his lack of theatricality, they were hard to perform:

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<sup>128</sup> Whitman, head of the playwriting department of the BYU when most of these plays were produced, directed them and taught those writers to write. Card calls him “the father of Mormon Theatre” (Bliss 62).

Few Mormon writers have his exquisite control of language, and it is unfortunate that his plays are generally unproduceable. The problem is partly an outgrowth of his poetry: because each word is carefully chosen, the language overwhelms the action of the play, and the drama suffers. (Bliss 59)

During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and at the beginnings of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Mormons develop a great body of dramatic literature. Some other promising playwrights such as Susan E. Howe, also a poet, Tim Slover, Reed McColm, J. Scott Bronson, Lee Anne Hill Adams or James Goldberg promise new horizons for Mormon drama. Slover has enjoyed a long career as a playwright that merited the AML Award for drama for two consecutive years: in 1995 for *A March Tale* and in 1996 for *Joyful Noise*. He received the award a third time in the year 2006 for *Treasure*. Another two authors, Eric Samuelson, a professor in the Theater Department at Brigham Young University, and Margaret Young Blair, who also writes fiction, have helped to increase the literary quality of Mormon drama. Young Blair won the AML Award in 2000 for her play *I Am Jane*; that same year her novel, *One More River to Cross*, received the award for fiction. Samuelson, considered by many Mormonism's pre-eminent contemporary playwright, won the Association for Mormon Letters award for drama three times with three different works: *Accommodations: A Play in Three Acts* (winner of the AML Award for Drama in 1994, first published in *Sunstone* that same year), *Gadianton* (winner of the AML Award for Drama in 1997) and *The Way We're Wired* (winner of the AML Award in 1999). He aspires to portray in his plays the conflicts that Mormon characters encounter in challenging sin and moral issues. He aims to be "to Mormon drama what Levi Peterson is to Mormon fiction" (Bigelow 154).

Finally, it is compulsory to highlight the names of Neil LaBute and Carol Lynn Pearson. LaBute's piece *Bash* which, as he himself states "was not really widely embraced by the

church” (Bigelow 86), is an important example of the progress made by Mormon drama. Carol Lynn Pearson, a writer who, because of her prolific career and the diversity of her choice of genres, comes up again here in this dissertation. Pearson’s *Mother Wove the Morning* has been performed over three hundred times internationally. This multifaceted writer chooses playwrighting as her favorite because, as she says, “drama, I think, is a religious experience” (Bigelow 114). In fact, Pearson has also written musicals such as *The Order Is Love* (1971), *My Turn on Earth* (1977) and *The Dance* (2007) and she confides in music and theatre as a good way of portraying “charming and moving explorations of LDS life and beliefs” (Bigelow 115).

### *Filmmaking and New Technologies*

Many of these promising playwrights now work in the growing Mormon filmmaking market. LaBute’s controversial work and his recent success as a mainstream film director is a good example, even though his work does not have a direct connection to the Mormon faith<sup>129</sup>.

The history of Mormon filmmaking, however, actually dates a long way back. Its source could be traced as far back as Thomas Edison’s trip to Salt Lake City in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many others, such as the Clawson Brothers also made movies about Mormons. These first films follow a tendency that was also seen in literature: the antagonism between films made from a sensationalist point of view, exploiting Mormon peculiarities, and films that, in response to these movies, clearly show sympathy towards the Church<sup>130</sup>. The

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<sup>129</sup> Some scholars recognize references to Mormonism in his film *The Wicker Man* released in 2006.

<sup>130</sup> This tendency exists even today. In 2006, HBO released a new television drama about a contemporary polygamist husband. *Big Love*, produced by Tom Hanks and starring Bill Paxton, Chloe Sevigny, Jeanne Tripplehorn, Ginnifer Goodwin and Harry Dean Stanton was labelled by *The Guardian* as “another tale of

Church began to produce films in the first two decades of the century but they did not establish their own motion picture studio until 1953. This institutional cinema, mostly documentaries promoting the Church from different perspectives, is still favored and delivered by the Church. Some scholars researching Mormon cinema call the period when the Church began promoting a private distribution and exhibition network for its own filmmaking production, the Home Cinema period. In recent years, Brigham Young University has become the center of Mormon filmmaking. Since 1992, a film festival for student films is organized every year<sup>131</sup>. By the 21<sup>st</sup> century, interest in this tradition and in the possibilities of film-making has increased among Mormons and scholars have begun to pay more attention to this cinema with lectures, articles and research projects. Many professional Mormons began to work in the cinema industry. Paralleling this independent or academic stress on Mormon film, a growing industry has also developed a new market for Mormon films that adapts the content or style of commercial cinema to Mormon tastes. Video and DVD distribution of institutional and independent Mormon film has expanded. *God's Army* (2000) is the film that inaugurated the most successful period in Mormon cinema. The director of that movie, Richard Dutcher, repeated its success with titles such as *Brigham City* (2001) or *States of Grace* (2005). Dutcher, who published a letter in the *Provo Daily Herald* in 2007 announcing that he has abandoned the Church, has been called the father of Mormon cinema. In an interview in 2000, he said the following about *God's Army*, the most successful Mormon film ever:

I see *God's Army* as a study of faith and a character study of individual at different points along the road of faith. And they're all me at one point in my life or another. I've been Elder Allen struggling for a testimony, I've been Elder Kinegar doubting

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American subculture" while the Mormon Church officially stated its concern about the sitcom's portrayal of Mormons.

<sup>131</sup> The festival, called Final Cut Film Festival, is organized every year at the Brigham Young University. This popular event screens short films mostly but with a wide range of topics and styles. Many contemporary professional Mormon filmmakers presented their first works at this festival.

under the intellectual tracks of anti-Mormons, I've been Elder Banks in Carthage Jail, I've been Benny healed of a permanent disability, and I've been Elder Dalton, faithful and committed and perhaps a bit intolerant. (Bigelow 10)

If the development of Mormon cinema is an example of Mormonism's cultural growth, the new resources offered by Internet are both a challenge and an obligation that serves to measure the modern character of a literature. Mormon literature is active and resilient on the Internet. *A Motley Vision: Mormon Arts and Culture*, a website founded by William Morris, aims at proposing different activities and approaches towards a new analysis of Mormon criticism. In 2005, it won the Award for Criticism from the Association for Mormon Letters. Its subsidiary, *Wilderness Interface Zone*, directed by poet Patricia Gunter Karamesines, helps to promote an ecocritical approach to Mormon literature and criticism. The *Red Brick Store* is a website for collaboration among many different Mormon publishers managed by Stephen Carter, who is also the moderator of the AML-List, another resource which developed to improve communication among Mormon scholars, researchers and artists. Gideon Burton's overwhelming Mormon Database and the website of the Association for Mormon Letters also provide visible examples of how the realm of Mormon literature has adapted to the possibilities offered by new technologies.

### *Prospects*

Mormon literature is not isolated from its historical context. In the beginning, Mormons produced a literature intended to tend to practical needs, either to support Church activities or to alleviate the afflictions of the pioneers by depicting their suffering on the written page. Those were days of endurance and misery, days when the stamina and tenacity of those men and women opened the road to the West. Their literature mirrored those unkind circumstances. Similarly, the conflicts and dissensions with non-Mormon settlers were



reflected in the Mormon-menace novels which today provide an extraordinary testimony of the misconceptions and prejudices of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the literature encouraged by Orson F. Whitney and promoted and sponsored by the Church was a consequence of the intensifying creation of the Kingdom of Zion. The Mormons, having already found the place to settle their community, had to promote faith and bonds which would make the Mormon community even stronger. The reaction to that period produced Mormondom's Lost Generation, as described by Geary.

In fact, Michael Austin states that this traditional tendency to produce a literature attacking the Mormons is still buoyant today: "While the Mormon Church has become much more mainstream than it was in the 1900s, it has also become more powerful, and one of the costs of that power has been a tremendous resurgence of negative images in contemporary literature" (*Mormon* 1). In his study, Austin discusses novels that were published between 1979 and 1998 and dealt substantially with Mormonism. Among these, he names books such as Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* and others by Gary Stewart, Robert Irvine, Laura Kalpakian and Marian Wells. Focusing on Deborah Laake's *Secret Ceremonies*, Austin puts forth his theory that these books mirror the stereotypes already described in the 19<sup>th</sup> century:

It is interesting to note that, in a passage like this, the anti-Mormon rhetoric of the nineteenth century comes full circle. Nineteenth-century moralists used stories of hostage women to show that Mormons were sexually permissive outcasts in a Victorian society. *Secret Ceremonies*, on the other hand, uses this same trope to show that Mormons are Victorian outcasts in a sexually permissive society. What does not change, though, is the fact that Mormonism is portrayed as sexually aberrant and therefore, "other". This is essentially true of most of the books in the study. (Austin, *Mormon* 5)

The progress and diversification of Mormon literature in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a symptom of the integration of the Church in the mainstream culture and economy of the United States. The encounter with this secular culture has given Mormon literature new ground on which to illustrate and expound a growing complexity in shaping their identities. Robert Raleigh celebrates the “incredible diversity” (Raleigh viii) among Mormon writers and poets. Mormon literature moves into the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the prospect of a potential group of writers who are making a valid attempt to increase the quality of a literature whose main challenge is still the ability to deal with literature and religion without being unfaithful to either of them. Levi S. Peterson’s final statement exudes expectation but also a persistent underlying distrust:

The current mainline Mormon literature is fecund, alive, creative. The publishing industry aimed at faithful Mormons is enormous. Mormon genre fiction is coming into its own. Orson Scott Card and Gerald Lund have established themselves as best-seller classics. I am impressed by the literary hopes and ambitions expressed by others. I can only assume there are many, many other gifted Latter-day Saint writers out there aspiring to create outstanding Mormon literature. I think this trend will only increase as long as American civilization is ascendant. All this does not apply to literature of an extreme liberal quality. Liberal Mormon writers have almost nowhere to go now to find a publisher, and their works have never sold well among the Mormon public. (Bigelow 132)

## 4. PHYLLIS BARBER'S WRITING

### 4.1. Introduction: Biographical and Cultural Background

Sometimes, I just avoid reading book covers. Mainly, because those covers are usually the reason why I pick a book off the shelf in a bookshop, or why I do not. Such whimsical, impulsive reasoning determines my choices more than I would like them to. Basically, if I feel the temptation to glance at the back cover to see the blurb of the writer's life, it means that I am still hesitant about reading that book.

Sometimes though, I look at the back cover when I have already finished reading the book. On these occasions, the stimulus to look for that information about the writer has a totally different origin. Holden Caulfield, J.D. Salinger's main character in *The Catcher in the Rye*, explained it quite well when he proposed a particular criterion to determine what he considered worthwhile literature: "What really knocks me out is a book that, when you're all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it" (Salinger 16).

When I finished reading Barber's *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*, I closed the book and read the back cover for the first time. I felt like smiling, but I also felt disappointed. This is what it said:

Phyllis Barber, a freelance writer and professional pianist, is on the faculty of Vermont College's MFA in Writing Program. Her published works include *And the Desert Shall Blossom*, *The School of Love*, and two books for children. She was a first

prize winner in the novel and short story categories in the 1988 Utah Fine Arts Literary Competition.<sup>132</sup>

*How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir* is the biographical account of the writer's girlhood and adolescence. In addition, it is a good example of what it meant to be a Mormon in Las Vegas in the 1950s and 1960s. When I was done reading the book, I felt like I had come closer to Barber. I felt like I had heard all her little secrets and that she had sincerely confessed all of them directly to me. So, when I read this brief summary of her life on the back cover of the book, I felt disappointed: just three lines summarizing a few achievements? Is that all you can tell me about my *nosy-parker Rhythmette*? Maybe I was looking for a *phone number* and that is why I felt disappointed.

Anyway, I did not despair but decided to make an inquiry in an organized manner, starting from the very beginning. The first adult book which Barber published, even though she had published some short stories in magazines prior to that, was *The School of Love* in 1990. I turned my copy around to read the blurb:

Phyllis Barber holds a B.A. in music from San Jose University and the Goddard M.F.A. in writing from Vermont College. Born in Nevada, she has since 1970 lived mostly in Utah.

*The School of Love* is a collection of short stories which Barber wrote in the 1990s. The book is entitled *The School of Love*, and each of these thirteen stories comprise a singular lesson of what loving means. A wide array of loving possibilities will be developed in this collection: from pain to meaning, or love presented as grounds for resolving failure of communication between males and females.

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<sup>132</sup> This and the following quotations are on the back covers of the books published by Phyllis Barber so far. Information about these quotations can be found in the bibliography.

This biographical note happened to be even shorter than the first I read, but there are two main differences when comparing the two. To start with, there seemed to be no outstanding literary achievement, no prize, no award, when she published this book, so first I see the woman, then the writer. I know that she holds degrees. I know that she studied music. I know that she moved from Nevada to Utah. Secondly, there is something else that I found in this book but that I cannot quote: there is a picture. A picture where I see her smiling, laughing with all her heart and a big, round earring and a colorful blouse, even if the picture is in black and white. My first glimpse turned out to be positive, not to say just poetically *kaleidoscopic*.

Continuing with this singular research plan, I turned to the two children's books she published in 1980 and 1991: the first one *Smiley Snake's Adventure*, and the second *Legs: The Story of a Giraffe*. The story about Smiley Snake was illustrated by Bob Reese, whereas the one about the orphaned giraffe, her second attempt at writing for children, was illustrated by Ann Bauman. In any case, there is no personal information about the author in either of these two books. Kids do not care about the personal life of a writer. They do not care about the writer at all. They do not think for a minute about who is writing or drawing or why. They only care about Imburugutu and Smiley Snake and what they are doing or where they are.

However, I did find a new biographical blurb on the flap of the dust jacket of the only novel that she has published, *And the Desert Shall Blossom* (1991). In this story, the Jensens are helped to find a job by A.P. Watkins, vice President of one of the companies in charge of the construction of the Boulder Dam during the earlier 1930s. The Jensens have been traveling a lot and they are excited about this new opportunity. The novel is an

accurate chronicle of the construction of the dam through the compassionate perspective of Esther Jensen and the disintegration of her own family:

Phyllis Barber teaches in the Vermont College MFA in Writing Program and serves on the editorial board for Weber Studies. She is the author of *The School of Love* and *Legs: The Story of a Giraffe* and her stories have appeared in numerous literary magazines and have received mention in Pushcart Prize XIII and *The Best of the West* 3. Barber most recently received the Associated Writing Program Competition in Non-Fiction award for 1991. Raised in southern Nevada – Boulder City and Las Vegas – until the age of 21, she lived in Utah for twenty years and currently resides in Colorado with her husband and three sons.

Here again, I found a few more facts about her achievements in writing. If I had read this account while picking the book off the shelf of a bookshop, I probably would have abandoned any hesitations that might still threaten to make me decide not to read the book. However, if I see this resumé after I had read all her published books and articles, (once I am looking for the *phone number*), I must underline a few important details which are probably not as visible or significant as that list of prizes: that she is a mother and that she was raised in Las Vegas and Boulder City. Even, a third one: that although she was raised in Nevada, she moved.

The last book that she published when I began this dissertation, and that I turned around to complete this curious investigation, is the collection of most of the short stories that, over a long period, she had published in magazines such as *Sunstone* or *Dialogue*, and which had helped her to get the attention and honors that she enjoys nowadays. The book was published in 1999 by Signature Books and is entitled *Parting the Veil: Stories from a Mormon Imagination*. On the back cover of that book I found another few lines about Barber:

Phyllis Barber is the author of six books, including her prize-winning memoir, *How I Got Cultured*, and a contributor to *Fiction: Crosscurrents' Best*, *Literary Las Vegas*, *Great and Peculiar Beauty: A Utah Reader*, and other anthologies, and has been honoured in *Best of the West* (vols. 3, 6) and *Pushcart Prize XIII*. She has received awards from the Association for Mormon Letters, the Associated Writing Programs (affiliated university departments), *Sunstone*, and the Utah Arts Council. She is co-founder of the annual Park City Writers at Work conference. Currently she teaches the MFA in Writing Program, Vermont College.

Obviously, I did not find anything that I did not already know. Following the line of her previously published books, in this account I again found a list of her literary merits and a concise annotation about her work as a college professor.

Then, when this dissertation was almost completed, *Raw Edges: A Memoir* came to life. I went to see the blurb. This time was short and succinct:

Phyllis Barber is the award-winning author of seven books, including an earlier memoir, *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*. She teaches at Vermont College of Fine Arts MFA Writing Program and lives in Denver. She was inducted into the Nevada Writers Hall of Fame in 2005.

*Raw Edges* chronicles the years after, before and during Barber's first marriage, based upon the axis of a trip on bicycle across the United States. It opens with an introduction in which Barber talks with delicacy and vulnerability about the beauty of risk in connection with her identity as a woman and wife but also concerning her communion with God, music, words, family or landscape, and she talks about it within the framed offered by the visual image of two delicate and vulnerable ballerinas of paper. Barber explains that she is embarking into the telling of her "seven lean years of being lost" (*Raw* 3) and her need of understanding, "if not by no one else but myself" (*Raw* 2). When I was turning back the page after reading the blurb, I came across a sentence that attracted my attention: "she had

to redefine herself as a woman, mother and artist.” I realized then that those “raw edges” would tell me more than any possible account summarizing her life.

I came to the end of my research after reading all the biographical accounts on the back of Barber’s published works, and, even though it is obviously just a metaphor and not really what I was looking for, I did not find her *phone number*. I could not answer any of those questions that some times come to your mind after or while you are reading a book, those questions that Jarold Ramsey calls “speculations” or “the irresistible imaginative consequence of all stories” (130). It would not be difficult to find a few more facts about her life simply by typing her name in an Internet search engine. Finding an author’s biography is that easy in these days of information technology and worldwide website networks. Having taken advantage of it, let me summarize Barber’s life and literary career.

Barber was born in the Rose de Lima Hospital in Basic Townsite, present day Henderson, Nevada, but she was raised in Boulder City and Las Vegas. She holds a degree in Music from San Jose State University and she is a professional classical pianist, having performed several concerts and recitals. Later, she received a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing from Vermont College where she taught in the Writing Program from 1990 to present day. She taught as a Visiting Writer at the University of Missouri in Columbia during the spring of 1994 as well. Co-founder of the Writers at Work Conference in Park City, Utah, she also served on many different writing competitions and she was inducted into the Nevada Writers Hall of Fame in October 2005.

Not only has she been successful in her careers as a musician and as a professor, but also as a writer as can be seen from the numerous prizes that she has received. She has



published seven books: the autobiography, *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir* (1994), the two collections of short stories, *The School of Love* (1990) and *Parting the Veil: Stories from a Mormon Imagination* (1999), her only published novel *And the Desert Shall Blossom* (1991) and the two books for children, *Legs: the Story of a Giraffe* (1991) and *Smiley Snake's Adventure* (1980). *Raw Edges: A Memoir*, her second autobiography, was released only a few months before this dissertation was completed. Among the prizes that she holds, some were received for her short stories, others were for excerpts from her memoir. These include a Special Mention in Pushcart Prize XIII (1988) for "Wild Sage"; Distinguished Western Story Mention in *Best of the West 6* for "At the Talent Show" and in *Best of the West 3* for "Criminal Justice". She also received first prize in the Utah Fine Arts Literary Competition for this same short story. "Mormon Levis", another short story from her collection *Parting the Veil: Stories from a Mormon Imagination*, was awarded by the Sunstone Brookie and D.K. Brown Memorial Fiction Competition in 1997 but four years before, "The Fiddler and the Wolf" and "Ida's Sabbath" were awarded with a second prize in this same competition. She has been anthologized in *Crosscurrents' Best Fiction Anthology* (1994) thanks to her prize winning short story "Criminal Justice" and in some other anthologies with different short stories: *A Great and Peculiar Beauty: a Utah Reader* (1995), *Walking the Twilight II: Women Writers of the Southwest* (1996), *In Our Lovely Desert* (1998), *The River Underground: An Anthology of Nevada Fiction* (2001) or *Home Means Nevada: Literature of the Silver State* (2006). Barber is listed in Cheryl Glotfelty's literary anthology of the state of Nevada *Literary Nevada: Writings from the Silver State* (2008). Other excerpts from her much awarded memoir can be found in various anthologies, including *Fourth Genre* (1999); *Literary Las Vegas: The Best Writing about America's Most Fabulous City* (1995) or *Frame Work: Culture, Storytelling and College Writing* (1997). In fact, her memoir has been widely praised as a whole, and was awarded

with the Associated Writing Program Award Series Prize in Creative Non-fiction in 1991 and the Association for Mormon Letters Award in autobiography two years later. Her only novel, *And the Desert Shall Blossom*, was also honored in the Utah Fine Arts Literary Competition and was chosen by the Utah Endowment for the Humanities for The Book Group Library Sciences.

After considering all these personal details, dates and accomplishments, I still feel like asking a question that sounds like a sigh: are all these facts and dates the information we need to understand Barber's literary production?

Everything I came to know by reading the covers of Barber's books seems misleading to me, like a trap. That is why I wanted to enumerate them all before focusing on what I consider more relevant when regarding an author whose contribution to the history of literature relies on a daring commitment to the freedom of expression ("I want to speak what I speak, not what someone else tells me I should speak") (Barber, *Mormon* 109) and faith in the healing power of creativity ("I want to be brave enough to stand naked in the snow, to live on if someone laughs, ridicules, or says I know nothing") (Barber, *Mormon* 110). It seems dangerous and counterproductive to reduce Barber's significance to a few literary achievements when we are dealing with a body of work that is based on a personal trust in and a consistent commitment to the power of imagination and creativity ("creativity implies freshness, new life, new possibilities") (Barber, *Rewriting* 4). Equally important is the energy and interest with which Barber faces and understands literature. Writing becomes a tool to search for the very inside of herself. Imagination, creativity or fiction are performances of her identity:

Then, one day, I realized I'd created a sculpture of myself outside myself, a clone who was my personal representation to the world. She had groomed hair, was nice, kind, responsible, well-loved, obedient, and she tended home fires. The other me, inside, seemed quite different --- sometimes loving, yet sometimes spiteful, sometimes slapping a child, hating the drudgery of iron / skillet / broom, and dreaming of a more exotic life in Medusa hairstyle. When this split came to my consciousness, it suddenly seemed bizarre. Why must I walk down in tandem when it would be easier just to be myself? (Barber, *Mormon* 109)

In her article "The Mormon Woman as a Writer," published in *Dialogue* in 1990, Barber explains how she embraces the challenge of writing. She trusts writing but she is also aware of the dangers, the risks and responsibilities that she has to consider when embarking on this journey. But she does so in order to find a voice, a place or answers to the many questions that she needs to ask. Writing becomes a way to raise questions rather than provide answers, questions which illustrate a sincere commitment to literature as a challenging exercise to search for freedom. Through literature she is able to break the sculpture, to unmask herself:

Subterraneously, like a blind reptile in a tunnel, I decided to dismantle the idealized sculpture, gather the disparate parts of myself together again, and find my voice --- not an imitation or an echo. Against my better judgement, I began to write, a dangerous thing to do. Words were unreliable. People can pick words apart and throw them back with fingerprints on them. I felt nervous. Maybe I should dance, sing, play the piano, or write innocent children's stories. Maybe I could speak most eloquently by not speaking at all. But the pen was in my hand. (Barber, *Mormon* 109)

In "On Rewriting and Practicing the Piano", an article that *Weber Studies* published in 1989, Barber explains why she writes. Specifically, she confesses the source of her compulsion to write, a clue to understand the nature of her style and her message:

Once while I was wandering through my life, I had a need to say something. I'm not sure where this something came from, but opinions and observations grew on the interior walls of my mind like lichen, growing into some kind of personal vision that wanted out." (Barber, *Rewriting* 1)

In the next paragraph she tries to relieve this need at first: “My first attempt at expressing this vision in something other than conversation was through music, namely the piano” (Barber, *Rewriting* 1). A few lines later, she explains that the piano was insufficient so she had to find something else: “After trying music as a vehicle for expressing my vision, I decided I wanted a medium that would last longer than the vibration of a string. I wanted to use words that would stay on paper and not fade away like sound” (Barber, *Rewriting* 1).

Accordingly, it becomes clear that Barber attempts to express herself through her writing. An analysis of her work must go beyond the fact that it won or did not win awards and prizes. The fact that she has been widely acclaimed is certainly noteworthy, but the meaning of her many successful achievements needs to be analyzed from a subjective perspective. By a subjective perspective I mean that the importance of the recognition awarded her work must be evaluated from within Mormon context, with special regard to her identity as woman and mother. The search for relevance or recognition has a meaning beyond any selfish or factual connotation. All those awards and prizes should be interpreted as a means of empowerment and a source of self-esteem. They mean visibility.

The renowned theorist of feminist autobiography, Sidonie Smith, explains this when she states that “[t]here have always been women who cross the line between private and public utterance, unmasking their desire for the empowering self-interpretation of autobiography as they unmasked in their life the desire for publicity” (Bush, *Faithful* 178). And Barber herself admits that desire for publicity when she writes:

In my experience, the LDS woman is not encouraged to excel in one area alone. Balance is the more important quality. Excelling in one area is somehow antibalance.

Knowing how to do many things adequately seems to be the sanctioned criteria because, after all, a mother (the most praised role of the LDS woman) needs to be

able to perform in all situations --- nurse, comforter, baker, canner, secretary, cook, scriptorian, manager. Writing is a selfish act.

And if, by some monumental good fortune, I succeed at writing, I mustn't be too visible. If my husband is not successful at his business, I can't be successful at mine. (Barber, *Mormon* 116)

As I will try to show when analyzing Barber's fiction, those awards that I found listed in the back covers of her books become really valuable and meaningful when the role of women in a Mormon context is considered. Although she was referring specifically to Barber's autobiography *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*, Laura L. Bush seems to share this idea when she states, in *Faithful Transgressions in the American West*, that "Barber's writing achievements exemplifies just such an unmasking of desire and rightfully earns her the public recognition that she always sought" (*Faithful* 192).

Maybe that is why I felt relieved when I read about all those awards in the first account published in the back cover of her autobiography. I came to feel closer to Phyllis Nelson<sup>133</sup> and her longing for visibility and recognition, so it was a relief to read that she became such a successful writer. Her voice, in addition, was echoing the voices of previous women engaging in the act of writing: "that publicity in women is detestable. Anonymity runs in their blood. The desire to be veiled still possesses them" (Woolf, *Room* 58).

Nevertheless, I also felt disappointed. Not because I could not find her *phone number*, but because it could be dangerous to summarize her life and literary career in a cold list of achievements that lost its real meaning when presented in an emotionless inventory. By failing to take into account other important details that explain the value of her writing, the importance of those awards could be minimized or even misunderstood.

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<sup>133</sup> In the different sections of this dissertation, I will be using the expression "young Phyllis" or "young Phyllis Nelson" to refer to Barber's self representation in her first autobiography *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*. In my analysis, I will explain why I consider necessary to make a distinction between the identities of the writer and the narrative voice.

Therefore, the truly appropriate and useful facts to be considered in the analysis of her work were only mentioned in the account of Barber's life on the inside jacket of her only novel: that she is a mother and that she was raised in Las Vegas and Boulder City but then moved. The fact that she was raised in those two towns, together with the fact that she was a mother are two of the relevant facts garnered from the biographical information provided on the book jackets. *Motherhood* (or, in a wider sense, *gender*) is very important to understand the meaning of Barber's fiction. *Place* (especially departing from a place) is also an important aspect of her writing, as can be seen in the following quotation: "I grew up in Las Vegas where the ideal woman (the one most appreciated by culture at large) seemed to be the one with the most beautiful statuesque body decorated with sequins, feathers, and chitton" (Barber, *Mormon* 117).

In this quotation, both topics, gender and place, can be perceived but another two components that I consider important in an analysis of Barber's work are also inferred. Firstly, the only detail which two of these accounts from different books that she published both include: that she is a musician; that, apart from being a writer, she is also a pianist. Secondly, something that goes unnoticed but is tacitly present in all these accounts, a fourth feature that interacts with the other three to make Barber's literature even richer and more complex: that she is a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

*Art*, on the one hand, and *religion* on the other; plus, *gender* and *place*. These four topics constitute the pillars of this research: *gender* (motherhood), *place* (Nevada), *religion* (Mormonism) and *culture* (music). My aim is to develop them in order to attain a complete analysis of Barber's work. These four pillars are those that Terry Tempest Williams calls

“biases” or “lenses”: “gender, geography, and culture” (Austin, *Voice* 68); Mormonism as “one of the lenses I see the world through” (Austin, *Voice* 155). Either bias or lenses, both imply coming from the inside to the outside, not rather a set of rules imposed from the outside, but a set of beliefs and cultural values adopted and accepted that shape her perception of the world.

All four of them interact in her work. They can be said to be the cause and the consequence of her involvement in the world of writing, “a dangerous thing to do” (Barber, *Mormon* 109). *Gender, place, religion* and *art* will be extremely useful in the analysis of her autobiographical works, *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir* and *Raw Edges: A Memoir*. But all four can also be found in the depiction of many of her fictional characters or the building of her creative landscapes. These four elements, therefore, facilitate not only the analysis of Barber as a professional writer, or of her motivations and interests; they are also essential in establishing a method to analyze her fictional work.

In fact, real life and fiction are often blurred in writing and that is definitely true of Barber’s work, though this characteristic of her work is totally predictable after reading how she understands the act of writing. Her conception of writing eradicates the distinction between real life and fiction, connecting them both in a close relationship: “Writing is only a way I’ve chosen, my pick and shovel as I dig out my life and make shapes of it” (Barber, *Mormon* 109). Her autobiography *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir* transcends the mere notion or definition of a memoir, if one should understand this genre as a chronological life history either presented from the beginning to the end or as a fragmented array of essays. Barber’s would fit in the second, but her serialized sections are neither essays nor even pieces that followed a clear line, they are short pieces of biographical

material dressed with the attributes of good fiction, structured with the measure of a short story and with a nature of themselves, an independence of coherent meaning and emotion that makes them have a personal connection. In fact, one of the sketches in which she divided her autobiography, “Oh, Say, Can You See?” was first published as a piece of fiction in her collection *The School of Love*. In “The Practice of Simple Faith”, Barber shows part of the body of feelings from which the character of Esther Jensen in *And the Desert Shall Blossom* was born even if she is talking about herself:

One of my greatest stumbling blocks in the marriage was my inability to face, literally, the truth of my situation. I held onto the ideal as if it were a life boat and couldn't see that we'd been stuck for years, locked in a grid and unable to shift from our positions. Something needs to change. (Barber, *Mormonism* 17)<sup>134</sup>

In *Raw Edges* Barber talks directly about marriage.<sup>135</sup> Marriages are central to family and family, as Howard Hunter states, “the most important unit in time and in eternity” (51). If Boyd K. Packer said that “the family is safe within the Church” (22), it seems that people is in danger without the family. Before publishing *Raw Edges*, Barber published “Body Blue: Excerpts from a Novoir” in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* in 2003. “Body Blue” is a little sample of what was to come in *Raw Edges*. It is composed by a prologue and two chapters divided into sections from which two are repeated all throughout both chapters: “Life” and “From inside my Head.” This structure helps first person to take a clear stand in this text, more committed than in her previous autobiographical act, *How I Got Cultured: A*

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<sup>134</sup> Here I find some of the sources she used to build the fictional Jenses in her novel. In an interview for *Iddie*, Barber states that Esther Jensen is “based on my paternal grandmother whom I never knew, and I imagined her from family stories I'd overheard as a child” (*Phyllis* 1).

<sup>135</sup> In a footnote reference from her text “Body Blue: Excerpts from a Novoir”, she tells about her marriage to David Barber which will be fictionalized in her autobiography *Raw Edges* and it is slightly fictionalized in this text: “David and Phyllis Barber, married for 33 years and divorced for six, are devoted friends. This is not a ‘kiss and tell’ or ‘here comes the judge’ account, but rather a recognition that there are many whose idealism gets caught beneath the intersecting wheels of Mormonism and of contemporary life. It is also a willingness to share this struggle to pull free again with others who may have been in a similar place” (Barber, *Body* 68). As Breau summarizes in her review of *Raw Edges* Barber recollects her experience of this long relationship in regard of her faith: “Barber’s earnest efforts to accept the beliefs of the original tenets of Mormonism is testament to her belief in her marriage vows” (Breau 1).



*Nevada Memoir*. Barber talks here about her darkest days, about the days before and about the days after the dark:

It's probably a darker book from anything I've written before. I am dealing with the shadowed side of my usually upbeat personality and with some very real pain. It's also a no-holds-barred book in which I tried not to shy away from the aspects of the story that wouldn't present me in the most favorable light. (Barber, *Phyllis* 1)

Looking for a source for her depression, she feels the compulsion to do it through words, through fiction but by looking back to her ancestors, by re-walking back the bloodline that takes her to the origins of things. The term *novoir* here is not free. Homer Hickam in "Nouvoir: the Genre That Isn't But Ought to Be" proposed this term that he himself claims to have coined as "a new genre be created for those writers who write non-fiction books in first person but also know to tell a good, absorbing story" (*Novoirs* 1). In any case, when Hickam lengthens his definition of this new genre, he applies concepts such as "entertainment" and "intrigue" as elements to capture the attention and attraction of readers, thus placing there the point of connection between fiction and memoir. It is my opinion that what Barber's memoirs have of fiction is not a natural and aprioristic intention to entertain and intrigue, but that present and past disguise in a combination that warps time. *Raw Edges* came into the world with no *novoirly* reference finally, and under the subtitle of memoir<sup>136</sup>.

Barber faces the autobiographical act committing to frankness and openness. She is aware of the limitations of saying the truth. She confesses her perspective and relies on experiences which are approached with a hesitating and revisionist spirit. Barber has always been a writer aware of her craft, "I've often killed much of what I wish I could

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<sup>136</sup> In the introduction to the book, Barber confesses that: "If I could, I'd call this book a *novoir*, though there's no such section in the bookstores. That's not because this writing has been fabricated or imagined, but because it's impossible to capture the whole of any person or life on paper" (*Raw* 3).

express because it doesn't measure up to some standard, because it lacks the perfection I so strive for" (*Dancing* 34). In this memoir, that "perfection" is elaborated not rather through the curling of words, still refined and elaborated but clearer and impulsive, but through a level of sincerity which, even though without violence or aggressiveness, takes her closer to what Cixous intends to express when she says that "I can't imagine that a woman could ever be granted the right to write the way Bernhardt wrote" (*Difficult* 21) or what Cixous too longs for when she says that "maybe mothers should write the truth about being mothered – that is, make open, show the family scene, the family drama" (*Difficult* 24).

These examples illustrate this close connection between her life and her fiction. Generally speaking, in any of her short fiction and in her only published novel so far we can see evidence of how these four ideas are pertinent to stem the significant contribution of Barber to the literary world at large. In Barber's literary production real life and fiction blend and mingle as if only a thin *veil* separates heaven and earth, reality and imagination, life and literature: "And, as much as I vacillate between the need to know and the need to doubt, I can't help telling stories that wrestle with the suspicion of a thin veil fluttering nearby" (Barber, *Parting* xi).

In the context of Mormon literary history, scholars like Eugene England or William Mulder usually place Barber together with popular contemporary Mormon writers such as Linda Sillitoe, Michael Fillerup, John Bennion or Douglas Thayer. All of them write fiction under the label New Mormon Fiction. Scholars indicate interest in the work of these writers because they use unorthodox themes, characters and styles; they explore new fictional realms; they write without any complexes or restrictions but, at the same time, their writing is not alien to the expectations of faithful Mormon readers. They approach Mormonism in

new ways. Mulder defines this pattern: “[these writers] have brought new viewpoints and professional skills to their work as they were beyond the clichés of Mormon faith and experience” (*Telling* 155). Eric A. Eliason proposes a different label, Mormon Magical Realism, calling for this group of contemporary and successful writers such as Margaret Young Blair, Orson Scott Card, Levi S. Peterson and Barber herself<sup>137</sup> (Eliason 3). Equally, in a Mormon context and period of turmoil, Barber, like many other writers, proposes a different picture of Mormonism, a contemporary picture in which the urban<sup>138</sup>, complex and modern conflicts of Mormons are part of their plots and their fictional characters. This, as Elizabeth Breau introduces in her recent review of *Raw Edges*, propels Barber into a wider audience: “her empathy and ability to articulate the emotions of divorce, loss, and struggle render her more than simply a regional or Mormon author, but an author of national scope” (1).

Mormon literature has always been considered to have a very *special nature*. England called it “burden” (*Prospects* 15). A Mormon writer has to bear a special burden, trying to deal with his or her beliefs and to do so artistically. Hart called it “double jeopardy” (1). A writer never knows the meaning of his or her creative work before he or she finishes or

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<sup>137</sup> Eric A. Eliason states that Barber skillfully fictionalizes Mormon vision of the “mundane world” and “the world of visions and spirits” as one. He says that “most of the stories that are not fantastic at face value at least leave the reader wondering at the reality of strange visions and touched by their haunting presence” (Eliason 3). My interpretation of Barber’s technique and intention when dealing with this “world of vision and spirits” is different from Eliason’s. When he says that “Mormon magical realism allows for the reality of sacred experience and the possibility of bumping into beings of light” (Eliason 3), I agree but I see a broader complexity that, as I try to explain in my analysis of her book *Parting the Veil: Stories from a Mormon Imagination*, enlarges the possible interpretation of that “sacred experience.” Thus, even if I could agree with the validity of the label proposed by Eliason, I see no applicability in my analysis, and I will not use any reference to magical realism as a genre or method in my analysis of Barber’s fiction.

<sup>138</sup> As William A. Wilson puts it when talking about Richard Dorson’s analysis of Mormon Folklore in terms of the point of view of a minority regional agrarian culture as oppose to urban modernity, and he is considering a book from 1964: “As a means of understanding contemporary Mormons the statement is entirely misleading since the overwhelming majority of Mormons today live in the cities” (Wilson 184). He also comments on another book published that same year but this time by John Greenway who labels Mormons among a Western group who stands as a “culturally backward islands” (Wilson 184), thus reproducing the idea that Mormons are some kind of product from a past century, a “somewhat romantic peasant communities that fit nineteenth-century concepts of folklore” (Wilson 184-185).

refines the work of art. The final meaning can be unexpected<sup>139</sup>. That is a jeopardy, but Mormon writers undergo a second jeopardy: this unexpected meaning can be mistaken for rejection or rebellion. Stegner talked about the difficulty of writing a truly good Mormon novel. The problem is that you cannot explain the special sociological, cultural and historical background of the novel because to do so would force “you to become a historian” (Stegner, *Stegner* 116), but to take it for granted can make the novel unintelligible.

Stegner’s perspective takes the stand of the reader. From that point of view, Mormon literature is perceived as having a “special nature.” There has always been a tendency to classify Mormon literature in two isolated categories, depending on its mission or appeal. Looking back to the history of Mormon criticism, I find examples of this tendency to establish two different camps in Mormon literature. In 1992, for instance, England differentiated between “Home Literature”, that highly didactic literature promoted by Orson F. Whitney’s famous speech, and the literature written by the so-called Lost Generation that reacted against the other. In fact, this last term, Lost Generation, was devised by Edward Geary who, in 1978, separated the literature created out of dogma from that created out of experience. Four years before, Karl Keller classified Mormon writing as either orthodox or “jack-fiction”, a term that derives from the concept of “jack-mormon”, the person who is neither committed to the theology nor enthusiastic about the activities of the Church. And even half a century ago, Don D. Walker talked about “outsiders” and “insiders”, depending on the frame of beliefs and moral values that the writer utilizes to rely on.

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<sup>139</sup> An idea quite popular among Mormon scholars. When talking about autobiography, Vanessa Holladay states that writing is not only a way to express ideas or report theories but something that “can lead the writer to concepts that weren’t even imagined at the outset of the assignment if he or she is willing to take risks” (84).

Lavina Fielding Anderson uses these same terms to establish her own classification of Mormon literature. She outlines a definition which follows a long tradition and classifies Margaret Blair Young, Linda Sillitoe and Barber within that frame:

All of these women are what I would call insider/outsider. They write fluently and skillfully, as Mormons, to audiences both within and outside of Mormonism, moving with ease and grace across both psychological and technical boundaries in their writing. Insider/insider fiction, in contrast, is home literature, its whole world encompassed by Mormon myths, premises and conclusions. Outsider/insider fiction occurs when writers, whether Mormon or frankly other, use the Mormon West as the regional and cultural settings for their stories. Characters can occupy a range of positions on the Mormon spectrum, from casual to obsessed, but for none of them is Mormonism primarily a faith. Rather, it is a phenomenon, like politics or socio-economic status. (Anderson, *Masks* 4)

Specifically talking about Barber, Anderson considers that the category in which she could be included is the one she called insider/outsider. Anderson renders her analysis of Barber's fiction to conclude that she fits into this category because of her ability to appeal to different audiences. Anderson states that this category in which Barber is inserted represents "the trickiest balance, the most demanding standards and the highest stakes" (*Masks* 4).

Burden, jeopardy or difficulty, this special challenge makes Mormon literature more attractive. Barber and the other members of this so-called New Mormon Fiction generation are trying to write blurring the lines. They try to write from the very inside of Mormonism in a way that makes it intelligible to outsiders without making it alien to insider Mormons. Even though Anderson states that *And the Desert Shall Blossom* "shows Barber as a gifted interpreter of Mormonism as an insider, as someone for whom the signs, symbols, and shibboleths of Mormonism make a fabric of wholeness and coherence" (*Masks* 6), she also

says that: “most of Phyllis Barber’s short stories that she published in *The School of Love* are not explicitly Mormon. Most of them are experimental, highly impressionistic, symbols, dreams, and fragments of nightmares” (*Masks* 6).

This challenge to combine faithfulness and skillfulness, to be either spiritual or experiential, to address Mormons and non-Mormons, is the same kind of challenge that Barber faces. Barber departs from Las Vegas and the Mormon ward<sup>140</sup> to walk far away, to walk and see and learn and taste, but always with “a stitch on my side” (*Precaious* 120), always aware of the place she departed from, the place where Phyllis Nelson began to grow to finally become Phyllis Barber. This movement and the description of those places help us to stem meaningful information to understand Barber’s fiction, because, as Denis Cosgrove and Mona Domosh say, “when we write our geographies we are not just representing some reality, we are creating meaning” (35).

Barber deals with Mormon themes without avoiding the attributes of postmodernism and the wide range of possibilities that literature gives her. Barber admits the influence of having been a student of François Camoin at the University of Utah and she confesses her taste for postmodern techniques: “I like to explore time warps, the edges of sanity, impressionism, experimental language, oblique approaches to the subject of humanity” (Barber, *Mormon* 118). She applies properties of modern literature to her work while never becoming separated from her origins: she can deal with Mormon ideas or develop Mormon stories but always playing with irony, perspective, chronology, metaphors, structure and many other techniques that help her literature attain a postmodernist style. As a writer influenced by postmodernist ideas, for example, she multiplies meanings and prevents

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<sup>140</sup> In The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a ward is the larger of two types of local congregations (the smaller being a *branch*). A ward is presided over by a *bishop*, the equivalent of a pastor in other religions.

readers from coming to any simple or stereotypical conclusion. The use of those devices is basically secondary though. It would be too shallow to try to analyze irony, perspective, tenses, chronology, fragmentation or the structure of Barber's stories and books in order to overcome the goal of labelling her fiction as postmodern literature. Those devices are consequences rather than primary resources.

Postmodernism in Barber rather than a set of literary devices is a personal commitment that opens a wider approach to Mormonism: a mixture of doubt and belief, transgression and faith that I call ideology to differ from the technical fragmentation or the elusiveness of her linear structure or the play with tenses, the irony and the perspective that she handles and uses to make more complex her narrative.

Barber is highly self-critical. In the very first chapter of her first autobiography, for instance, the one that introduces her in places as symbolic as Boulder Dam, one of the most important enterprises during the Great Depression, and the desert where the atomic bombs are being tested, the story is closed with the following quotation:

“Nobody can get us now,” my daddy said.

I don't think about it much, but sometimes when I punch my pillow for more fluff, ready to settle into sleep, the cloud mists into long red airy fingers over everything, reaching across the stark blue. (Barber, *How* 20)

Something is hurting in her memory. She remembers the cloud when going to sleep as if it were something hidden, unexplained, non-reflected, or something that she avoids to reflect on, to explain to herself, that she prefers to hide. There is an intrigue going on between herself as a character, which she tries to present with a conscience of herself, and Barber as a grown-up looking back, as a writer who is searching for something through a

fictional effort: “In a sense, I’m still trying to find that life, having been derailed by the confusion of adolescence and later by the obligations of adulthood, but I need clues from the past as I move on” (Barber, *How* 10). In fact, this critical relationship can be translated into the idea of being subject and being subjected-to that in Barber exercises her search for identity from the cross of both a personal and a relational center:

to be a ‘subject’ is also to be ‘subject to’ and as such is positioned in terms of ideology as well as language. Related to the concept of ‘subject-to’ or ‘subject-ed’ is the ‘subject position’, which refers to ways one is ascribed to a ‘position’ within various discourses. For example, we are each assigned a subject position according to gender, race, ethnicity, family, region, as well as according to the variety of other discourses (as a woman, as white, as Irish, as daughter, as a Midwesterner, as a consumer, etc.) (Marshall 82)

The whole autobiography *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir* is a struggle between Me as a subject and Me as object, subject-ed to the different individual parts of her identity (as a woman, as a pianist, as a Mormon, as a Nevadan) and how to balance all of them. Nevertheless, this struggle is not a pure matter of language or discourse, but also a translation of the tension between Phyllis Barber as a writer and Phyllis Nelson as a character. These struggles, and all the previous techniques and the general attitude that I define to talk about postmodernism in Barber from an ideological rather than a technical point of view apply to her way of approaching Mormonism. She does not reject or rebel against Mormonism as if it were a reflection of their household rigor or limitation. She looks for balance, a broader definition of herself in relation to a faith that means more than just her relationship to God. In Barber, faith means home, community, identity and in that sense her conflict between experience and the totalizing definition of the world proposed by her Church goes beyond a mere conflict to become a complex, multiple reflection about the tension between risk and security, the disruptive beauty, the relative truth, the greyness of black and white. A single theological meaning is rejected in a text aiming at compiling a



diverse approach to faith. And she looks for that community through her brief attempt through literature, an attempt that can be oblique or slippery, or just a failed attempt.

Her postmodern approach from an ideological or moral stand, rather than technical, offers a complex picture of literature and culture. But, besides her postmodern approach, one of Barber's most valuable attributes is her integrity and bravery when applying on the page her highly committed, generous and frank conception of literature. She is a writer who disagrees with conclusive divisions, who has a taste for "no easy blacks and whites" (Barber, *Mormon* 109). Barber also rejects absolute truths. She challenges dichotomies such as good versus evil or black versus white so ordinary in religious belief. And there is no resolution or closure because Barber's books have no closing end, the reader comes to no conclusion and they leave the reader with more questions than answers. She approaches literature with trust in her honesty and sincerity: "In the act of holding it [the pen], I decided I wanted to look at questions from every angle, not from a single point of view" (Barber, *Mormon* 109).

In her review of Darrell Spencer's *CAUTION: Men in Trees*, Barber recognises her own philosophy of fiction: "Spencer is an excellent commentator on the pop-eyed condition of contemporary life, which, after all, is too diverse to reduce to any one explanation" (*CAUTION* 191). The same critique can be applied to her work. Barber is able to bear that special burden. She is daring and sincere enough to confront the consequences of any jeopardy. She never succumbs and she overcomes the difficulties to make herself understandable for "outsiders" and "insiders". But she is aware of the consequences of this intention:

Writing for the world at large presents an unusual challenge to someone who has been raised on Mormon language / sensibility and who believes subconsciously that the most important value on earth is the upbuilding of the Kingdom of God. If storytelling is rendered through this particular lens, many readers outside the language and sensibility have no contextual awareness to inform them of the subtlety and nuance, even the high stakes being played out in the story. (Barber, *Mormon* 113)

She is also aware of the risks of this challenge from a very different perspective, when considering the response that it could have among Mormons themselves. When talking about Levi Peterson and his famous novel *The Backslider*, Barber states: “These writers need to remember that making any choice includes the price of admission: there’s a price / prize for belonging and remaining safe; there’s a price / prize for living at the edge” (*Mormon* 113). In this quotation, it seems that she is talking to herself rather than advising Peterson because she is one of those writers. Barber is subtly referring to the imbalance between the praise she received and the price she paid and the disturbing acceptance of her success by Mormon society at large and by some orthodox critics. Both sides have been disclosed in this introduction and both are instrumental in understanding the real meaning of the many prizes that Barber holds. Barber is then conscious of the place of the intellectual as a stranger or foreigner, as Cixous explains<sup>141</sup>.

In fact, one of the reasons to study Barber and, finally, I am answering my question, is the condition of resistance to certain power or authority with all the consequences and grievances. That is why, again, her books need to be analyzed from so many perspectives, which, overall, describe the nature of that resistance and its success or failure. Barber’s books, as Edward Said proposes, offer a set of realities clinged (“located and interpreted”) to “historical moments” (4). I could not avoid this relationship, because if culture, understood as the set of values, customs and knowledge(s) that defines, or helps shaping,

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<sup>141</sup> Cixous, in “Difficult Joys”, conceptualizes the involvement in literature through a natural condition of strangeness (*Difficult* 5) and she also talks about the foreignness of women’s condition in the world of literature (*Difficult* 12).

somebody's definition of self, can be, as Said again conceives, the power "to authorize, to dominate, to legitimate, to demote, interdict, and validate: in short, the power of culture to be an agent of, and perhaps the main agency for, powerful differentiation within its domain and beyond it too" (9), I could suspect some kind of response when an individual experience does not fit into those totalizing concepts. There, the literary production, evoking Patricia Hampl's idea of the "pinhole that lets the light of the world in"<sup>142</sup> (Boardman 44), executes the tension between "possessing possession" that Said so well explains (9). All of this, in my opinion, is complicated by Mormonism and Mormon culture.

Said proposes the idea of affiliation as the cultural and social bond that justifies a new system of relationships imitating or representing "the filiative processes to be found in nature" (23), and Mormonism becomes a perfect example that blurs the line between filiation and affiliation since those elements that Said enumerates as ingredients of any filial relationship, obedience, fear, love, respect, and instinctual conflict are mere constituents of the individual and collective official and conventional relationship established between the Church and the member of the Church. And that can be an important element in Barber's fiction, an element that allows disruption, tension and conflict to enter into her work. Karl Keller explains in "On Words and the Word of God" how literature is "essentially anarchic, rebellious, shocking, analytical, critical, deviant, absurd, subversive, destructive" (*On* 20), a perilous artefact in the hands of desperate people who have been, in certain aspects, trapped by a Mormon community which has tried

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<sup>142</sup> In conversation with other writers during the panel of writers that gave places to the article that Boardman and Woods elaborated for their book *Western Subjects: Autobiographical Writing in the North American West* in 2004. Hampl is here considering the surprise of becoming a representation for somebody when you are writing a very personal piece of fictional text. Hampl rejects the idea that this fact is based on the importance of the subject but in its instrumental ability to exemplify and thus produce a communication that transcends the personal confession.

to utilize literary production in its own benefit. Keller was highly pessimistic in this article and critical of any connection between religion and literature, “literature is seldom written, and can be seldom written, in the service of religion” (*On* 17), but reading Barber could have possibly changed his mind. Maybe it is because Barber has dwelled and wandered in that place that Robert Raleigh talks about in his introduction to *In Our Lovely Deseret: Mormon Fictions*:

Like any religious culture, however, there are those who live near that warm, beating heart, those who reside in the vicinity of the brain, and those who live somewhere farther out on the periphery, closer to the hard, sharp edges of the world. This collection of stories is mostly about people who live somewhere nearer the periphery of the “body of Christ” – people who can’t or won’t quite fit into a culture where fitting is one of the highest values. (Raleigh vii)

Barber has wandered and dwelled, again, in that “periphery”, in and out of, crossing, bridging, suffering borders, boundaries, edges, *raw edges*. Moreover, she has translated this experience into words, into fiction, and her characters have wandered and dwelled, dwelled and wandered in the same *spaced* and *unspaced* periphery the same that she has converted her own experiences into artful attempts of communication, breaded on sincerity and a hunger for knowledge and meaning that was formed through a necessity of communion and revelation that links her to the Mormon community but also to the world at large.

## 4.2. Religion: *Phyllis Barber on Faith and Identity*

*Mormonism was my first love*  
*Phyllis Barber*

### 4.2.1. Introduction: Phyllis Barber and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Phyllis Barber is a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, popularly known as the Mormon Church<sup>143</sup>. She was raised in a Mormon household, since both her parents, Hermand and Thora Nelson were Mormons<sup>144</sup>. Barber has been away from the Church for a long period of time. In those days, she gave up being an active member but still have a close need to feel in communion with God, as she herself states, faith was with her from childhood to the darker times of adulthood: “I consider myself well-introduced to faith, a child of the faith, a child of faith, a person who believes deeply in a God who wants us to share, a person who desires to brighten one spot in this earthly garden wherever that might be” (Barber, *Mormonism* 17). This does not mean that her relation to the Church is that of a jack or secular Mormon but that her tortuous experience with some cultural and ideological tenets of Mormonism has not been able to pull down her faith but make it

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<sup>143</sup> I already explained in the introduction to this dissertation what I mean when stating that Barber is a Mormon. In any case, I think it is necessary to read her own words: “Even though I attended The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints regularly for forty years, almost never missing a Sunday and serving in administrative, teaching, and music capacities since the age of seven, and even though I’ve borne my testimony countless number of times and attended seminary and Brigham Young University, I confess I now speak in a voice which is not purely Mormon, whatever a pure Mormon sounds like” (Barber, *Dancing* 30). She wrote this in 2001. In any case, her connection to Mormon culture or to the consequences of being born and raised in a Mormon context are still evidence enough to keep on analyzing her fiction as if she were a member of the Church, never forgetting that her use of the term “purity” establishes one more example to illustrate the idea that Barber rejects essential conclusions and embraces, instead, the repercussions and mysteries of complexity and paradox. Barber admits that she identifies with the Mormonism that begins “with Joseph Smith and his visionary ideas that have given my own imagination access to infinite possibility: social and economic communitarism, plural marriage, vicarious baptism for the dead, conversations with heavenly beings, free-flowing consideration of any meritorious ideas (including Freemasonry and the plurality of Gods), the literal building of a Kingdom of God on earth, and much more” (*Parting* x).

<sup>144</sup> As we can see in her autobiography *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*.

compound and munificent: “I believed in the Divine, whatever it is, whoever it was” (Barber, *Raw* 54). Her search led to a much more complex set of connections, joining her spirituality with worldliness in many-sided ways. Her long experience with Mormonism has been a constant challenge of fitting and, conclusively, getting into a label or a frame or a close definition proves problematic: “It was perverse to think everyone should fit mid-spectrum. Fitting into something was an illusion. We fit one moment; we were misfits the next” (Barber, *Raw* 125). Still, she needs to feel connected to a group. She needs to belong, to be part, to get a place in between boundaries (but not barriers): “I realized I needed certain boundaries for myself, certain ways of living to stay healthy emotionally and spiritually” (Barber, *Raw* 152). At the end of *Raw Edges*, she recalls her coming back to Mormon Church after a long and perilous journey away from it: “They were The Other. Not me. Separate from me. They’d broken down somewhere along the way. I didn’t want to look in that mirror” (Barber, *Raw* 223).

Still, she feels that connection to the supernatural, the Divine, the Inefable. And her Mormonism, and Joseph Smith is the origin of that compulsion to feel that spiritual bond:

I may not have survived without believing and hoping for the best in all things, so I said thank you to the prophet who gave me this idea in the first place. Faith in life. Faith in the truth being everywhere. Faith in a larger purpose. (Barber, *Raw* 234)

And she makes a second attempt to go to the Church, because she needs, again, to belong. She feels it like a heartbeat. Nevertheless, the stress, again, is put on the community and there is a new resolution in her voice, a resolution to deal with failure which anticipates certain assumptions I will later highlight in her fiction:

I felt that old urge to get my Sunday-best clothes out of the back of my closet, put them on, and walk over to the chapel: the ward. Why shouldn't I partake of my Mormon community again even if I wasn't a true believe? I missed those days. I liked the sense of belonging somewhere. Maybe I should go see the bishop and submit to baptismal waters again, a second baptism, a cleansing. Some of the early Mormons were rebaptized when their souls needed a good scrub. I'd made big mistakes, I knew, but maybe I was no more a sinner than anyone else, all said and done. I had a kind heart most of the time. I tried to live the Golden Rule. I told the truth as best I could, so why make such a big deal out of this? "No man is good save God," the Good Book said. (Barber, *Raw* 259)

She gets there after going through the process of rebuilding her identity and with a clear notion of who she is, of her flaws, virtues, vices, pains and joys. She accepts what the Church means; a refuge that in some moment seems an excuse to avoid risk. The journey back to the past helps her to see the present in a different way.

Now she can buy it because she has reconciled this with her being "chaotic, at times inappropriate and rebellious" (Barber, *Raw* 260). She knows that the Church is something that she can not let go because it provides her with certain solid conviction: "this safe shore I was experiencing: the friendly faces, the music, the families sitting together in the congregation, and the sacrament" (Barber, *Raw* 262) but now she also knows that she has something "*buried deep in this chaotic ocean of myself that will always swamp the dry land of me, something ancient that needs life*" (Barber, *Raw* 262). She has gone through what Robert Van Wagoner explains when he confesses that "I finally accepted that I was forever Mormon, whether I believed in the theology or not" (Bigelow 211) after he went through a necessity to "play the contortionist for a time" (Bigelow 211). Now Barber has learnt from strife and grief and she is not ashamed anymore because she knows that "there is a particular beauty in my failure" (Barber, *Raw* 264).

Consequently, just as any scholar attempting to study Flannery O'Connor's work has to bear in mind that she was a fervent Catholic, it is impossible to approach Barber's fiction without taking into account the fact that she is a Mormon. In fact, Barber is very conscious of the possible influences of her Mormonism in concern to her literary work: "But you're a Mormon, a Latter-day Saint, and you wonder about your responsibility for sharing the gospel. You also have some deeply ingrained tendencies to be didactic, prescriptive, even moralistic at times" (Barber, *Writing* xiv). Nevertheless, she also explains in the article "The Precarious Walk Away from Mormonism, All the Time with a Stitch in My Side", that

after thirty-eight years of dedication and every-meeting, ever-church-job devotion to Mormonism, I decided, through a strange, broken and knotted and broken and knotted again thread of events, that it was necessary and compulsory to find the way to God by myself, that I couldn't really know God unless I had a direct, unsecondhand, personal knowledge of the one, the Divine, the All, the Absolute. I needed to take this journey alone, even though I knew I might get lost. (Barber, *Precarious* 122)

During that journey, she looks back to recall those days when she was still trying to discover God through the creed of the Church. Then, she realizes that she has never been a believer fond of labels such as "the one and only true church of God." For her, now that that journey is almost done and she is able to look back and consider all her memories from a critical perspective, Mormonism came to be like a first love, denoting in that expression the complete loyalty and trust that she placed in that attempt.

Your first love is something that you always look back with nostalgia, something paradoxical because you're able to compare, to unwrap, to see what it has of idealization and what it had of real. It's always your first joy but also your first deception. (Barber, *Precarious* 122)



In any way, Barber uses a “peripheral vision” (*Dancing* 32). This is that Mormonism is not going to be strictly seen from the front, but from behind, beneath and upwards, trying to look at it not as the moon, but as the finger: “It is not the moon, and it seems to me that it always taught that the Church was established as a vehicle for this earth life, not as an end in itself. The finger is the finger. The moon is the moon. God is God” (Barber, *Dancing* 33).

From that perspective, Mormonism in Barber’s fiction is going to be both a “joy” and a “deception”, both a “shelter” and a “desert”, both a “light” and a “darkness.” Barber is not a writer of whites and blacks, of conclusive distinctions, or goods and bads, so religion will be left as a task to be resolved by anyone who approaches her writing. Barber’s personal narrative reflects a mixture of doubt and belief, transgression and faith in her Mormon upbringing that invites the reader to defy that challenge as if it were his or her own. Albanese defines religions as a matter of boundaries. In her opinion, religions look to distinct themselves from others and they do it in a social dimension, defining borders that if cohesive and tight they help to form a stronger community. In this sense, those boundaries are related to the ordinary, to the social, and thus affect common life. In Barber the tension of boundaries is drawn within oneself, or towards oneself within the community. That tension is one of the motors of her fiction. It is what in her late years she will refer as a “wall”: “and I’ve wondered about my ability to keep from erecting a wall between myself and the Divine because of the Mormon perception I have of what is true, what is false, and what is Sacred” (Barber, *Dancing* 33). Here the wall<sup>145</sup> limits her mystic definition of “dancing”, an “ecstatic trance” (Barber, *Dancing* 33), that describes an experience of

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<sup>145</sup> The same concept was used by William Mulder when this groundbreaking scholar in the Mormon Studies announced his discrepancies with the Church: “the trouble with various theologies is that they build walls around things that should be open.” (This quotation was taken from the digital version of the magazine *Weber Studies* Spring/Summer 2008 24.3) In an article without author dedicated in memoriam of William Mulder.

communion with the Divine, a spiritual experience that is sensed through the body and with no limitation of religious shape. Hence, she approaches her Mormon heritage in *Parting the Veil: Stories from a Mormon Imagination* with a sense of play that not only implies postmodern concepts of literary interpretation but also delivers a sense of “approaching the old stories with new eyes, new questions, new possibilities” (Barber, *Dancing* 33).

The fact that she is a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and that she is concerned about faith and the search for God is key to understanding her work. In the autobiographical recollection of her girlhood and in her fictional characters as well, the conflicts rising out of spiritual question are important; but equally important is the way in which these collide with different aspects of her own life. These conflicts will allow complexity in her literature. The spiritual question, together with issues regarding gender or her close connection to place will interact to promote a varicolored and complex meaning permeated through a fiction that communicates directness and sincerity.

Mormon heritage and education have influenced her writing in other ways too. Barber suggests that there is a kind of “Latter-day Saints lexicon,” promoted and developed through the unique cultural and social instruction of the Mormon household.

In the attempt to speak with imagination, a challenge for Mormon writers is the LDS Lexicon. What repertoire of language is available to me if I operate from the stance of active Mormonism? Should a down-and-out character sulking in a western bar be expected to speak Mormon slang because I am a Mormon writer? If my word processing screen displays words that a good Mormon woman shouldn't use, do I delete them, blast them off the screen, and flagellate myself --- “I said that?” Maybe I can blame my word processor --- that evil thing. Demonic. Saying things I'd never say. (Barber, *Mormon* 112)

What Barber is basically stating here, albeit with a bit of irony, is that she suffers some kind of censorship from the orthodox approach to Mormon culture.

How much are we shaped by the concepts with which we've been raised? Is it possible to emerge into a different sensibility? [...] or are we for ever shaped, as Melena in Slovenia seemed to me, by the rethoric of our young lives and idealism? [...] Are we governed by language that is rigid and set in its ways? (Barber, *Mormon* 112)

This quotation brings to mind what Hart called “a second jeopardy” (1). Barber is a writer who consciously and carefully selects her language to make it more compelling and eloquent. Through this technique, the reader appreciates the magnitude and consequence of the words that come out of the mouth of Alf Jensen or any other character in her novel, *And the Desert Shall Blossom*, for instance. In those words, selected for their sound and connotative power, the reader discovers embarrassment, remorse, guilt or anger.

In “The Mormon Woman as a Writer,” Barber expands on this theme and finally enumerates one list of terms suitable for use by Mormon women and another containing terms not suitable for use by Mormon men or women. This device permits Barber to present us with a compendium of attributes of the stereotyped woman in Mormon society. Among the appropriate terms for use by women we find: “sweet”, “reliable”, “responsible”, “generous”, “loving”, “cheerful” or “warm”. The inappropriate ones include: “heroine”, “intellectual”, “angry” or “sexy”. Thus, she illustrates how words generate gender roles.

Esther Jensen, the female character in *And the Desert Shall Blossom*, is a tragic “heroine”, a potential “intellectual”, an “angry” woman and a crippled “sexy” woman who suffers, who goes out of control because Mormonism has shaped her to avoid these attributes. She is not a “heroine”, in the positive sense, but a tragic “heroine”; neither is she

an “intellectual”, but rather a woman who could have been an “intellectual.” Barber is not only playing with words on the edge, but with how these words can mold when they are manipulated. Words are liquid, not stone, and they can reshape.

With her postmodern flaw Barber goes beyond injecting certain techniques in her fiction, and she plays a complex game with language to show how important part it plays in building our own identities, showing how dangerous is promoting the rejection of some kind of language for women since it deprives them of certain attributes. In that line, she condemns and makes poetry with the dichotomy of appropriateness that some people build for Mormon women in regard of language:

Whatever the solution to that dispute, the conversation started me thinking about words that might offend some people in the LDS culture. I took adjectives first. Which adjectives are comfortable?

*nice sweet gentle tender kind reliable responsible marvellous spiritual generous loving soothing intelligent cheerful appropriate warm*

And which adjectives might cause discomfort when applied to a Mormon woman?

*angry mouthy despairing grasping materialistic controversial sexy seductive feminist bitchy intellectual probing Socratic heroic sleazy*

Discomfort for a Mormon man?

*power-hungry adulterous greedy lying seedy fascist communist socialist hippy flippant irrelevant pig money-grubbing abusive.* (Barber, *Mormon* 112)

Then, if sweet, reliable, responsible, generous, loving or cheerful are appropriate words to talk about women but heroin, intellectual, angry or sexy are inappropriate, Barber will not change the level of appropriateness to reclaim the importance of this unfair gesture but she will play with the consequences of such a manipulation of language in her narrative, thus reflecting the mark that these steps leave in the body of women. That selection of words operates as an artefact to build a set of attributes for women which deprive them of the moral agency to error and rebel. Thus, Mormonism is also part of her literary play with words and metaphors.

It would be unfair to reduce the importance of Barber's literature to a Mormon context, just as it would be unfair to limit its significance to a female or a Western readership. But, her Mormonism, not only because she is a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints but because she was raised in a Mormon household, is irrefutable and a constant reference in her work. In fact, Barber has confessed her "fascination", a literary attraction, with "Mormon stories heard when a kid. Stories heard at Sunday School, sacrament meetings but also at dinner table" (*Parting* ix). Those stories are a solid bedrock for her imagination and creative energy, which is not only related to Mormonism, but it exercises the necessity for the divine in general fashion. In any case, there is a second reason why Mormonism is so relevant in her fiction, and it is by opposition, because she moved away, because she experienced conflicts with her Mormon upbringing and her spirituality. This journey is perceived in her literature with all the scars that her departure left because coming back remains a constant tension which mesmerizes the reader, a potency that sways and polarizes Barber's relationship with her religion in seemingly opposing directions.

The clash with the outside world that she portrayed in her autobiography and in her fiction parallels the process that professional Mormon writers probably face in the act of writing and the world of literature. Mulder explains that Mormon writers are born into a world that is closed and comfortable, full of certainties and beliefs that can be relied on; but then, they discover their literary awareness in another different, dangerous, secular, open world full of hesitation, disrupting images and temptation. In Mulder's view, this complexity pervades and enriches their work when they look back to explore Mormon tradition, using their secular talent and experience (*Essential* 1). Essentially, this is what

Barber does in her work, constructing complex new lives for invented characters while daring to look back and recollect her own girlhood and adulthood.

#### **4.2.2. *How I Got Cultured and Trained to Be a Mormon***

Obviously, *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir* serves as the best viewpoint to observe how Barber's fervent Mormon values rival her desire to become a star and a cultured woman. As Laura Bush states, Barber's autobiography follows

the tradition of Mormon women's life writing by repeating many of its common conventions. She writes about Mormon doctrine (polygamy, tithing, word of wisdom, Joseph Smith's first vision) and culture (talent shows, quilting, family life, ward activities), but she repeats the conventions with a literary style that enlivens the familiar stories and makes them feel new. (Bush, *Faithful* 190-191)

In her autobiography, Barber constructs herself as a young person confronted with common girlhood dilemmas about sexuality, gender performance and small-town culture. Nonetheless, each dilemma seems to be exacerbated by her religious training at home and at church. She lives in a Mormon context, in the world of Sunday School, Sacrament Meetings, the Relief Society and the Mutual Improvement Association. But though she is fixed in those places, she is always looking out the window, watching people in the street as if they were in a movie. Church means responsibilities and she feels the need to be free, to become the flower that she wants to be in the pot she wants to choose. She wants to float everywhere, but that means going in the opposite direction to where the Church and her family direct her.

Religion for her is too homogeneous, too fixed; she longs for diversity, adventure, a less restricted view, and one good example of this conflict is pictured in the description of her

relationship with her mother. Barber's mother is presented as a guardian of faith and tradition. She wanted "the church thick in our blood" (*How* 6). This portrayal of the mother as the link between the main character (usually a daughter) and faith or the Church as institution will be repeated throughout Barber's fiction. In her short story "Mormon Levis" or in the novel *And the Desert Shall Blossom*, for example. The role of initiating others in the heritage, the creed and the rules and characteristics of the Church as an institution is placed on the mother rather than on the father, thus multiplying the possibility of conflict between mother and daughter.

Family, as a whole, is an important element in this conflict between the young Phyllis of the autobiography and her surroundings. Wallace Stegner states that "the family is so important in Mormon religion that without it, the religion would hardly exist" (*Stegner* 112). And Claudia L. Bushman confirms this notion when she states that, in Mormon Church, "the basic unit [is] the family rather than the individual" (*Should* 176). The line that binds family and Church is not a literary device. In Barber's fiction, family is the last stance of Church, and this is a natural element in Mormon faith: "for a Mormon, the distinction between family and church is one of scale" (Clark, *Mormon-b* 22). Barber's family will be the main site of conflict when regarding submissiveness and pride, both of which are tested and measured from within Mormon scope.

In "Oh, Say, Can You See", references to familial issues center the relationship between the father and the daughter<sup>146</sup> because mom is almost blurred in this story. Her presence is reduced to that she takes in a dream when she forces Irene to sleep in a creaky bed. Maybe Irene places her mother in that dream because she felt she was not in the other side, with

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<sup>146</sup> In this story nation is more important than God, because her father is returning from war, but we have some references that connect him to the father in "Silver Dollars": "I have a job, a wife, three children, and an address," he said. "God bless the government" (Barber, *How* 47).

her, helping her to watch the dam, instead of being lifted by the powerful arms of Uncle Jack. The narrator goes back to see<sup>147</sup> in memories and she makes it through or in companion of her family rather than alone. But within all these intricacies of the familial relationships, the focus will be placed on the chasms between girl and father, even between girl and Uncle Jack, even between girl and Presidents. All these chasms are representative of the topic developing the complex relationships between fathers and daughters. She is not able to see Eisenhower. She does it only in the last moment when she is held by her father, the same way Uncle Jack helped her to see what she did not want to see of (or from) the dam. There is a distance from power and female. The male characters are grown ups and they seem to have a hold on the meaning: they know what they are watching, they know what it means the shape of that cloud and they may know what is the real meaning of that dam. She does not know; she has plain impressions, clues that are revisioned from the perspective of the writer. In this story, some references conjure family as the backbone of the story, and latent topics such as God and familial issues will be further developed later.

In any case, all throughout her memoir, pride and power seem to be in the side of men. In “Oh, Say, Can You See?” there is only that vague moment of pride for grandma echoing in the book. The moment went she sings is placed too far away and that image of her being taken home in a VIP car seems to take the story even backwards. In general, Barber parents felt that entertaining would lead her away from God’s work and the traditional Mormon path and purpose in life, specifically to procreate and tend to a family<sup>148</sup>. For the young Phyllis, Mormonism means submission to a structure and hierarchy. Her dream is to fly

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<sup>147</sup> The verb see plays here a poetic importance. See aggrandizes its meaning proposing pregnant references to the painful experience of looking back in search of truth, to try to *see* the truth behind such a visible and obvious presence as that of the dam. Barber implies that she is trying to *see* behind the roles of her father and mother.

<sup>148</sup> I will go further on this topic when analyzing Barber’s fiction from a feminist point of view in the section titled *Gender*.



free of that control. She yearns to be noticed, and, in adolescence, this desire grows desperate. The resulting conflicts that arise will lead her to rebel against authority, whether it be driven by family or by religion, since her father is both parent and President of the local ward. In “At the Talent Show,” she demonstrates an early willingness to confront both her father’s and the Church’s authority, but also her growing interest in working on her personal power, autonomy, in response to the formal and informal representations of authority that she is starting to experience even if unconsciously or mistakenly<sup>149</sup>. Even as a young person, she speaks her mind, even though the scene ends with contrite regret for having accused her father of being a hypocrite. Also, in the dialogue in which Barber reconstructs the relationship between Mormon children and their Sunday school teacher, she illustrates how obedience to authority is conditioned in Mormons from the early stages of their education. Frequent examples of this training appear in her fiction.

Her family exemplifies the attributes of stereotyped Mormon virtue and this provides security in the sense that it opposes anything disruptive, new or dangerous. The Mormon household signifies stability and security. Everything is settled. The young Phyllis feels attracted somehow to tradition and to the established values of the inviolable, confident context of her Mormon household: “Everyone settled back in their seats, comforted that the Christmas’s night story was coming and that things never changed” (Barber, *How* 101). This certainty is reinforced when it is threatened by the visit of the Hawaiian dancers taking

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<sup>149</sup> Here we use the hierarchical division of authority propose by Jill Mulvay Derr and C. Brooklyn Derr in “Outside the Mormon Hierarchy: Alternative Aspects of Institutional Power.” Using a weberian perspective, they revise Mormon examples of authority and come to summarize it in the following terms: “Formal Authority is the power derived from one’s position in a pyramidal hierarchy of officers. It is the authority flowing from rules that define duties and responsibilities for each office. One obeys the office or position, not the person. Informal influence operates outside formal bureaucratic prescription. Informal coalitions, charismatic personalities, friends and relatives, and those to whom favors are given are all power centers but not necessarily with the title and trappings of formal authority. Autonomy is the power to exercise creativity, expertise, or interests outside the organization” (Derr, *Outside* 22). With this study on authority, both authors come to the conclusion that it is impossible to exercise authority within the church for the women since they are isolated from the formal dimension of authority (Derr, *Outside* 35).

part in an activity promoted by the Church. They are accommodated in Barber's home for a few days. Their visit is disruptive for them all, not only for the young Phyllis. Everything about the visitors Liliuokalanimoa, Sonny and Popo is big and different. The Mormon household and its rules are threatened by Sonny: "He sat back in the chair, tipped it back against the wall which was forbidden in our household, and rubbed his massive stomach" (Barber, *How* 26).

This conflict between the Mormon shelter and the risky outside is also obvious. She likes the forbidden doors that some of her aunts' stories, such as those narrated by Aunt Grace, open. The mysterious journey to the unknown stands in opposition to religion. This particular conflict surfaces when, toward the end of the autobiography, Barber relates how, as a member of the Rhythmettes<sup>150</sup>, she is asked to ride atop a Founder's Day float sponsored by one of the casinos in Las Vegas. The confrontation between the security of certainty and believing and the adventure of facing difference and uncertainty is narrated in the autobiography through her relationship with her family and God.

In the introduction to her memoir, Barber begins with a metaphoric representation of a wondering but unconsciously determined baby girl and follows with a candid, brave and penetrating confession in which she displays certain *certainties* but uncovers one particular certainty that hovers over the rest of the book: the tricky imbalance between being *certain* and risking into uncertainty. But this feeling changes as the narrative advances, and her hesitation about uncertainty grows as she becomes confident enough to challenge and learn. All these feelings have to do with Mormonism and the divergence with real life outside. In fact, in *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*, all those *warm* words as sweet, tender,

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<sup>150</sup> The Rhythmettes was a drill team from Las Vegas High School.

loving or spiritual become *hot* as sexy, intellectual, angry or heroic in a final metaphor in which heat embodies a duality of certainty and uncertainty:

This oppressive heat keeps me from the mirage of night dreams where there's a breeze blowing through palm fronds and I'm beautiful and cool in the shade – detached, serene, beyond all this. This is the self I'm taking to BYU, to my new life, but tonight it seems I'll never get to my dreams. I'm turning over and over in these damp bedclothes. I'm filled with an insatiable longing here with nothing on in the dark, the moon lighting the curves of my thighs and accentuating the shadows. (Barber, *How* 188)

She looks for balance, a broader definition of herself in relation to a faith that means more than just her relationship to God. In Barber, faith means home, community, identity and, in consequence, her conflict between experience and the totalizing definition of the world proposed by her Church goes beyond a mere conflict to become a complex, multiple reflection about the tension between risk and security, the disruptive beauty, the relative truth, the greyness of black and white, the single theological meaning that postmodernists such as Barthes or Derrida rejected for a text (Marshall 122):

Now I feel as though there's nothing in the world besides this bed and this August night. I can't escape it, no matter what I do. It's under my skin. No matter where I go, no matter who tries to teach me what, the heat will always be with me. It will penetrate my dreams when I'm in the high mountains. It will spread thickly across my night landscape like a plague (Barber, *How* 188)

In her memoir, when she thinks critically about her religion, “thoughts only I could hear” (Barber, *How* 7), she feels alone; there is nobody to share with, nobody to ask for help. Even if there is a shelter in family, there is also some kind of solitude which comes not merely from her need to go, to experience risk, but from the impossibility of balancing this compulsion and her still latent necessity for family and certainty: “I needed to be unified

with my family (...) If I had to stop time, I'd stop it there where we were united in our certainty" (Barber, *How* 8).

One of the main reasons why Barber starts to notice a discrepancy between her idea of faith and God and the dictated by the Church is its involvement in topics like sexuality and the female body. Throughout the novel, she will describe herself as the Mormon girl with a body who did not have a body, which resembles my topic on visibility, but also displays a blossoming sexual awareness. Especially disturbing is her teenage love affair when she has to choose between remaining chaste or unleashing her instincts. Finally, she chooses to reject sexual intercourse, but her denial opens a door to the wider world: by not having sex with that boy, she is opening her own path to the other world. Rejecting sex, rather than acting as her mother would have wanted her to act, is an expression of her independence, an independence that struggles for freedom either in conflict with her mother, thus the Church, or with her most primitive instincts. The heat represents here a burden that she needs to hold rather than get rid of it. The constant tension between the duality of certainty and uncertainty is resolved in a determination that faces the responsibility of balancing all the extremes, even the extremes between a writer and a character that embodies a search for identity which goes beyond the memories transcribed into fiction.

In "The Russian Winter Dancing Studio" she starts discovering her body when she runs into some showgirls: "Then they dashed past me as if no etiquette had been breached, as if their bodies were everyday things, not sacred temples as I'd been taught from childhood" (Barber, *How* 94). There is defiance in the showgirl's nakedness and that is what she really likes: "Lately at night, I'd been thinking maybe my skin could belong to me and no one else. Why did somebody else make decisions about my body?" (Barber, *How* 96)

The reader learns how losing authority over her body aggravates the common doubts of a girl about sex and intimacy. On the contrary, she has to be a rose: “It’s hard being a rose.” (Barber, *How* 154). It is hard to be pure, forsaking sex for religion. The rose is the symbol that the teachers in the Mutual Improvement Association use to illustrate how Mormon teenagers must accept that their bodies are temples: “It was the scene of instruction in eternal values, the ground school for celestial marriage, the setting for Rose Night” (Barber, *How* 154). Sister Bradshaw tells them how “all roses have thorns” (Barber, *How* 155). But she does not want to have thorns. Thorns stand like a defensive parapet against the world and she does not want to be closed in but open to the world. She would like to be a rose “who smelled beautiful and mesmerized people with her fragrant petals and her deep velvet textures” (Barber, *How* 155). They are being educated to remain pure through fear: “Now girls, do you think any decent young man would want a rose that’s been handled, passed around to everyone, felt by hands that have been who knows where?” (Barber, *How* 156) They are expected to wait for a man and, in the meantime, get ready for him. Consequently, they are learning to be dependent on men: “He’ll reverence you above all women because you’ve saved yourself for him and your eternal marriage, the kind that lasts forever” (Barber, *How* 156).

This training promotes the participation of women in sexual performances as an object position rather than as sexual subjects. As Holly Welker states: “Indeed, it seems that the only way in which young Mormon women are taught to be sexual subject is by being allowed, if they’re lucky, to decide when, where, and by whom they will be treated as sexual objects” (*Sexual* 40). Thus, Mormon cultural or sexual interpretation promotes the idea of sexual purity as an attribute of appeal that limits women’s role in this one

dimension of objects rather than subjects. In fact, Welker, using sources as Liz Phair's lyrics or advertisements by liquor companies, states that this situation is further more applicable to all women in general:

I'm glad Barber gives us a strong critique of things like *Rose Nights* and *Rhythmettes*, and that Bush provides an analysis of how that critique operates. I think I'm not venturing too far out on a limb here by saying that being trained to imagine yourself as a peach in danger of bruising is still better than being trained to get drunk on peach schnapps a few weekends a month so you can endure the debasement involved in sleeping with some drunk frat boy you hardly know. Still, I believe that it is only by critiquing both extremes, both the ripe peach and the peach schnapps, that we will understand how to train young women to become sexual subjects – responsible, informed, acting agents, not passive fruit or flowers. (Welker, *Sexual* 41)

In her autobiography, those “two extremes” portrayed by Welker are inherently potential interpretation in Barber's memoir. If not while talking about the *Rhythmettes*, when modelling for a fur company, the reader feels the connection of that evoked training to a second wheel which, again, tries to control her destiny. Barber does not want to believe all she is told at first. She needs to be critical. She needs to believe but through her own consciousness, her own thoughts and reflections. She is strong enough to look back to test her purity and thorns, instead of turning around and rejecting all these experiences. She is strong enough not to escape but to confront the problem. It is the same pattern she followed when her neighbor, Leonard, tried to touch her and she refused but stayed and told him: “I want to be your friend, but don't ever do that again” (Barber, *How* 158). Either when being trained or when experiencing, Barber is able to look back with irony and to control and handle all these feelings without fear: “I'd kept all invaders away [...] Of course, not many had tried to bruise my petals, at least nobody I was interested in” (Barber, *How* 159).

During the exercise, she is given a rose of a different color. She is not a white, nor a red rose; she is a yellow rose. And that is perfect for her: *her own way*. Her own color. Her

own rose. That was what she was looking for. She is still disturbed by her struggle to wait for the warrior and her need to be touched and loved. This is clear when young Phyllis grows up to become a professional writer who imposes on Esther Jensen in *And the Desert Shall Blossom* the same conflict: desire and obligation. The same conflict that she feels when she falls in love with Bobby Jack, a smooth, cool, street smart guy who “wasn’t trying to be perfect” (Barber, *How* 162), but who opens new horizons of desire: “I just wanted him to touch me, to connect with my skin, to hold me as I’d never been held before. And he did touch me”<sup>151</sup> (Barber, *How* 162).

This is sensual rather than sexual: touch of hands on another’s flesh and life and feeling and not being spiritual but worldly and trying to balance it all, instead of ignoring it: “The world was stretching out of the shape I knew it to be” (Barber, *How* 162). She is experiencing and discovering and that is what she likes, what she wants. It is not a matter to remain pure as long as she is the one who determines that this is her choice: “The idea of the Rose had been sealed tightly into the folds of my brain, however, and I felt as though, while Bobby Jack and I touched each other on that particular night, a red rose was rooting in my heart and growing out of the neck of my blouse, complete with thorns” (Barber, *How* 163). She is unable to ignore her training. Bobby Jack proposes marriage but she refuses, saying that she must save herself. She is not concerned about the temple, sex, or Mormonism. She is determined to balance things. She is determined dream, control, empower and travel. She chooses God because she needs to know God, she wants to be loyal, but at the same time, she has chosen freedom. She needs to be strong in order not to be stuck with that boy. She must be able to take decisions, to buy a ticket on the train of her choice. Following the line of marriage could have been the easiest though the most

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<sup>151</sup> But the reference to her parents echoes the conflict between desire and obligation when Barber explains that he “frightened mother and father because they sensed I wasn’t afraid of his touch” (*How* 162).

complex one. As Knowlton puts it, many Mormons marry so early that they go into the flow of life without being aware of it:

Finally, the Mormon youth is pressured to get married shortly after his mission. He thereby plays the role of “patriarch” in his own small family and begins a lifetime of Church service. All this happens so quickly that it almost leaves the young man’s head spinning. It occurs before he has time to seriously consider the different options of life and before he can easily make too many alternative choices. The Church and its members heap plenty of negative sanctions on any young man who fails, at any step, to follow the established pattern. I would expect that many of them are socialized out of the Church, in part through active ostracization. (Knowlton 24)

During this journey to the mysterious, Barber is able to balance the virtues and defects of her Mormon values. Young Phyllis Nelson begins her own search for God and faith to appoint the positive and negative features of this commitment. Her freedom and determination are built upon this vigorous and daring communion with her education, her upbringing, her expectations and disappointments, her free-will and her need for love, both worldly and heavenly. The young woman in this autobiography became a writer who looks for answers in her own past or in the fictional world that defines her identity and her own vision of life.

Both the topics dealing with security and experience and the references to the sexual training are developed by Barber in her fiction. The topic illustrating how a sense of security can suffocate the same that it relieves is seen in “Silver Dollars”, for instance. Barber places a break between what she represents through the night, Las Vegas, silver dollars, Mario, everything meaning success, possibilities and what represents Mother, home, Dad and Mormonism: “even if they surprised themselves one night and went out somewhere besides a church meeting” (Barber, *School* 8). The Mormon household is represented through details which picture the circumstances: food, praying before dinner,



clothes, swearing, gender roles (those of the father and the mother). Pies are the symbol of conformism which is somehow criticized through the figure of the father, but the critique is oblique because the reader approaches this young girl with reluctance, alert to see in her unfair and whimsical attitudes; even when she states with irony that her father loves his wife because she knows how to make him the eggs: "I've got my church," the father tells Mario, "my family, my pie-making wife" (Barber, *School* 8). This time the topic is drawn through the analysis of her father's failure. In fact, she is applying universal topics such as conformity and the risk of ambitions. Silver, money, lights, the night, casinos, trapeceists, electric signs, musicians, smart clothes, white teeth, bellies, cufflinks, cigarettes are placed in contrast with papers, pot roast, stewed carrots, halved potatoes, carpets, pies, bobby pins, gravy, ministers, swearing or eggs. The silver dollars, the coins are rather a symbol to summarize what she is trying to deal with. Mario has it. Father does not. She has one and it means power, possibilities, chances. What dazzles her is the color, the size, the music of the money in the pocket. Silver becomes an obsession. She thinks about paving Fremont Street, wearing silver belts. Barber doubles the meaning of the symbol to make it more energetic and meaningful. Color is one of the main points, she makes a parallel with the resemblances of ashes and silver to extract the whole powerful image of her father's downing. The end is open and significant because, after the deception of her father's rejection of an expensive present, the girl is seen simply listening to the radio and dreaming with his godfearing father and the dazzling Mario, finishing with this sentence: "A trainload of silver dollars is waiting just outside my window, the night is moving again, and Daddy, my daddy, fades into my night" (Barber, *School* 13).

On the other hand, Barber treats the topic of sexuality in some other short stories, in "Tangles", for instance. There is no obvious reference to Mormonism but in a second

reading it is plausible to interpret the text as a critic of the sexual education and protection of Mormon women. But this specifically Mormon topic is here developed establishing universal conclusions which broadens the relevance of the topic and avoids limiting it to a unique Mormon frame. In this short story, Barber expands on her lyrical style, full of verbs with motion, detailed images which triggered the story and the narration, to consider womanhood in the context of the sexual tension of a girl's awakening. Barber explicitly describes the manipulation suffered by women who are educated and reared in a narrowing sense of motherhood and purity that force them to remain pure and afraid of sex. Here, she pictures some of the possible consequences of this education with the final cry of the girl who is asking for the truth, the same girl who parallels bears with safety from men, the same girl who is brave enough to face that man with yolky-eyes, the same girl who compares her father, in a powerful dreamy image, to a teddy bear. The same girl who tried to escape and face all those things in different ways, first in a circus, then in a Viennese mask dancing, both confronting rather than hiding.

A possible consequence of all this training can be seen in another work of fiction by Barber, this time, her novel *And the Desert Shall Blossom*. Esther has unhappy sexual relationships with her husband, relationships in which God seems to be a presence shadowing the scene with a sense of filthy sin:

He'd tempt her with his words and closeness, and sometimes she'd squeeze her eyes and think of a world away from this one where no God was peering down at her, a world where she could scream and bite into Alf's flesh, where she could dance naked across the room with billowing silk scarves and her imperfect skin. (Barber, *And* 51)

There is here much more in interplay. First her lost confidence with her body because of the scars which are hidden thanks to the garments, then the God peering that makes it

impossible to enjoy. It is skillful how Barber starts the paragraph with a sentence that could make easy an interpretation in which she is half forced to have sex but then we see that the appetite is there but not the possibility.

#### **4.2.3. *Parting the Veil*: Barber's Contribution to Mormon Literature**

Barber dedicates a whole book to collecting some of those stories that meant so much to her when she was young: "When I was a child, it was as common to think of an angel appearing by my bed as it was to drink orange juice for breakfast" (*Parting* x). Most of these stories are inspired by Mormon folklore that Barber heard as a youngster or that she discovered later on when doing research at the Fife Folklore Collection in Utah State University or at the Utah State Historical Society<sup>152</sup>. Barber unveils the source of these powerful stories in a final epilogue at the end of the book. Some reviewers have criticized this section for being counterproductive for those Mormons who are simply trying to find pleasure in reading. Nevertheless, this epilogue is useful for those uninitiated readers who require historical and terminological orientation in Mormon culture, and Eric A. Eliason has praised it as a plus: "this procedure allows us to see, more transparently than is often the case, how authors craft their material using the raw stuff of legend" (1). In fact, the epilogue shows that Barber uses her sources very freely and it seems a literary device that opens different dimensions of reading rather than a simple fountainhead of information. Barber, in a postmodern twist, unfolds new lines of fiction, confesses her inspiration and experience, and draws meaningful secondary perspectives for the same stories that she reinvented. The epilogue teaches more than just the information about the roots of these

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<sup>152</sup> In "Folk Elements in the Formation of the Mormon Personality", Austin E. Fife states that the duty of a folklorist is to assemble, classify and interpret myth, never forgetting that myth is an ever evolving thing (4). Barber here takes those myths to build a meaning out of them. She redefines the meaning of those myths, complicating them, distorting them, fitting them into the realm of present day.

twelve short stories. As I will try to show there is a second postmodernist stress in the way Barber approaches this parting of veils<sup>153</sup>. Robert Bird states that Mormon postmodernism is based on the following:

By travelling among worlds, crossing over into other cultures and other realities, Mormon postmodernism affirms the intrusion and influence of one world upon the other. A modernist wall, a sense of epistemological limitation has come down, and in its place only a postmodern veil separates the human from the divine and this life from the afterlife. This veil is easily parted, allowing for revelation, manifestations of goodness and of evil, and glimpses into multiple realities. (Bird 56)

In Barber, this will lead to a new approach to this veil parting that allows complex interpretations which deepen in the multiplicity of readings and understandings. Eliason considers that Barber perfectly accomplishes Mormon mind inasmuch as her fiction gathers the mundane and the spiritual in a similar dimension: “that these two worlds are one in the classic Mormon mind is, of course, her point” (2) and he praises her for skillfully taking the reader from one to the other when he says that Barber “takes her reader from the mundane world to the world of visions and spirits so quickly and seamlessly that the reader can be caught off guard” (Eliason 2). Eliason concludes that this is a new twist of realistic tendency that avoids the flaw of trying to fit everything in realistic, agnostic worldviews whereas Barber embraces some short of magical realism that perfectly works to marry these two different dimensions. Agreeing with Eliason in Barber’s skillful technique to develop the bridge from a narrative routine to a climatic abridgement of spectacular intervention, my reading, as I will try to show, takes a different approach to come to Eliason’s conclusion, but with a different touch. I also agree in the fact that Barber “explores the supernatural not only for its own sake but also to raise curious ethical questions” (Eliason 3) but, from my perspective, those questions, apart from raising

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<sup>153</sup> The veil parting is a common expression in Mormon culture. It conveys the affirmation that the Divine intervenes in worldly life. In any case, all throughout this dissertation, this expression is complicated to denote different meanings of discovery, implying that the intervention can be directed in different levels.

dilemmas that confront tensions within a Mormon ethical frame, translate into ethical considerations that stretch wider, trespass the boundaries of Mormonism to be open to an outsider-insider kind of dialogue which multiplies the meanings encoded in these stories.

This collection of short stories was published in 1999 by Signature Books. *Parting the Veil: Stories from a Mormon Imagination* was born from Barber's belief in the supernatural and Barber's fascination with her Mormon heritage: "there is something about Mormonism that keeps bringing me back to its roots, something about the power of the miraculous I knew so intimately as a child" (*Parting* ix). In the preface, Barber explains her interest in these stories as a way to find answers to questions which kept clinging to her mind: "What is this something that moved men and women to give up all they had, to leave comfortable homes, to separate from families, to build an empire in the name of God?" (*Parting* xi) There is curiosity about this *veil*, about this *parting the veil* that subtly divides the world in two:

This belief in the parting of the veil between heaven and earth has never been far from me, though there have been those moments in time when my innocence was, as all innocence must be, challenged... moments when I watched my idealism fall and my faith crumble. Real life was too disparate from the pretty picture. (Barber, *Parting* x)

The assumption of a veil parting is part of the Mormon cultural heritage and has been represented in fiction and it is part of common life, like Geary shows in his recollection of his early days when he says that

the dead were all around us, he said, some of them right there in the meetinghouse at the very moment, but we couldn't seem them because of the veil. When you were about to die, the veil would open up and you would see your parents or wife or whoever you had on the other side. (Geary, *Goodbye* 45)

In his recollection Geary shows how the veil parting is part of the worldview of the Mormons, how significant is the spiritual world, even if it is ghostly for a kid. These changes are part of their culture and their vision of the earthly world. All throughout the book, a progress can be said to be seen in the main character, and the reader sees his taste for faith and religion growing, the more he yearns for a spiritual experience. Geary's culture, in fact, after reading the whole book seems to be determined by place and faith.

In some of these stories this veil parts only in mood or symbol, but in others, it spreads wide, revealing a spectacular view of the Mormon longing for an earthly heaven. As Terryl L. Givens points out, the fact of visitation or divine intervention is a natural element in Mormon culture that comes from the *Book of Mormon*: "the thematic thread that pervades the text from first to last was the timeless accessibility to all persons of revelatory experience" (*People* 23). But if Givens sees this as a tangible explanation of Mormon's affair with certainty, a rhetoric of certainty and fullness that has helped to maintain the idea of faith as "the antidote to uncertainty about the state of the soul, or its eventual fate" (*People* 21), Barber exercises it to resemble just the opposite, that this divine intervention is by no means a source for certainty or closure, thus leaving a sense of indeterminacy that I aim at examining in the following analysis of her short stories. Givens concludes that the central concern of Mormonism with the "affirmation of absolute certainty" (*People* 26) has a countercurrent in its own origin and nature. Givens explains how Joseph Smith, following the examples of other 19<sup>th</sup> century thinkers such as Hegel, Marx, Darwin, Nietzsche or especially William Blake and his "without contraries is no progression", developed a theory of progression based on the idea that opposition and contestation determines a notion of salvation that depends on ceaseless transformation, free agency and individual effort (Givens, *People* 28). Barber's tension or uncertainty is rather than based on this

contrast, based on a personal commitment to the diversity of experiences and the openness of interpretation and knowledge.

In an essay published in 1996, Barber describes the collection as an effort to “help the culture at large to see the beauty, complexity, profundity and engagement of Mormonism, rather than the usual scandalous misperceptions” (*Parting x*). In any case, *Parting the Veil* was rejected by many national publishers. While they praised the writing and the stories, they expressed doubt that it could give them any commercial benefit. Yet in her attempt to study the parting of the veil, Barber is clearly addressing both Mormons and non-Mormons. The former will find in her stories a reminder of their collective beliefs and their oral tradition. Hence, the constant effort to balance the presence and interaction of divine forces in the lives of Mormons is depicted in her fiction with a strength and sincerity that makes her writing valuable reading for Mormon believers. But, these stories are also suitable and attractive reading for non-Mormons because in her portrayal of the *veil parting* she summarizes not only the delicate, thin line between the divine and the profane, but she also reflects the clash between the idealized beliefs of Mormonism and the secular world which seems to conspire to make it even more difficult for Mormons to follow that path. In a wider sense, Barber is talking about the loss of innocence, about seeking faith or God or any other conviction to embrace security and thus avoid the reverses that life, or even religion, may inflict on us. Equally interesting for any reader are the additional meanings that Barber’s stories offer, such as the confrontation between the individual and the community. These stories are focused on miracle, but Barber proposes secondary topics such as people with troubles within their communities or the suggestive play she constructs between male and female characters. The miracle is in the eye of the beholder and Barber

always leaves a door open to anyone's explanation or belief, even to interpret those secondary topics she slides into her fiction.

In conclusion, Barber plays with the idea of miracles in these stories, with the fascination for the divine taking part in real life. It is significant however, that Barber leaves the final choice to believe or not to believe in the "eye of the beholder." These open-ended stories are evidence of her broad attitude towards religion and faith.

The stories are like a moving train that the reader boards by opening a door. Once on board, the reader becomes witness to the moment when the veil parts or is about to part, but Barber leaves the action unresolved, forcing the reader to decide whether to believe or not. Perhaps that veil parting was sourced from mere coincidence, or the suggestive mind of a believer, or it was a real miracle. Sometimes the moment when the veils part and the reader recognizes the divine at work may look preposterous to those who do not believe. In any case, may also feel that believing is simply a need to feel sheltered, protected, a way towards understanding that is just as valid as any scientific analysis.

Some of these stories are based on Barber's personal conception of religion. In "Prophet by the Sea," for example, the most dreamlike of these stories, Barber portrays a Prophet walking by the sea with a man who is worried about his wife's bizarre ideas about God. Fernando and the Prophet are walking on the beach. Fernando seems excited and worried because of his troubles and duties, whereas the Prophet is relaxed and peacefully anxious to enjoy time and life. Suddenly, a sea lion crumbles on the sand as if he was looking for a place to rest when he is closed to die. No matter how, the Prophet lay down his hands on the sea lion and after praying some blessings, the lion breathed and sailed back to the sea.



The Prophet, who shows no concern about Fernando's doubts, only wants to build a sand castle. He has no fears about death or the passing of time: "Death is only a door, Fernando. And time is bigger than a clock. There's enough of it to do what you need to do, to accomplish what you're here to accomplish. Trust, my friend" (Barber, *Parting* 110).

In this allegorical and poetic story, Barber develops some of her own ideas about spiritual faith. She departs from the idea of the Church as an institution, voicing her personal, free relationship with God. Barber operates over an easy skeleton, two persons walking on a beach that she embellishes with a material twist of the action: the sudden apparition of a sea lion. To make it workable, she uses verbs which denote movement; she paces rhythm with long, composed sentences so the rhythm is not monotonous but constant: like the wind, the waves on the beach, and their walking. Barber says at the end that this story is inspired by an article by Ferren L. Christensen in which he tells with love about a beach in Southern California and his love for the changing colours, the shapes, shadows, animals and beauty of such a paradise place and then he tells about how former President of the Church, David O. McKay and his wife used to like walking on the beach. Then he tells the anecdote that grows to be a miracle in the short story: the sudden coming of a wounded sea lion and how David O. McKay mysteriously explained its story and finally put his hands down to bless an animal which went back to the sea. But, in fact, Barber changes completely the meaning of this experience, basically through the character of Fernando and his response to it. She widens the lateral connotations of the story, involving indirect topics and concerns. This way, the main conclusion that Christensen took from this experience, "man does have dominion all over the earth, let us exercise that dominion through kindness and love" (79), does not coincide with the conclusion, if there is any, that Fernando obtains at the end of this short story.

The story is full of symbols. Some of them almost invisible and very difficult to see for non-Mormons but that help to give coherence to the story: the ties, the fact that Fernando is Spanish<sup>154</sup>, the beach, the sun, the animal, the sky, the sand... All of them work together to give a solid shape to the philosophical or ideological concepts that are being discussed in the story. Then she dresses these images with clothes attainable to Mormonism to give a personal sense that helps introducing what she wants to say. She gives transcendentalism to the whole picture through the idiomatic talking of the two characters, the little details, and the symbolic charge imposed to the sea lion after being described so spiritually. The miracle is placed at the end, and the consequences of that miracle are left open, unwritten, even though we know which ones they should be after watching the fine, unobvious contrast of possibilities that Barber draws through the figures of the Prophet and Fernando. In fact, those are positive visions of this powerful religion. Positive things that are challenged by the attitude of man towards them, the manipulation of pure ideas full of possibilities. And here is where Fernando diverts from the Prophet. The miracle leaves one door open to imagine the information or meaning this character is going to take out of it: is he going to sit and make a castle of sand, a powerful symbol of something weak, beautiful, mortal? Or is he going to stand up and care about his many duties? Fernando is left pending on the verge to do the first one.

In “Devil Horse”, Barber pays homage to the Church she wants to believe in, that first, powerful Church which meant a world full of possibilities for people in need. The Church of “open your mind to the possibilities” as the Prophet in this story describes it to Jonathan, a rich and veritable character because Barber equips him with sincere doubts and places

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<sup>154</sup> Mormon missionary efforts during the 20<sup>th</sup> century have been mostly directed to Latin-American countries.

him on the road to search and to stand up fear. “I want to know God” (Barber, *Parting* 33), Jonathan says as he crosses his short legs at the ankles.

In this story, most of the power of the narration is gone with the description of environment and the appearance of the devil, moment in which the character takes over Barber and controls the dialogues and the dramatic energy of the narration. Barber wasted all her efforts in giving a heroic, stubborn force to Jonathan who even seems an alter ego of Joseph Smith. Jonathan’s search is somehow messed with the reader’s own search for Jonathan, even though maybe all this mess is consciously trying to show the complex search for God of people in those days. Barber once said that “the Mormonism I most identify with begins where The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints did – with Joseph Smith and his visionary ideas that have given my own imagination access to infinite possibility” (Barber, *Parting* x). She believes as she said that “the web is wide”, “the canvas is broad”, “God waves in mysterious ways” (Barber, *Parting* x). At the end of this story, the Prophet says “open your mind to the possibilities” (Barber, *Parting* 35) or that everything is possible. In fact, the apparition of the devil and the consequences that he provokes in Jonathan are quite remarkable to understand Barber’s ideologies. The devil helps Jonathan to choose the Book of Mormon and the prophet accepts it and says that maybe is another teacher in disguise because he is still a son of God. Barber is saying that badness and goodness are still a blurring line and that it comes from the same source. Barber takes a story from her own familial background<sup>155</sup> to illustrate that part of her faith

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<sup>155</sup> This story is taken from Barber’s own family history. Brigham Wright published in 1931 “A Sketch of the Life of Jonathan Calkins Wright” (Jonathan Wilkins) where he tells the story of his father reading the Book of Mormon avidly. He decided to go and visit the Prophet but when he was riding to Nauvoo, he found something in the book that it did not suit for him and he tried to turn round and go back to his village but his horse was possessed by the devil. Jonathan Calkins Wright was converted to the restored gospel and was baptized by Hyrum Smith, Joseph Smith’s older brother in the Mississippi River in 1840.

that she admires the most: the beginnings of the Church and she takes advantage of it to play with the idea of no black and whites, no stiff limits.

“The Whip” is the opening story and thus the first encountering with the mysterious, the divine, the first experience with the parting the veil and it is experienced by a woman, while her husband attends a priesthood meeting. Even though the tone of the story is that of a storytelling, there is no epic, no tragedy. Consequently, this story is a good beginning to understand the whole concept and taste of this collection. Barber controls very skillfully the rhythm, paced with dialogues and images like folding blankets or coiling the whip under the pillow to summarize the passing of time. It is very skillful how she traces the rhythm by the end of the story to grow in the characters and tell the story through them. This story is totally rooted in Mormon history and there are important references to Mormonism from a historic and sociological point of view. Hilma, the wife, is introduced as a model of caring wife who takes the weight of the wagon, so the weight of love, so of life, not because she folds blankets and keeps the alfalfa and cooks but because she takes care of the husband with the determination to decide for and to deceive him. It is clear that the parting the veil moment of the story is or can be nonsensical for those who do not feel the world from a faithful perspective. He forgets the whip so she cooks it and this coincidence takes place after she prayed. Barber leaves it open. In *The School of Love*, she never judges but merely leaves the meaning oblique and communicates through the unreliable and partial characters and their own actions, decisions and inner feelings. In this collection, the facts and the mystery surrounding the facts are going to be free for any interpretation by the side of the reader, not by the side of the characters: “... Before the miracle happened” (Barber, *Parting* 1). The word is there, in the very first page, but then Barber succeeds in leaving the miracle offering different meanings for different people.

“The Boy and the Hand” is the story of a boy who comes close to choking. The family is having dinner and parents are quarrelling over minor themes. Dinner is a big trout with slice potatoes and salad. The trout is big and menacing so the boy does not want to eat it but his father forces him to do so. A bone sticks in his throat when he takes a big bite which he tried to gulp. A marvellous hand comes to help him but on its way it also takes all the whys from mother’s mouth and touches the father. They keep on having dinner happily after that spiritual experience, even though the story is not over:

Once upon a time lightning sawed the sky and cracks appeared in the roof of the day. About the same time, a family of four sat at the dinner table, huddled over their bread, corn, salad, and fish. The mother and the father were arguing over minor points, as people who argue usually do. (Barber, *Parting* 23)

With this clever summary of context and scene, the reader sees the story begin like a fairy tale or a Bible story. But then it dives into that minor event, making it earthly and bringing it close to the reader. She makes it transcendent but finally it becomes earthly again with its ending about human fallibility. Barber places the story over two different perspectives, that of the parents and that of the kid, both of which finally collapse when the fishbone sticks and the hand hovers over the kitchen table. She does so through an easily-flowing style of short sentences, slim paragraphs, little details that run skillfully, simple dialogues. Triviality rides the story until the miracle comes, and as easy as the trouble came. Barber makes the characters aware of the miracle and of the happiness of it. Around the dinner table, with easy smiles they congratulate and dispose of the miracle with no deep reflection. Barber makes the reader aware of this through stiff sentences that are introduced by time subordination: that night, the next day, at dinner next night, placing a sense of rapid, unconscious domination of that lesson.

Barber always moves on two levels: the ordinary and the extraordinary. When they clash, the *parting of the veil* occurs. Here we see a boy choking when a miraculous hand helps him. This is a good ending that makes the lesson pending of a complex perspective since resolving the climax depends on the reader's personal interpretation. The final scene works as a symbol: when the family succumbs to former flaws, the profitable lesson that could have been acquired from the miraculous episode seems to disclose the double reading we could have made of the event, whether the reader resolves that it was a miracle or understands it as a subjective rendition of an accident:

Peace reigned for a while, and they almost lived happily after. But before too long, it became apparent that mothers can ask questions without the word why; that fathers still don't like to be quizzed (even if they can laugh at themselves and hang a rubber hand in the kitchen); AND, even though eating might be easier otherwise, fish still have bones. (Barber, *Parting* 26)

Again, this a story recalled in Fife's archive but Barber dilates the meaning broadening the scope of moral burden in the story rather than widening the psychological depth of the characters. This time, she does it through the consequences of the miracle. If in the previous examples, Barber played with the obviety of the miracle so each one could decide if it had a scientific explanation or it was a divine intermission, this time it is only an exercise on faith. We have a close room and the testimony of four members of the same family who experienced the same thing and all of them came together to believe. Barber, anyway, leaves the twist in interpretation to the consequence of the miracle. In this story, Barber invites to belief that miracles are and that miracles work, and the freedom of interpretation is placed on the benefit you can take from them. All experiences have a meaning behind, an energy that it is always delivered by the subject. At the beginning of the story, Barber makes it obvious that the minor topics are the reason for people to argue,

but minor topics entangle unreasonable quarrelling because the protagonists do not step to see the real source of those minor topics. Then comes the miracle and they accept it, digest it, enjoy it as easily as they messed the dinner. Major topics are cornered. Nobody reflects on the nature and the source of this opportunity. Thus, Barber has established a hidden structure that links minority and majority, ordinary and extraordinary, particular and general, peculiar and universal in a cluster of equal mistakes and potencies. Major topics must be chewed as should be chewed minor topics, as it should be chewed fishbones because, you know: “fish still have bones”, “mothers can ask questions without the word why” and “a rubber hand in the kitchen” makes no difference (Barber, *Parting* 26).

“A Brief History of Seagulls: A Trilogy With Notes” is divided into three stories about miracles, and, specifically, about a major miracle recorded in Mormon history: the seagulls that helped the pioneers<sup>156</sup>. Barber describes the transition from fact to miracle and then back to fact again, emphasizing how people forget about the miracle in the end. A miracle is something more than a fact in itself. It can be an expectation rather than a legend, like with Sheila and Max, main characters in one of the sections of this trilogy. With the passing of time, the miracle becomes a story that loses all its energy. It could be a denouncement. Or just the description of events or the manner in which people develop a reaction through miracles. The seagulls are still there. In this story, Barber links love to believing in miracles, perhaps because love is a miracle and you have to believe in it whether or not it seems possible to do so.

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<sup>156</sup> She talks about the reported miracle of 1848 with the seagulls, the crickets and the pioneers. Not in order to acknowledge the falsity of the miracle, since that is not the aim of this dissertation, it is compulsory to show how grasshoppers (and other insects) plagues were common in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: “In a bad year, such as 1874, the grasshoppers swarmed into the northern prairies in such numbers that farmers mistook them for storm clouds massing on the horizon” (White, *It's* 193).

This is probably the longest of Barber's stories and it is divided into three different pieces that seem like three different acts on miracle. First, the action is set in 1848, and Barber covers one of the most important events in Mormon history from a personal perspective, personal not because it is hers but because the event is presented to us through the experience of it by Lucy and Charles, a pioneer couple who are the owners of the most beautiful curtains in the newly settled city. The story begins when Lucy sees a cricket moving on her curtains but in general is a description of this historical event. The second story tells the vulgar encounter of Sheila and Max, a recently separated couple. She works attending the checking counter in a market and he is buying pesticide for the farm because the crickets are back in Utah. They discuss over the topic of the miracle with the witnessing of a second farmer, Charlie. In fact, they are quarrelling over a different topic, sort of a different miracle: the need that they both seem to have for each other. The third part, the shortest of the three, narrates the crash of an F-16 with a seagull, then breaking one of the engines and the plane falling to the Great Salt Lake. The story is told by the pilot so the reader understands the personal implications of an event which is so real.

Barber uses for the first time a wide arrange of modern literary devices to deal with one of the most important examples when dealing with miracles and divine intermission within a Mormon context: the miracle of the seagulls that she introduces with a quotation taken from the inscription on Seagull Monument that she inserts at the beginning of the first part. The quotations that introduce each part are very illustrative. The first one works as a skillful summary prefacing the topic for anyone unfamiliar with the event and with Mormon culture. The second part is preceded by two quotations. The first quotation tells about the seagulls but the second one talks about crickets from a scientific, realistic point of view. Barber is proposing to analyze miracles and how they influence people, even so



many years after they took place. The third section is introduced by a record, probably some kind of military message or official email, from Colonel to the one in charge of the Environmental Health Club in Davis County claiming for a solution to resolve the problem affecting the jets and the seagulls. Barber presents the content of this third section in which she goes up to the sky to meet the seagulls so as to see if they are real or divine beings sent by angels.

The three stories are written in the third person and they are told through the perspective of one main character (Lucy, Max and Steeve). Only the last one is written in the present, so the stories follow some kind of chronological line, but this line surpasses the limits of fictional chronology and goes from the 19<sup>th</sup> century up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, rather than being chronologically ordered, the stories are consequentially ordered. In the second part, Barber works over a couple and though Max is the character who introduces the story, Sheila wins to manage the attention of the reader. Barber is really good at showing both characters with her and his flaws. Dialogues are very important here: rich, floating, full of information in both words and tone. Barber plays with irony through the characters, but she takes advantage of it to make them play and argue over topics of religion or faith when there is something even easier going on in the backside. In fact, this time they are discussing over miracles, but they are both fighting for a miracle, a miracle between them both, especially Max, who is the one who does not believe on miracles but he finally sees a possibility for a miracle on her eyes (Barber, *Parting* 101). In fact, the miracle is that this square block is able to look back and see the source of the consequences. The narration is dual, one dimension is that going on inside the characters, the sub-story, a very important channel of information in Barber's fiction. Chaotic and reserved, this second and hidden plot explodes suddenly and the reader comes across a naked meaning: "Don't lose faith in

the seagulls, Max” (Barber, *Parting* 101). Barber played her cards to make miracles a matter of individual concern, a matter of attitude towards tough times. There is a clear gap in this couple and that is religion, faith. The ups and downs between Max and Sheila, even though sourced, somehow, on a Mormon context are universal: the distance of believing on miracles or not is in fact the easiest difference to resolve, being more complex to balance the cultural and social distances which broke the couple: freedom, respect, roles.

The third section is the shortest of the three and it is written in present tense, so it is made closer to the reader and further away from the previous sections. It is a good example of how Barber plays again with rhythms, because there are two paces on this story. One before the seagull hits the jet and another after it. Barber closes the story with a powerful, serene, spiritual, positive image that collapses with a piece of a TV news report that she places at the end in cursive. A piece that gathers also the collapse of the other two stories: who is going to keep on having faith on seagulls if they are shot and they are disturbing for our progress? It is remarkable how Barber establishes questions within the content decisions: progress and memory are revisited through the analysis of the procedural development of the myth and the miracle. The nerve of the story shows that development from the seagulls to the fighter plane and raises questions about the nature of this process.

In “Wild Sage” the main character’s son had to leave home to go on a mission to Canada. Mother and son both hold a secret, that Jamie, the son, had sexual relationships with a girl who was trying to convince him to stay at home. The woman keeps the secret away from her husband Royal when the mailman takes a letter: Jamie is “wasting away” (Barber, *Parting* 15). She starts praying and trying to deal with her guilt and remorse. Her desperation is a blend of those feelings and a sense of incapacity to react. Finally, the

miracle comes: the three Nephites<sup>157</sup> appear and tell her to put some sage on an envelope, send it to him and tell him that he needs to make some tea with it so he feels okay. The short story is closed without confirming the completion of the happy end. The miracle can be futile. Barber leaves that admirably open. She leaves traces to support that those miraculous intermissions are images or mental figurations. This time to do so she focuses on leaves in the eyes of one of those three men, placing the weight of the description through light and leaves, so at the end this became part of that image and then we can find psychological clues to explain the event rather scientifically or, sort to say, logically. Barber, once again, plays with the notion that the miracle is in the eye of the beholder.

In “Spirit Babies,” Barber tells the story of a woman whose life is a crusade because she must submit her whole being – particularly the womb – to the interests of the Mormon kingdom. Mothering is Delta Ray Bradford’s mission in life, who still dreams of a baby coming. The false polarity between the childless woman and the mother is here taken to the extreme: here, the failed woman is the “childful” woman. The reader feels her loneliness as she is not supported by those around her. She is a sensitive wife, a good cook and loving mother. But when she says goodbye to a husband who envies her dreaming of babies coming, she whispers: “Dream a little dream of me” (Barber, *Parting* 7). Her entire world is shaken when she sees herself as someone who is fallible after her daughter suffers an accident.

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<sup>157</sup> In the epilogue to the book, Barber explains how the Three Nephites is a common belief among the Mormons ever since 1851 (*Parting* 126). The source of the story is based on a personal testimony of an 8 years old boy from Logan, Utah, Al Curtis. Barber implies different themes to make the characters richer, complex and dramatic, then the fiction much more meaningful. The Three Nephites are three Nephite disciples of Jesus described in the Book of Mormon who were blessed by Jesus. Stories about modern encounters with one or more of the Three Nephites are common in Mormon folklore, as Eric A. Eliason states: “Three Nephite legends are just one well-known Mormon oral narrative type. But the legion of writers who have fashioned Nephites stories into short fiction includes Wallace Stegner, Margaret Blair Young, Maurine Whipple, Levi S. Peterson, Neal Chandler, Brent Pribil, Brian Evenson, Rodello Hunter, and now Phyllis Barber” (1).

It is not exaggerating to say that motherhood is the main topic in this short story. That tendency to place women's main role in society as that of being mother is the main topic here but it is approached through the perspective of a mother who agrees with it. Here, Delta Ray is quite assured, proud and convinced of her mission and she says once and again that she is pregnant with the spirit (Barber, *Parting* 8). The whole short story is sourced from that old custom of Mormon women who related that they had dreams announcing the proximity of a baby birth. Here, this is challenged at the end, when Delta Ray faces her own fallibility. She does not hesitate after hearing what Jeff Jex or Verjean said but because she saw so clearly that she was not going to be able to defend Tara Sue or her children from all kind of dangers. It seems like a perfect, unrealistic design before she faces the possibility of failure, then is when she folds to think in other terms, more realistic and J.L. encourages her to have at least one more baby. Then the question comes: is she going to stop having those dreams now that she or they decided to have one more and that is enough? She is only seen as mother, and as wife. And the husband is all out of the picture. Female is in the front, coping and facing this thing. Males are in the background, just being (even being the source of the problem).

In "Dust to Dust" Rosebeth wakes up early in the morning but there is no sun, only dust and wind and she is hurt because she is unable to tend the garden and she has to do so since her husband passed away when he was hit by a lightning after he went riding to find two lost lambs. Suddenly, she sees a carriage and white horses through the dust and automatically fears the visit as a menace to the golden coin she keeps hidden and safe for the bad times to come. The visitor is a mysterious man who speaks like a preacher, makes her dance and finally asks for any help she could give to him. She gives up and holds the coin on his hand. He promises good times will come and leaves, leaving only the lily that

he took as a present on a vase. When he leaves, she feels deceived, fooled but then Jessica, her daughter, wakes up and says that she dreamt about daddy walking over a field of white flowers. The mother looks and takes the lily. She accepts and interprets the visit with the symbol of the lily as a message from her husband to stop fearing God and feeling angry. This time the heavenly being is well described through the physical appearance of the character rather than abusing the metaphorical, lyrical and archetypal resources (Barber, *Parting* 57). All the information, all the recollections, all the clues come as it comes naturally from the character's mind. The narrator is not involved, she only places the characters in those moments when the coming of those memories or reflections seem appropriate. In this way, the writer is out of the story but her way of narration highlights her presence throughout the book. In a metaliterary analysis, all this heavenly intermission could be interpreted as the study of the reactions of the characters to writer's control, and how both believing and disbelieving open and place questions about the limits of controlling and seeking.

In "Bread for Gunnar," Mormonism is a historical context where Barber develops one of the more important topics of 19<sup>th</sup> century. Mormon kingdom was built upon those families moving to attend Brigham Young's callings to settle new settlements, a period of time which purports fundamental topics for Mormon sense of community: the emigration from Europe, the long exodes that sometimes ended up in a tragedy (Gunnar and Anna in this story) and, obviously, a very important theme: the Principle<sup>158</sup>. To illustrate the individual dramatism involving these decisions, Barber does not confront husband and wife. Instead, she reinforces the idea that the wife had to fold anyway, and, even if Heber seems not an evil character (he loves her and he abandoned the call because her wife was feeling sick),

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<sup>158</sup> The Principle is the call to practice plural marriage.

he is going to be the one holding the authority. Barber places gaps between them, silent monologues, solitary beds. Thus she makes it more powerful, and, in turn, she changes the stress by introducing a third character, Gunnar, whose idealization of love will complicate Anna's undertones for impossible love. They prove to be two unreal forces which fail to win over the practical usefulness and they collapse in a dramatic failure: "I'd like to be loved like that" (Barber, *Parting* 80). Anna finishes folding to love God, though all throughout the story she kept on fighting to avoid hesitating about a faith which puts her on challenge after challenge. In Barber's fictional couples there is always a lack of balance when concerning faith. There is always someone in the couple who does not share the degree of certainty about his or her faith. The point is that, while if the male is the one hesitating, the consequences affect the woman, if the woman is the one who is in a crisis, she still seems to be pledged to marital bond. In this story, from Anna's anger when her husband obeys the Principle blossoms an obsession with Gunnar so it is a sick obsession from the very beginning. All the things that Gunnar does are reinterpreted from "foolness" to an idealized possibility of romantic love. She is attracted to Gunnar because he means freedom, senselessness in a world that is falling, crumbling down for her. She is a woman adrift, with a possible woman inside which is harnessed by the woman who has to pledge to her husband and faith. Here, the spiritual affair, the miracle, the parting the veil is sudden, short, nuclear, it seems rather a metaphor even though Anna clearly says that "I heard the power of God" (Barber, *Parting* 88).

In "Ida's Sabbath", Barber expands on the topic of womanhood in this story about a woman "dependable as the seasons" (*Parting* 40) who discovers her own unpredictable skin. The story deals with one of the most peculiar and private customs in Mormon Church:

temple garments<sup>159</sup>, but symbolically. The story talks about transgressing the cultural codes of righteousness that apparently enslave more than they release. Here Church is a reminder of the weight of time. Ida missed no day at Church: 1,039<sup>th</sup> Sunday in a row being all that, and then playing music. All that time being a housekeeper, being a mother, being a wife. She knows she can be another person but she tries not to be. For the community, she is “a woman who personified dependability” (Barber, *Parting* 40). Ida will finally collapse and even though it is difficult to understand the internal logic of the story because it deals with Mormon culture, it is not difficult to feel Ida’s suffering and sense of inadequacy. Her awakening is miraculous. She rids herself of one layer of her double skin, the temple garments which were suffocating her: “She loved the free of her body, free of belts and zippers and buttons and nylons, the feel of nothing between her and the air” (Barber, *Parting* 48). But her conscience kicks in; she kneels, prays and repents for enjoying her own skin. All the consequences are taking place in the day and the moment of Sunday Service. The consequences of Ida’s sinful action began when she took off her temple garments for too long. The visit of the heavenly being is faced and challenged by the main character. It could be an image on reverse, like in the “Devil’s Horse” with the devil himself. There the devil handing the Book of Mormon, here a heavenly being accusing rather than comforting. When she talks to the heavenly being what it tells her is “depend not on thine own understanding, Sister Rossiter” (Barber, *Parting* 43) and she cries. In “Wild Sage”, it works for the main character because that is really what she needs. The desperate mother in “Wild Sage” used to hear that from her husband, her stiff husband and

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<sup>159</sup> A set of sacred underclothing worn by adult adherents who have taken part in a ritual ceremony known as washing and anointing ordinance, usually in a temple as part of the Endowment ceremony. To understand it better, see how Virginia Sorensen explains how she learnt about them: “I knew what they were talking about without going in to see. We had spoken of this at home when Grandmother came for a visit and her clothes were washed with ours. How odd she should go on wearing the undergarments of the Mormon Church, the white symbolic underwear with marks over the breasts, the navel, and the knee. In the beginning of the Church, the legs came to the ankle, the sleeves to the wrist, and they had been tied instead of buttoned. By the time I myself married in the temple and wore them, strategic revelations had permitted alterations in length of sleeve and leg that made them more acceptable under modern clothes. But the marks remained the same” (56).

the Three Nephites seem to understand the circumstances, they seem to be able to “see Jamie’s heart through her eyes” (Barber, *Parting* 21). Here, instead, it is the heavenly being who is saying it and the husband who wanted her to disobey, but she kept faithful.

Finally, the dialogue between Ida and the heavenly being is powerful and significant (Barber, *Parting* 47-48) and all those whys that the woman in “The Boy and the Hand” stopped saying, here they are important and useful. Barber closes the story with the sacrament which makes the scene even more powerful and meaningful. The character of Ida is strong, reliable, truthful, probably because Barber is less bended by the burden of the tales in the Fife collection since this story was born or inspired only by an act of nature (as she explains in the epilogue) that happened in the late 1980s closed to where she was living then.

It is noteworthy how this story communicates a powerful energy that structures the tension of the argument. An outsider reader feels the struggles of a woman who resembles the pains of facing the strokes of life. Beaten by vital dichotomies such as sex and faith, individuality and community, loyalty and bravery, rebellion and holding to God, Ida’s discovery of her body in the coldness of the refrigerator, or her journey into the dark places of her own heart, are perfectly delivered by Barber who uses the past simple for the two plot lines, the foreground and the background, then sketching a continuum that helps the reader to feel the whole dimension of this woman’s struggle to harmonize her disappointments and her expectations. Eric A. Eliason sanctions this story because “her treatment of some ideas might well have been designed to move us to higher planes of cultural introspection, but may have the actual result of only baffling and offending” (2).



Eliason parallels being provocative with being inappropriate, a connection that seems impractical and constrictive.

The collection is closed with “Mormon Levis,” the only story in this collection written in the first person. It is not as lyrical as the others, but shows how Barber tries to adapt her style to the historical context and the tone of the story. Here the soundtrack is not a violin, but Johnny Mathis and Led Zeppelin’s “Stairway to Heaven”: “Remember your curfew, Mattie. And don’t be chasing after those boys you think are so cool. You know better” (Barber, *Parting* 113).

Mattie is a young Mormon girl reminiscent of the young Phyllis of *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*, the Mary Elizabeth in *And the Desert Shall Blossom* or the Chloe in “Radio KENO” from her other collection of short stories *The School of Love*, with whom Mattie shares the same relationship towards religion: “Jesus is always looking over someone’s shoulder it seems” (Barber, *Parting* 113). Mattie feels the haunting presence of God and this is the same haunting symbolism that Barber uses in “Radio KENO.” In this one, Chloe goes back to the site of her first love, from whom she escaped when still a young girl<sup>160</sup>. She wants to ask him if he still loves her but she finds out that Wagner married a religious woman.<sup>161</sup> Chloe seems like a sick character and her sickness seems to come from the sad-eyed Jesus who will “never leave me alone” (Barber, *School* 94). When being a girl, she believed herself capable of stopping the sun from coming just because of her faith. And she stubbornly chose God better than Wagner and now she regrets it and she

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<sup>160</sup> Once again, the choice here was either going for her Church or for a man who seemed to represent more than just a physical attraction. She went for the Church: “I’m saving myself” (Barber, *School* 86).

<sup>161</sup> Shauna, Wagner’s wife, says that they are happy because they found God. Wagner does not say a single word. Finally, he confesses to Chloe that he married a woman like her and at the end he uses Chloe in front of his family to make them aware of his own concept of religion: forcing people to do what they do not want to do.

comes back, almost suicidingly, almost blind, uncontrolled: “Can’t you understand He’s always around the next corner, haunting me, waiting for me? This isn’t easy” (Barber, *School* 94).<sup>162</sup>

By chance, both characters will end up sitting in car. While Chloe drives back from her desperate attempt, Mattie remains quiet in the rear seat of her boyfriend’s car. The story begins when Mattie goes out with a friend to look for their forbidden boyfriends, Rod and The King<sup>163</sup>, who drink and smoke and as Marian Nelson says about Salt Lake City in 1950, even though here we are in Las Vegas a few years later, drinking beer and smoking cigarettes “was wicked enough” (1). The movie they are not going to see is “Way Out West.” And precisely they seem to be “Way Out West” when they land in the car with the two boys, but the truth is that they are going to the “Stairway to Heaven.” Shelley, her friend, looks stronger. Mattie is more innocent, ready to see it all like a game, incapable of seeing the danger. Rod and The King will be “drunk enough to give the finger to all worldly inhabitants plus the moon and the stars as they speed damn the highway. Drunk enough to call us Bitch One and Bitch Two” (Barber, *Parting* 116).

Mattie does not care about the real meaning of the words. From the very beginning of the story she took the rides of the narration. She decides the rhythm of the text through her walking, through her experience of the night: emotions, thrills, desires, fears, temptations, feelings of guilt, all of it moving silently inside. Good examples are for instance the personal experience of bumping across with the showgirl, which is very personal and it

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<sup>162</sup> In these two characters the presence of Jesus is overwhelming and painful, even though both seem to quarrel silently and desperately to balance their relationship towards God. In “Almost Magnificence”, another short story, God is present, even talking, and it would be easy to say that there is a kind of remorse but there is such an invitation to think that there is a feeling of failure and impotence. In any case, that feeling is not coming directly from God but from somebody that he hired.

<sup>163</sup> The King, the name resembles an irony and reverse to the romantic ideal of The Knight, apparent and common in Mormon thinking: “Girls my age fantasized about love at first sight. The Knight. The Prince who was speechless with awe” (Barber, *Raw* 35).

reveals meanings which become fundamental in the process of understanding that the main character, Mattie, is experienced in such a short period of time. In any case, the pace of the narration, the sequence of action attenuates the importance of this occurrence when it is perceptibly lost in the middle of a mess of events, speed and emotions. All of the meanings which could be determined by the characters are stomped by the next event. What she likes is the risk, the different world: "I love it when they talk like that, words from the Forbidden City" (Barber, *Parting* 116). The attraction of Fremont Street and the city of Las Vegas is close to the attraction of certain words: "lights, wild, free, don't care." This is a context placed beyond the certainties of her household and her Mormon upbringing, a different context of which she is still quite conscious: "We are, after all, Mormon girls in Mormon levis, saving our sacred bodies for The Big Event called Temple marriage" (Barber, *Parting* 116-117).

Suddenly, she gets her period, becoming a woman both physically and symbolically. This fact acquires a higher meaning when she runs into a showgirl, with her confident big breasts, buying a box of tampax that same day: "[T]he same time. This must be portentous" (Barber, *Parting* 117). The showgirl is real, nothing miraculous; she is like her, so Mattie can be like her: "Her eyes briefly gaze my face as she passes, leaving me with feelings I don't understand" (Barber, *Parting* 118). Womanhood awakens in her; it is powerful and she feels bright enough to behave like a woman with all the attributes of the woman she has been taught to be. But sex awakens in her as well: "I want body contact" (Barber, *Parting* 120). Her training to be a Mormon woman and the call of her body combine in a complex feeling that takes control of her mind: she had Jesus in mind a few minutes ago but she still feels the attraction of forbidden sex. She is in the center of both those feelings. But she is in a car that is not driven by her.

“Life is one big bud of goodness, I’ve been told, and yet, sometimes it’s a maximum security prison to have to smile and be loving all the time” (Barber, *Parting* 121). Mattie is forced to love and smile. She is not able to decide, but she dreams of kisses. She dreams of The King and she feels his tongue inside of her mouth. The tone of her rebellion smoothens within the narration. All this constant conflict between righteousness, faith and sexual awakening is the backbone of the story. In fact, she seems to try to install this instinct on that attempt to be faithful. Her faith seems to grow all throughout the narration at the same pace as her determination heightens and she tries to encounter both in balance as if it was possible to make them both friends. There is a sense of looking at things (the night, the city, the experience) as a cold description, something between enjoying and fearing that stays in the middle, trying to find a balance that looks cool rather than warm. It is one of the main features in Barber’s work: balancing the extremes and here it is important as she herself confesses because she is trying to describe the clash between the profane and the divine and she does so placing Mattie in an spiritual context with material sensations. “But I know I’m still a good girl. I want to live with Jesus one day“ (Barber, *Parting* 122). In any case, now that she is in that car where all sense of rebellion seems to blossom, she is being driven, she is not the driver. Again, Mattie’s resolution for embracing certain spiritual communion is related to a feeling of surrendering.

The miracle, placed at the end of the story, so at the end of the collection, leaves the car on the way to its crash, questions clinging in the mouth. There is no real miracle, no spiritual intervention, no closure. Barber leaves it up to the reader to judge Mattie and decide the ending. This story could only fit here, at the very end of the collection.

#### **4.2.4. *And the Desert Shall Blossom: Esther and Alf and God***

All the topics included in these short stories were fully developed on the scarred body and the sick mind of Esther Jensen and her pliable, disjointed husband, Alf. The whole first chapter is kind of an introduction in which the reader meets these two main characters. It is remarkable anyway how the first character that the reader hears is Alf, Alf alone, in front of the desert which is not presented as a friendly space. Nevertheless, the first character to be introduced, just after Barber finishes with the real, spacious introduction, is the little Esther with her family behind. The novel opens with a handwritten letter sent by Esther to A. P. Watkins asking for help to find a job. Esther's personal letter is the first clue we have but we do not have her voice even if it could be heard in her handwriting. Esther's voice is sliding, even as if she is talking about her husband easily, positive, but indulgent, compassionate with a cold almost invisible rebuke: "somebody must have been too tired, crumpled up the blueprints, and laughed a fit of exhaustion" (Barber, *And* 5). That is Alf who is in front of the Colorado River and all throughout the first chapters Alf's sense of failure and a huge expectation blend to make of it an adventure: "Here by the Colorado River, this was the time for Alf's flowering" (Barber, *And* 6). The character's presentation is done through Barber's usual style of implication. Any judgement is made by the characters themselves about other characters or about themselves but never by the author herself, and that is why in these introductions to the characters we see the important presence of a past that reveals traces of faith and culture: "They were hymns, those damned hymns she'd been singing ever since they left St. Thomas and driven into heat unlike any they'd ever felt" (Barber, *And* 6).

Their relation can be approached as a fictional device to illustrate the demands and tensions produced in Mormon definition of marital bond. Mormon marriage when it is exercised through temple ordinances is called “Celestial Marriage” (Baumgart 2) and it claims for a durability that transcends mortal life. Mormons must marry in order to improve their conditions to achieve a good place in the afterlife and marriage is not only a source for a bond that in its unbreakable tangibility establishes a limiting space but also a source for the generation of gender roles that are transmitted as something linked to faith and gospel rather than pertaining to the cultural and social, to the secular and human.

For Alf, Church means worries, fear and limitations whereas life means release, laughter and entertainment. For Esther, Church means backpatting, security, shelter and understanding whereas life means shock, worries and fear. Esther is, once again, one of those women that Barber portrays in her stories, a woman at the edge, on the border between real life and Mormon society trying to deal with this situation but equipped with any of the tools necessary to do so. Alf Jensen, like some of the other male characters in Barber’s stories, particularly Ida’s husband in “Ida’s Sabbath”, is going to be the one responsible for opening the door to the fresh breeze of the outside world. Husbands will have the chance and the right to experience temptation and handle it, though, as can be seen in this novel, for Alf Jensen this is not going to be easy.

Esther is the central victim in the novel, not only because of her maddening marriage or the harsh circumstances that she has to overcome to keep her family unified. Esther denies her own dream of a world away from the real one where God is constantly peering down at her. She avoids believing in a different world where she could scream and bite when she is making love with her husband or where she could walk naked and she would not be

ashamed of her scarred skin. The garments and the scarred skin are two shields to help her hold to God's word.

Her soul is scarred by impossibly high Mormon standards, symbolized by the temple garments she wears despite the relentless, suffocating heat but also because her nuclear family, such an important element in a Mormon community, is not so marvellous as it seemed. They have been victims of movement, never being able to stop and find a home: "Off and away, and yet they'd always been together – the family" (Barber, *And* 218). But united does not mean jointed, as it is proposed in the text. Even if they have been moving in space and time, and seeing how some members have been going away, there is some balance that needs to be found: "always everybody to count on like the perennial spring green bursting out of brown pods of trees" (Barber, *And* 219). In any case, by the end of the book, the family will be reunited, jointed and scarred by all the things that have been going on: "The Jensens. Together. A family event. A baptism. A rite of passage for a concrete adolescent about to enter the serious business of making power and controlling water" (Barber, *And* 276).

Alf is also in conflict because he is trying to fit into the realm of religious beliefs. He is supposedly visited by God at the beginning of the novel and he makes his own reading of this. Alf's spiritual experience is depicted by Barber with apparent subjectivity. The reader is able to see that the reliability of this visitation depends on desire rather than on fact, what sets the tone for Alf's future engagement with Church. He is only faithful to some commandments, only to those which work for him. Alf acts as a man who will exercise a personal and peculiar relation to Church in which his own interest and his rights are placed before his obligations towards a community which is not of his real interest, basically

because it denotes other meanings which have nothing to do with him: “Kegs were Alf’s true religion, try as the Latter-day Saints might to keep him from his ways. He bent to sniff one, his nose, his tongue remembering” (Barber, *And* 28). Childish or vulgar as it may seem, this situation reveals a man who needs to ponder his own accommodation to outsider rules. That makes him seem to be out of place in many places at the same time, a man in the middle, who suffers, even if he is not conscious of his displacement from either his own household, the Church, the circle of men or the Pass: “Alf fit somewhere in the middle of these types” (Barber, *And* 25). And at the same time, he is also very aware of how he does not fulfill with the conditions to fit in any of those categories, especially in the religious one: “The moment lifted him out of self-absorption, out of Alf, the uneven man who sometimes broke promises and spoke half-truths, who most of the time preferred hooch to the sacrament he took on Sundays” (Barber, *And* 61). Nevertheless, Alf has his own way to faith. He has his own questions: “What do you think God’ll say, Bill? Do you think all this Mormonism is the only way to get to the main event? Do you believe it line for line?” (Barber, *And* 31) And he also has his own certainties: “And he was making Serena happy, too. Jesus said to love one another, and Alf was obedient to some of the commandments” (Barber, *And* 166).

Mormonism is also a matter of authority for a man who feels all the time too small in front of everybody. In fact, when A. P. Watkins comes to visit them the one thing that shows Alf’s concern about the attributes of this men is, rather than easy-money, a certain visibility or ascendance among men: “He was in his late seventies and still reeked with authority” (Barber, *And* 37). He has persevering doubts about faith but it seems truly hesitations not childish like before and in that sense it means some kind of concern about religious act, in fact, here doubts seem to be based on authority, on some kind of non-male



Mormonism, that is why he was drawn to Parker who spoke with the same kind of southern Utah, dry-wash drawl (Barber, *And* 31). John Bennion calls it Western Mormonism, another kind of Mormonism, rougher, earth-bound, less spiritual, adventuring, pioneering, practical in a sense (Bennion, *And* 1). Alf talks about “stiff-necked Mormons” or he wonders about obedience: “she thought she did know the mind of God because she obeyed the church leaders and because it was her responsibility to guide him into the path, either with coaxing or a reprimand” (Barber, *And* 32). Faith and authority, failure, hierarchy, success and individualism versus obeying. All those poignant passions are messing and conflicting in his head. This matter of authority is also reflected in his marriage since he feels his wife to be upon him on virtue and dignity:

Maybe he was getting to be Esther’s pet dog again.

She needed somebody loyal who could love her as she should be loved. She was a good woman who happened to live close to the margins all the time, but damn, he couldn’t always be there to keep her away from the edge. She had to take care of herself.

He had to think of his own dreams too. And he liked to laugh, get down-and-out obscene and say all those things Esther though were disgusting. (Barber, *And* 116)

Alf’s dreams crash with Esther’s. Alf reacts against a submissive potency driven by her wife’s religious standards. The reader presumes some kind of compassionate victimizing in here. Serena and her brother are closer to Alf’s dreams, dreams where he feels stronger to live those ideas out. He wants instinct, desires, no attraction for security or stillness. Something inside Alf longs for what he does not have, for what he is not supposed to have. He is unable to detach to a quiet life. He feels some kind of lack in his heart that his life is unable to fill in: “A man had to have a place to breathe if he was going to work every day and bring home the bacon” (Barber, *And* 117). His duty to Church encapsulates his own agonistic contradictions and he tries to delimit his obligation to that of conceiving children.

He has given to his wife ten sons and daughters, even though, the twins passed away and three were miscarriages. That is now the role he has to fulfill with Serena:

He'd give Serena a child when she was ready. He was good at making babies. He'd be careful of Esther if that happened. He didn't want to hurt her, but surely she could understand his purpose. Esther wouldn't need to know if it happened, except that she would; Esther knew everything. (Barber, *And* 167)

Esther here seems to be the peering god. Fear here is driven differently in both characters. Alf is fearful of Church that means worries and fear for him so he tries to find comfort on releasing, laugh, entertainment, life or the pleasures of life. Meanwhile, Esther is fearful of life, of shocks, changes, worries, and what gives her comfort is the Church, the backpatting and the security. So we have a clash between them as individuals and them as a couple because they are equally unable to be together and to be singles. And this is Alf's simple understanding and not the core of the trouble: "That was the point. She'd never understand how he preferred sitting shoulder to shoulder at a bar with friends who didn't take life so seriously and who weren't obsessed with the hereafter" (Barber, *And* 223).

There are different perspectives when their relationship is approached from the standpoints of each character. In a way, Esther is forcing herself to remember him and Alf is forcing himself to forget her, a situation which matches their personal concerns about Church. Serena, the third protagonist, instead, seems to have no fears but she looks for comfort on the seed of children. Some part of that lost faith on certainty, summarized in Alf's idea that everything in the world is illusory and that there is no sense to be afraid, that "everything changed with the weather and the times" (Barber, *And* 165), relies on the constant memory of his father's suicide: "He'd see the darkness of the pit as he looked down between the cracks of coal that cradled his father's body after he untied the knots"

(Barber, *And* 166). Alf did not move on. The “darkness of the pit” is the constant reminder of failure that took his father to that shed. Whether the weather, government, depression, authority, his wife, all of them conspire to try to have him out of success and into the failure, into “the darkness of the pit”:

His father’s breath gone like a snap of fingers. The breath pumping his lungs, the breath heavy with desire as he fathered eleven children, the breath pulling in oxygen while cigar smoke curled out of his nostrils. His breath. Snap. Gone. Neither white or black. Just air. Oxygen. Invisible to the eye, but gone. So noticeable when gone. So still. Pale. White framed by black. A study in still life. White hands relaxed against black coal. And it was nothing to be afraid of because it was quiet. He remembered his father hovering around their family home, sitting in a chair gazing into space. Tired. Gray. A picture of suspension. The moment between breaths. Now crumpled on the coal. Quiet. Telling Alf not to worry about this because there was nothing to fear when you were quiet and still and void of the desire to feel anything. (Barber, *And* 166)

His father. His breath. The weakness of life. Breath snaps in a second. Coal means work. Hovering around the house means no benefit, no pleasure. This is helpful to understand Alf’s philosophy and attitude towards life. Both Alf and Esther have a story pushing from the past, an experience which marked their lives till present day, the burning and the suicide. The difference is that one was suffered by herself, the other was suffered by a third person. In any case, they never ever talk about it. It is always permeated in their minds, in their memories, in their inner monologues. They put dams, walls to it, instead of papers or screens to make movies or stories and get over it. That is why he kept on caring about her earthly problems rather than about spiritual ones: “Alf kept in touch with every shift of political wind and prayed to his god that company scrip would not go away” (Barber, *And* 169). A “god” with no capital letter.

In fact, he fights against a possible feeling of faith, because, for him, this means folding. It ressonates with aggressive echoes from the past: “and the words started pouring into his

head again, the words about God and obedience and failure and determination” (Barber, *And* 32). He had to find a way to escape them before he drowned. Right after it, he begins delineating his future business. He relies on the expectation hidden in the roadside attractions, honkytonks, bootleg liquor tents... and he finishes saying: “He might talk to God about it, but if God decided it wasn’t a good idea, maybe he’d have to reconsider. But God had given him his brain, hadn’t he” (Barber, *And* 31).

All this will not be shared by her wife Esther who has a different engagement with the faith and within the Church. For her, Mormonism is a shelter. Where Alf longs for individuality, Esther longs for community: “Alf said she was a blind a sheep and didn’t think for herself, but he missed the point, the simplicity, the fact that an individual was only a part of things, not a lone star in the sky” (Barber, *And* 49-51). Alf rejects Mormonism because he has to obey. Esther embraces it because it means security. Religion, when looking backwards, is perceived as a place to feel comfortable and secure, a shelter. “The community. The branch, bond together by the rim of a glass of sanctified water” (Barber, *And* 81). Mormonism is truth, some kind of structure to order the chaos of life.

Occasionally, Esther reasserted her determination to hold to the rod, the word of God. Something to save her children in this life and the next. Something that was stable, ordered, the truth. This resolution was her only remaining gift to her children when everything else had been warped beyond recognition. (Barber, *And* 100-101)

Esther is the faithful one in Barber’s story and she is frightened by the gentile world. Her inner world becomes more hidden and tenuous as the family drives further away from Brigham City and from those who understood her spiritual sensitivity:

... she should have stayed in Brigham City with the apricot and peach trees and the water running in a ditch in front of her house, with her mother who had already seen

too much for her in the many retreats homeward to birth another child or when things rotted between her and Alf. (Barber, *And* 38)

But for Esther Mormonism means also a history, a tradition, a genealogical tree that stands too bound to earth, that is impossible to carry with while you try to move forward. This burden is a paradox because sometimes is something she longs for but it is also some sort of burden that makes it less easy to cope with her problems: “The people she’d never known, designers of Esther and her children and their children, passing on strengths, quirks, and oddnesses” (Barber, *And* 86). She feels attached to people she never knew. Ancestors who are sand that she cannot grasp; a place to hold that looks unreal, that she is unable to seize tightly. She is putting the pictures on the walls of her new prefab home when she feels that sense of being lost in permanent hunting for a place, as if they were pioneers from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, to Esther, Mormonism is both a relief and a constant reminder of her need to work hard. Mormonism means giving more than receiving:

Occasionally, Esther reasserted her determination to hold to the rod, the word of God. Something to save her children in this life and the next. Something that was stable, ordered, the truth. This resolution was her only remaining gift to her children when everything else had been warped beyond recognition. (Barber, *Desert* 100-101)

One important trace of this fear of the world outside Mormonism is Esther’s quiet and controlled rebellion against the constraints of her faith. Esther has lots of hopes for her children; most of her identity relies on their education: “Be in the world, but not of the world, she heard at the Church, but she had no choice in the matter. Alf brought the world stumbling in their door and the need for money kept her children going out” (Barber, *And* 81).

It is impossible to remain isolated and, at the same time, she even encourages this feeling: “She had her own quiet insurrection, one that wanted her children to know all life, good and ill, and wanted them to defy her, to stand up for themselves” (Barber, *And* 101). But this is repressed, avoided and erased from her mind because Mormonism, just as it means order, also means obedience, so she is not supposed to feel like that. Mormonism is also fear, something like the Jesus peering over Chloe in “Radio KENO”. It means escaping from overprotection. It is a synonym of courage, the courage that she might have lost when she was burnt as a child. She is not able to do this, but maybe Mary Elizabeth could deny all the negative things in faith and accept only the positive ones. Esther feels that fear has different shapes, all of them always tied to guilt and her supposed failures as a mother: twins, three babies, fire. She has a black hole in her spirit. All her expectations and failures, her dreams and deceptions are stuck inside. She is weak. Religion is both supportive and rude to her. She has no idea that she has a chance to be strong. She is aware of the limitations of having been educated as a Mormon:

But her growing had an insularity. Her schoolteachers were Latter-day Saints, as was her voice teacher, the grocery store manager, and the theatre owner. Everyone in Brigham was a Mormon to one degree or another. Underlying everything, even Esther’s decision not to try for Big Times, was the communal belief that nothing was more important than serving God’s purpose. (Barber, *And* 129)

Mormons in a foreign culture may have problems combining their heritage and the real world: “When Esther, a willing chalice for God’s glorification, was tossed out into the world with her less willing husband, she was frightened. No one understood the intricacies of her faith or comprehend her words” (Barber, *And* 129). In fact, her personal fight for her own determinacy and strength, her silent and oblivious fight against her melancholy, her jumps from “no more wasting time feeling sorry for herself” (Barber, *And* 94) to the “slipping toward the black hole” (Barber, *And* 104) are a transformation from her concerns

towards religion which are complex and paradoxical and sway between extremes in which Esther looks like a ball bouncing from one wall to the other. Thus she shows a disrupting, hidden determination towards freedom which complicates the already complicated imbalance she felt between her religion as community and as a distorted burden of tradition and shaping: “Her daughter swore for her mother, took God’s name in vain as Esther wished she had the courage to do without frightening herself, without looking up to see if a swift hand was moving in her direction to smash her” (Barber, *And* 101). It is a complex situation in which Esther seems to be fighting with extremes or within extremes: her own quite insurrection, courage, stand up for themselves, not being afraid, defy. Those expressions unfold her struggle between feelings of reliability and rebellion. She longs for a different education and she observes Mormon culture as limiting.

The tension between certainty and uncertainty plays an important role here. Extremes adamantly appear as compulsory choices: “Maybe there’s a license to be extreme here” (Barber, *And* 147). Esther feels that the extremes are unavoidable in a place where circumstances, reasons and the climate, all of them collaborate to facilitate extreme attitudes. Barber profits from past perfect tense to give a sense of implicit lost opportunity or unable attempt. Esther is afraid of change, time. She fears that she had nothing to stick to. Nothing seems reliable. But then the Colorado River emerges as a symbol of firmness, but not because it controls, but because it flows. That certainty reflects something reliable and that is why she also likes the theater:

And now, she’d returned to the beginnings of the Boulder Theater, a place that felt safe. A movie theater was scored – a place where stories had endings, where love was stronger than people, where one could cry over a sad life and leave it behind. (Barber, *And* 148)

That certainty is fictional so it is relaxing, unreal. One thing is flowing and the other going adrift. It seems that the only thing that remains unmoveable is Church: “Thanks heavens for church and funerals, those would always be there, but why did everything else have to change constantly?” (Barber, *And* 144) In fact, it is not a matter of movement. She is for or she will be for movement, she will be attracted by the flowing of the river. It is a matter of reliability, of knowledge, of esteem and identity. You are hurt by changes when everything changes around:

Once she'd thought there was safety if one worked hard, learned to sing, took an ironing, washed clothes, kept children neat, kissed one's husband when he came home from work, but now it seemed nothing was reliable, not even the promises of the brethren at church who told her if she was faithful to the end everything would be all right. (Barber, *And* 144)

This sense of disappointment with the Church is coming from Bishop Vaughn's remark that she needed to do better to take her husband back to Church, that it was her responsibility: “Be firm about it, and try to get Alf out to church more. It's not only your salvation at stake here” (Barber, *And* 145). This statement engenders disappointment because her bishop is looking at the problem between husband and wife from a point of view in which she gets no relief or compassion but more responsibility. She sees the Church as a place to find shelter and certainty but it seems that there is no place for someone who comes without her or his other half:

The church. She wanted it to give her comfort – the hymns, the sacrament, handshaking and the backpatting – but she didn't like sitting alone or feeling her troubles were a matter of spiritual speculation for the bishop or the congregation. She knew Mormonism was not for halves, quarters, and shaved bits of families. It preached Unity. Harmony. Togetherness in praise of God. But hers kept splintering like the wings of a balsa wood airplane, fragments and curls and bits of wood fraying the already rough body of her family. (Barber, *And* 145)



Church is not for halves which remains me of Linda Sillitoe's main character in *Sideways to the Sun*. Church has been almost invisible as an institution in rough Southern Nevada. It has been out of the scene, leaving the characters on their own to deal and organize both their earthly and spiritual lives. Esther has been fighting for her faith on her own. All that sense of community and repairing was way back on her memory and it was only reachable through flashbacks that in fact worked to enlarge her sick melancholy. She has been told to keep and work on taking his husband back to the Gospel. Wives are to be driving husbands to Church when, in fact, Alf stands for all that hurts her: she blames him for taking uncertainty and risk to her family. This is something that Alf will suffer by the end of the book when he feels that he is much more comforted or alive when he knows that Esther needs him, rather than Serena on whom he can feel no dependency. He needs to know that he needs someone but that that someone needs us. He needs needing not to feel lost and the needing can be mistaken with control. Alf's adherence towards uncertainty is a source of freedom but he finally is apparently aware of the need for certain reliability, a reflection that echoes Esther's reflections about religion. The goal is the same: to stop fearing death. But the ways they chose seem different:

Everything – life and death, man-made opinions, and the shifting emotions in a body – was illusory. Everything changed with the weather and the times. There was nothing to fear, not even dying, because in death people would have no will to feel anything, no feelings of sorrow, regret, stupidity. (Barber, *And* 165)

Esther's faith is jeopardized by paradox. Mormonism is operating as one of the reasons for her sickness. Her Mormon education did not equip her to deal with turmoil and doubt: "Life will not upset me. Life will not upset me" (Barber, *And* 94). Again, she seems to be more prepared to deal with death than with life. And part of what she needs to deal with that is self-esteem, something that she lost somewhere in the way from the Elberta Theater

to Boulder Dam: “What did she know, compared to him?” (Barber, *And* 128) Always unconfident, she proves better when helping others: Serena, the kid, Alf with the corpse. Not even her family is the source of her sick heart. When the reader hears about Mary Elizabeth, about Rebecca, about Inez, they timidly resonate in the background, on the mouth of secondary characters. The world is too much compressed for Esther. She was thrown to the world: “she was frightened” (Barber, *And* 129) and Alf was the world. He took her all throughout the world and he did not help her. It is impossible to combine her heritage with earthly temptations and disruptions. Individuals interact determined by a discourse of assumptions and beliefs which gives them culture and some kind of visibility that you only have around those akin to you. If you move to foreign terrain, you become invisible. Still individuals possess strategies to re-establish themselves in alien or unfamiliar circumstances but the prize required is unaffordable for Esther. Alf, however, is ready not only to pay that prize but to invest it and take interests afterwards:

... farther away from those who understood her spiritual sensibility and too close to strangers who could never fathom the world according to Esther Jensen. She felt like invisible ink, only perceptible to those who knew about the Urim and Thummim – the seerstones that aided Joseph Smith when he translated the Book of Mormon from golden plates. (Barber, *And* 129)

There is in any case something that bounds them to each other beyond the distances imposed by certain expectations, standards and roles, even beyond their own failures and mistakes. The feeling all throughout the book is that love is impossible but inevitable when you trace it through a determined attempt to follow a pre-established pattern. There is a feeling that this failure is linked to pretending, circumstances, differences and lack of communication which may be provoked by those standards and expectations. Nevertheless, when Alf finally visits Esther in the hospital and he goes with Serena, even if he tries to say goodbye coldly and even if he seems egocentric because he is sincere and hurting in that

severe moment, there is a feeling hovering over the scene that they will not be able to detach from the other. Alf says without emotion that he is not the person she wants him to be (Barber, *And* 237). But in fact he is trying desperately to negate what Esther said before:

“You’re wrong about a lot of things. Alf, and most of all you’ve wrong about me. You don’t know who I am. You’ve been too afraid to find out. So afraid that you don’t know there’s something out there besides scrambling to the top, something besides having to prove yourself with schemes of money and power. You don’t hurt me anymore. You’re afraid. Hear me, Alf? Serena is only part of your fear. You can’t hurt me with her, Alf. (Barber, *And* 237)

There is something that still connects them. Something insuperable that Esther knows and Alf fights to take for oblivion: love. Love is even beyond their own decisions, like the river is beyond the dam. The doctor in Spark Mental Hospital states that Esther’s problem is romantic: “I don’t think there is anything wrong with her other than, as one of my aides said, she’s dying from a broken heart” (Barber, *And* 243). In fact, Barber worked it out to make us friendly to this conclusion, because we know they still find the other in their own ways:

Alf seemed bare to Esther, and she suddenly felt sad for his fear and his ups and downs and all his trying. She wished she could make it right for him. He hadn’t wanted all that much, her Alf, the shabby painting of her dream. Something in him stirred her to stand up and find the front of him: “I’ve always loved you, Alf. Not always well, I know. Go and believe and do what you must, but we’re woven. Don’t underestimate us. (Barber, *And* 238)

Love is the builder of this tragedy. By the end of the book Alf is doubting about her relationship with Serena because he is unable to understand her, because “he couldn’t find a gap in the wall” (Barber, *And* 259) and he was unable to give her a child. She is “a blockade as a dam” (Barber, *And* 261) and Alf starts to think about it: “What was he

doing?” (Barber, *And* 261) He is still quarrelling with his feelings about Esther, who he is unable to get free of:

Herbert could give Esther what she needed, which was a caretaker, not a husband, Herbert was like her. Alf didn't need to feel responsible for this woman who'd bailed out on him by jack-knifing into craziness. He'd kept this part of the bargain. She hadn't. Why should he feel responsible? (Barber, *And* 260)

The source of the whole drama is that they both are unable to go away from each other. Maybe is in here where Barber gets the best balance between universality and particularity, because the story is shaped by the particular characteristic of each character but the nuclear problem is something as universal as pure love. In a final outburst, Alf attempts at liberating his choked shouts which are still hurting him and he shouts at her, reproaching her condescension, her making him feel smaller, her control, her sadness, her melancholy: “You can't make me feel like a nothing from the poor Danish immigrants of Brigham City anymore” (Barber, *And* 266). And their faith is there present as a burden, their faith as both belief and education: “No kingdoms to populate with good Mormon children. Everybody's notion of eternity is a product of the imagination, the Mormons included. Imagination stops when you do” (Barber, *And* 265).

By the end of the book, another male character, a silent character who is probably the one with a real broken heart, Conway Mitchell appears to open Alf's eyes and help him see his wife as “an extraordinary women” (Barber, *And* 272), with an extraordinary sensitivity, an emotional voice and a quality that is not visible for all. Now love, once crippled, is unleashed:

Esther groped for his knee and leaned forward to stare up at him with the eyes that had haunted him ever since he first saw her. She was right. He'd been afraid of those

eyes, defending himself against them, avoiding the extremities of feeling there. To look into them was usually like watching an invisible point of icicle carve the iris into splinters. But at that moment, he thought he could see a sly smile inside them. A complex piece of music. He felt her gentle touch on the side of his thigh. (Barber, *And* 275)

In conclusion, Esther looks to the Church for “comfort”, but she knows that she is expected to fulfill some conditions. Not fulfilling those conditions leads to a sense of “estrangement” (Lambert, *Ten* 25), a sense of losing one’s identity that comes with the feeling that one does not fit into an established category. Mormon emphasis on family threatens with that *estrangement* even if one poses to reinforce faith in times of failure. Sillitoe’s main character in *Sideways to the Sun* feels what Esther already knows, that the Church is not for “halves, quarters, and shared bits of families” (Barber, *And* 145).

Esther is not being able to get her family reunited. Perhaps one of the reasons why she suffers so much is because she goes through these facts in a sickly way, as if she were not just expected, but forced to cope with whatever happens because she must be a mother and a wife. So, if her husband does something wrong, if her family crumbles, it is dramatic, a tragedy, and she is the one responsible. That is why, in the end, she makes a numb effort to accept Serena and polygamy. Esther always looked back with doubts on her three grandmothers, Grandpa Carpenter’s polygamous wives, but now she sees Serena and Alf and she tells herself: “We see it’s your turn to share now” (Barber, *And* 233). She answers: “You can’t possess anyone.” Esther is a polygamous wife now, just like them. She would have to recognize Serena and welcome her into the family” (Barber, *And* 239).

Her son, Herbert has been working to break those prejudices lasting since the very beginnings of the Church: “The Latter-day Saints were gaining some respect. (...) teased Herbert about the wives he must have hidden away somewhere, an old saw no non-

Mormon could drop even though the Church officially abandoned the policy in 1890” (Barber, *And* 218). Herbert sees circumstances in positive ways. They have always been “off and away,” always moving, but they are still together. And he feels Rebecca, Inez, and Jack’s skin as part of his own skin. Mormonism means community, the nuclear family, but where Esther sees a crack, Herbert sees a seam. Maybe it is just a matter of “the eye of the beholder”, like when the *veil parts*. Alf needs “freedom from the intensity of the woman he’d chosen for a wife” (Barber, *And* 219). Esther is disrupted when her son, Jack, marries a girl who had never before heard about Mormons. “He’s lost to me, Herbert” (Barber, *And* 159), she confesses to her other son. Those complex attitudes towards religion transform in peace and pace when Herbert appears on scene. Herbert is compared by opposition to Jack by both his parents. Even Herbert is aware of this comparison and he sees it in a different perspective, positive, expecting, still believing (Barber, *And* 219).

Jack is a character who is all the time behind, impossible to seize, slipping. He seems happy or, at least, not affected by the troubles of the family because he got to give a step forward and get healthy distance from all this, not like Herbert or Mary Elizabeth who will get involved even when he marries Gloria, a non-Mormon, and one of the sources of his mother’s sickness: “*My plans for my family, ripping, tearing*” (Barber, *And* 158). Nevertheless, Herbert is the one trying to understand and agree. He is faithful but gives blessing to Jack’s marriage. In fact, he is loyal to the Church but he has a different approach to this commitment though he also thinks it is the truth and it is not very difficult to pledge to it. His future wife Edna will come to terms with Gloria, Jack’s non-Mormon wife:

Embarrassed by the early church practice that accused wrath to be poured on the innocent hands of the Saints, Herbert wanted to be the Boulder City spokesman for

Mormons. He wanted to prove their good citizenship and normalcy. Isolation, as they had known in the nineteenth-century days in the Utah Territory, hadn't worked for them in Nevada. They couldn't, after all, escape the swirls of humanity around them. (Barber, *And* 242)

Herbert has the kind of resistance of his mom and he also looks not melancholic but with this kind of softness, solemnity that seems sad but he is solid and strong and that is what nerves his father who mocks his involvement in religion and confronts him about the difference between faith and independence: "Do you have yourself, Herbert, or are you just a package of obedience walking around in skin?" (Barber, *And* 245). A place for the Mormons in Western history is one of the ideas that resonate behind this character, together with some application of Barber's own beliefs: no isolation. And he is not only blaming gentiles but Mormons themselves as the ones responsible of that isolation. Herbert stands for a statement which looks Barber's, a new development of Mormonism, of faith, that inherits as much from the gospel as from the circumstances in Boulder City (Barber, *And* 242).

Throughout Barber's novel, Mormonism stands up as a frame within which this family struggling is understood and raises questions to examine faith when rooted on ground. God is a gun, an instrument which serves both to attack and to defend from attacks. "God told me you were no good" she accuses Alf but he defends himself saying that she does not know about his relationship with God. "God loves me, Esther" (Barber, *And* 199). From a religious point of view, Alf is always able to interpret and fit faith into his own validity, as he did when seeing that vision because, even if love outside marriage is sanctioned by Church, "the Lord forbids and his church condemns any and every intimate relationship outside of marriage" (Hunter 49), he adapts to former beliefs in order to favor his attraction

to another woman. Alf's attitude towards religion is consciously shaped by obligation because his wife stubbornly sticks to it (Barber, *And* 73).

She is, in the end, somewhat independent from her husband, but she failed to align her own determination and the cultural standards of the Church. She is floating, but unconsciously, sedated, flying over an unreal cloud: "You're a mother of children for the kingdom of God. Don't be afraid, Esther. God loves you. Nobody else can hurt you because you don't belong to this earth." (Barber, *And* 234). Esther tried hard to find a third way, but in the end she comes back to the very beginning; her love for God and her role of mother are her only identity. She tried to think about herself. She tried to ask for love, to be successful, to be happy but all she felt was pain. The only way to get rid of it is to go back to the shelter where she is bound to think about the rest of the members of her family, not about herself. She tried to face all her fears: fear of not being a good mother, a model mother and wife, Mormon woman; fear of not making Alf happy or being able to raise her kids properly. Now that fear is all gone, she stops fighting and lets the wind take her. If a reason is needed to understand this conclusion, there is only one possible way, and it takes us right to the beginning. If Esther considered or reflected about her identity being constrained by roles is not because she found that compulsion in a positive impulse. She was forced to do it. Hesitations blossomed because people around her, specifically her husband, took the wrong decisions for her. She could have reconciled those standards in some sort of positive connection, from her own conviction or doubts stemming from her own conclusions, but the primal motivation was not her own, it came from a sense of failure which was born, and sort of imposed, by her husband.



### 4.3. Gender: *Phyllis Barber on Motherhood and Womanhood*

*Women are the sacrifice area of Mormonism*  
Wallace Stegner

#### 4.3.1. Introduction: The Mormon Woman as a Writer (and Character)

In “Border Crossings”, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich seems to take a breath to tell for the last time why she understands that Mormonism and Feminism rhyme in prosody but also in essence. “Feminism may be larger than they imagined and Mormonism more flexible” (*Border 5*), she concludes. In what resembles a strenuous but necessary exercise, Ulrich confesses her awareness that these two terms sound antithetical to many persons, but asserts that both are in her and that, in fact, both share the same heart: “that each person be free to think, speak, and act for herself is both a feminist and a Mormon dream” (*Border 5*).

Mormon culture has a long story of feminist discourse. Maxine Hanks expounds this fact in her introduction to the anthology *Women and Authority*: “Feminism has always existed in Mormonism. It makes sense that Mormon women would be feminists: within male-centred religion and discourse, feminism and feminist theology are necessary” (Hanks, *Women xi*). In fact, in this introduction, Hanks examines Mormon and American feminist history to propose a general overview of Mormon feminist movements in all complexity, starting from 18<sup>th</sup> century liberal and cultural Mormon feminism, which she pronounces that “resulted from their own response to Mormonism rather than a direct influence by American feminism” (Hanks, *Women xiii*) to postmodern feminism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, listing a series of names some of them already mentioned in Mormon historical and literary introductions in this dissertation, but for different reasons. Thus from Eliza R. Snow,

Emma Smith or Emmeline B. Wells to Sonia Johnson, Hanks revisits the history of women within a Mormon cultural frame, paying attention to key aspects such as the suffragist movement, the doctrine of the Heavenly Mother or the imbalance for authority between priesthood and motherhood. Her recollection, in sum, shows, as Hanks herself states, that “Mormon women are still engaged in a feminist battle that is over one hundred years old” (*Women* xix).

Mormon feminist discourse is mainly twofold. On the one hand, Mormon feminism fights to denounce the imbalance of authority within the Church, mainly focusing on the hierarchies of priesthood but also in theological matters. Priesthood disparities are one of the most important claims for present day feminists but it has been so from almost the beginning: “during the opening years of the twentieth century, a changing definition of priesthood emerged, bringing with it a redefinition of the role of women.”<sup>164</sup> (Newell 35) Besides, some Mormon feminist scholars claim for certain revision of theological matters, as Hanks says, “feminist theology is a revisionist theology” (*Women* xxv). Specifically, Mormon feminists talk about the figure of the Heavenly Mother<sup>165</sup> as an object of reverence which still survives in a blurring definition, as Carol Lynn Pearson specifies with her poetic talent: “the motherless house” (*Healing* 231). Linda P. Wilcox explains how Mormon feminists still pay attention to this panorama of Mormon theology: “at present the nineteenth-century image of a female counterpart to a literal male father-god is receiving

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<sup>164</sup> Linda King Newell’s “Mormon Women and Priesthood” is a historical recollection to show how women have a claim in the share of Priesthood within the Mormon Church. She focuses specifically on the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the figure of the first leaders of the Relief Society which she considers as Joseph Smith’s attempt to build a system of ordinances for women.

<sup>165</sup> Since Eliza R. Snow wrote the poem “Invocation” the notion of a female being accompanying God or a certain presence of female attributes has accompanied Mormon theological debate, as Pearson conveys: “The Mormon church could have been a leader in giving to the modern world the concept of God as Mother: for 150 years we have been sitting on this doctrine. Many other churches have moved ahead, making strides in this direction. Currently the reintegration of the feminine divine into our religious experience is happening almost universally.” (*Healing* 241-242) The words in “Invocation”, later titled “Invocation, or The Eternal Father or Mother”, were used as the basis for the lyrics of the famous Mormon hymn “O My Father” and this can lead to confusion in the use of these titles interchangeably.

attention and expansion and is becoming more personalized and individualized”<sup>166</sup> (*Mormon* 17). Theology, thus, is part of Mormon feminist struggle and, as Hanks states:

The ideal situation would be that formal, informal, and personal authority combine perspectives to articulate a Mormon feminist doctrine, revelation and ritual. Mormon theology stipulates an anthropomorphic female god of equal power and glory to the father, yet she remains officially unknown and unwritten. (Hanks, *Women* xxvi)

Carrie A. Miles declares that “Christianity as a whole has come to emphasize the image of God as father to the exclusion of other ways of relating to him” (*God* 42) and she considers that there are many references to the Heavenly Mother in scriptures so as to conclude that there is a need to appreciate “God as mother as well as father” because this fact would add “a rich and wonderful dimension to the parental metaphor” (*God* 42). Understanding God as a blend of father but also motherly attributes would add to Him attributes such as “compassion, nurturance, self-sacrifice, tender love” (Miles, *God* 45) in a new definition that proposes expanding realities. On the other hand, Mormon feminist scholars and writers denounce the promotion of gender roles which help to perpetuate those imbalances. Mormon society works as complex scenery in this regard. Many women are satisfied with what many others qualify as an unequal circumstance<sup>167</sup>, maybe instigated by the strong spiritual bonds that the Church has managed to build between their roles and their belonging to the Church: “Any gender inequities are to them but the unintended consequences of benign Church doctrine and policies that require men to provide for families and to protect women, children, and weaker members in their charge from economic, physical, moral, and spiritual harm” (Toscano, *Are* 25).

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<sup>166</sup> If further information about the Heavenly Mother is necessary, it is advisable to revisit *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism* in general but especially Linda P. Wilcox’s general but detailed, historical but critical recollection of it in her article “The Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven” in that same collection.

<sup>167</sup> In the same article by Margaret Toscano that I am quoting here, she gives this percentage: “A recent study by an intern at the Smith Institute at BYU showed that 70 percent of LDS women surveyed were content with their role in Church” (*Are* 25). The article was published in 2007.

As far as in 1957, Thomas O’Dea wrote that “women are dependent upon men and upon marriage for exaltation in the afterlife and are subordinate to men on this earth within the family” (100). This establishes a pattern in which women’s status is not only based on men for social or economic dimensions in earthly life, but also for their salvation or promotion in the hereafter that their religion displays<sup>168</sup>.

Barber’s feminist approach is mainly focused on the second historical concern of Mormon feminism, that of gender roles. Before I begin with the analysis of Barber’s fiction from this feminist perspective, I feel mandatory to define what I mean by role. Here I understand roles as the historical products that condense the expectations and demands placed upon women in a male-centered community. Those roles, apart from determining a set of activities and responsibilities for a group of people, determine as well those they can not aspire to, so, in a way, as Toscano puts it: “create different concepts of self-worth for men and women” (*Are* 24).<sup>169</sup> In Mormonism, those roles circle around the idea of motherhood and wifhood, as can be easily seen by taking a look to the proclamation that the Church published in 1995:

Successful marriages and families are established and maintained on principles of faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, compassion, work, and

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<sup>168</sup> Never forget that as soon as 1970s, Kate Millett states the same for western women at large when she says that “just as their social position is vicarious and achieved (often on a temporary or marginal basis) through males, their relation to the economy is also typically vicarious or tangential.” (Millett 40)

<sup>169</sup> Apart from an inequity of self-worthiness, this role distinction also operates as the source of a “matriarchal substructure” (Toscano, *Are* 27) that appears beneath the patriarchal system. In the foreword to my introduction to Mormon Literature, I quote how Austin states that “to a very large degree, texts by Mormon women *are* the Mormon literary canon, and when we discuss important, influential, and critically acclaimed books by Mormons, we will find our conversations nearly dominated by women author’s works” (*Some* 23). Austin wonders why if Mormon society is considered to be unequal and patriarchal such a large number of women could manage to gain visibility in the world of writing. Maybe the answer is in Toscano’s explanation: after being relegated to a subordinate position, women had to react by creating a matriarchal substructure. Maybe one of the most important ways of giving voice to this structure is through the art of words.

wholesome recreational activities. By divine design, fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children.<sup>170</sup>

This is not a sudden apparition. These ideas have been present in the Church since Parley P. Pratt wrote his “Duties of Women” in the *Latter-day Saints Millennial Star* in 1840, and through the second half of the century with essays published in *Relief Society* or speeches at conferences by authorities such as Harold B. Lee, Hugh B. Brown or Joseph Fielding Smith (Arrington, *Persons* 16). Such statement, as Toscano interprets it, helps to enlighten role marking: “If one partner always presides, even in love and righteousness, the other is still subordinate, at least in rule, if not also in rank” (*Are* 21). This idea is based on a distinction between two different sets of responsibilities for women and men so characteristic in Mormon culture: women taking the role of motherhood and men, the role of priesthood. An apparently equal balance based on gender essentials that do not take into account the personal agency to choose. Motherhood is thus placed at the level of a calling that opens women to the possibility of exercise their sharing instrumental agency within the Church and justifies that priesthood is the equal grade of responsibility bestowed to men. This division helps obviously to define spaces, reproducing the distinction between the private and the public sphere which, at the same time, reciprocally helps to enlarge those differentiations about gender roles. In any case, they both, man and woman, seem to be bound to get married, as Howard W. Hunter says “it is no good for man nor for woman to be alone” (49). Marriage is understood as a basis to family and families are central to the

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<sup>170</sup> President Gordon B. Hinckley read this proclamation for the first time as part of his message to the General Relief Society Meeting held in Salt Lake City, Utah in 1995. As Miles states, the proclamation, even if it has not been officially canonized and has not the weight of scripture, “appeared as a new and unique form of communicating God’s will to church members” (*LDS* 33). The present quotation has been taken from the text published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in their official website.

Church<sup>171</sup>: “Mormon history suggests that the combination of the doctrine of eternal marriage and the law of eternal progression requires equal emphasis on the development of the individual and on the strength of the family and community” (*Persons* 17), says Arrington.

In any case, there is no better way to explain what I mean by role in this dissertation than by paying attention to what Barber herself stated about gender roles in Mormon culture:

Both the Mormon male and female are raised on ethic of service, but I believe that woman is the more publicly obligated social servant when the Latter-day Saints cultural ideal is operative (the female being married and staying at home to raise children). (Barber, *Mormon*, 115)

Barber talks here about the fact that the main object and purpose in life for Mormon women, not just in a practical sense but also in a spiritual sense, should be that of being a mother. Official authorities have read scriptures in the proper way to conclude that motherhood is the divine role assigned to women,<sup>172</sup> as I have already shown. The effort increased in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the authorities worked to reinforce the idea that motherhood was holy and it was equal to men’s priesthood in the sense that it was the way women had to achieve exaltation. Wilcox gives an accurate reference to this fact: “In the 1920s and 1930s there seemed to be an emphasis on the idea of ‘eternal’ or ‘everlasting’ motherhood. It seemed important to emphasize that motherhood was as ongoing and eternal as godhood” (*Mormon* 9). If motherhood is “eternal” and “everlasting” then, as Aaltje Baumgart summarizes, the roles that the Church promotes limiting women’s spheres to the home and the family, are “eternal patterns and not secularly influenced” (Baumgart 2). This

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<sup>171</sup> As Stegner perfectly concludes: “The family is so important in Mormon religion that without it the religion would hardly exist” (*Stegner* 102).

<sup>172</sup> Talks and articles by general authorities such as those written or proclaimed by Ezra Taft Benson, Boyd K. Packer, Joseph Fielding Smith or Gordon B. Hinckley can be used as examples of this promotion, some of them have been already exposed in this dissertation.

means that motherhood and the roles that force women into considering this as their only task in life, become increasingly unavoidable once they are part of theology, of the essence of the faith rather than a cultural construction. Miles underlines how motherhood looks mandatory to attain membership: “to join the Church today, the potential member, especially a woman, has to obtain not just a testimony of the truthfulness of the Church, she must also develop a testimony of the eternal and earthly importance of motherhood” (*LDS* 36-37), but this negotiation has been perceived by Chidester and Linenthal as a central element in religious composition:

These symbolic relations were all centered and reinforced in the domestic architecture, discourses, and practices of the home. Giving the “cult of domesticity” an explicitly religious content, conservative Christians in the late twentieth century have worked hard to construct a domestic sacred place set a part from the larger space of America. An examination of this particular type of domestic space in the worlds of conservative Christians reveals how the home has operated as a specific sacred site, not only idealized and promoted, but also constructed, negotiated, and even sometimes resisted in practice as a nexus of religious meaning and power. (Chidester 22)

Today, this stress is still on work even though it is being criticized by many writers and scholars, among them, obviously, Barber. Toscano states that “these theories about different roles create different concepts of self-worth for men and women” (*Are* 24). To perceive the endurance of these circumstances in contemporary days, it is illustrative how Holly Welker’s peculiar analysis of Stephenie Meyer’s character Bella is framed in her ideological and moral dimension through the methodological comparison to Helen Andelin’s set of values in *Fascinating Womanhood*. Welker concludes that “Helen Andelin and *Twilight* author Stephenie Meyer are both devout Mormons who graduated from Brigham Young University, so perhaps it’s not surprising that the two women are prone to

glorifying female submission and male strength” (Welker, *Forever* 3). Thus Anderson<sup>173</sup> explains that the new theories of feminism had helped to make more acceptable and possible for Mormon women their participation in professional and creative worlds, but she warns that “at the same time, Mormon male leadership has poured increasing efforts into empedestaling Mormon motherhood, warning women away from workplace lest they fail in their primary mission of motherhood” (*Masks* 3).

In Anderson’s opinion, this pre-eminence of motherhood as the prescriptive role for women has three important consequences: firstly, it is presented in an authoritative mode so women are not free to choose. Secondly, when the stress is placed on the importance of motherhood, it makes it the only task for women. Thirdly, being a mother implies so much time that women do not have any time to involve themselves in professional or artistic activities.

The implications of these three consequences are developed in Barber’s fiction. She applies her fiction to denouncing the results and deviances of these roles. Thus, as an anticipation of my following analysis of Barber’s characters, I underline how even in a secondary character such as Zenna, the mother in “Silver Dollars”, the reader feels the energy of such a presence both in the position she occupies in the fiction and in the nature and representativeness of the character as content and as fiction. Zenna is the subtle, secondary character who in fact plays a very important role and introduces some of the

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<sup>173</sup> Feminists in Mormon culture were challenged as part of September Six, when a large number of scholars and feminists were questioned or threatened with discipline. This event of September Six, which took place in 1993 when six noted Mormon intellectuals and feminists were expelled from the Church, had repercussions for liberal scholarship and feminism in the contemporary Latter-day Saints community, greatly discouraging liberals, feminists and “critical” scholarship. The September Six event echoed the 1979 excommunication of feminist and ERA activist, Sonia Johnson. Members were advised by the Church in 1989 to exercise caution in reading publications or attending symposia not sponsored by the Church itself. Feminists scholars, such as Hanks (*Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism* published in 1992) and Anderson (*Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective*, 1992) were among the scholars involved in this affair.



topics that Barber will be developing on her subsequent work. Basically she represents religion zeal and ruling at home, the figure of the good cook, blurred wife, imposing mother but something is moving in her heart when she talks about working outside home, in Mr. Bascom's orthodontist business. There she is called Zan and Vernon, his husband, is not happy at all, but she says nothing. The tension is obvious but seems only visible for her daughter. So the two female characters seem to be the seed of possibility for foreign attraction and promotion while the male character seems to be the restraint, the burden which ties them to now and this way.

Barber uses this formula mostly in the stories she collects in her memoir *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*. Here she presents her own coming-of-age, giving importance to her familiar relationships while growing up as a woman and a Mormon. In her fiction, Barber talks about motherhood, both as an institution and as source for the production of roles that limit the scope of freedom for women. One of the best examples to illustrate this topic is the character of her mother, especially the description of her relationship with her daughter, Barber herself.

Also significant are her two collections of short stories. In *The School of Love*, practically all the female characters are women on the edge, facing extreme situations in unavoidable circumstances in which they lack the confidence to know that they are strong enough to overcome them. These women are probably reacting to the "asymmetrical heterosexual relationships" (Chodorow 208), but they are also reacting to themselves, turning their energies from one centered goal that seemed appropriate to a passionate and desperate chaotic center where they look for a balance. Apparently, they feel imbalance due to what Hanks implies when she talks about how struggling with our circumstances (upbringing,

culture, training, relationships or faith) determines our identities. Hanks concludes that “the challenge is to keep these as personal decisions or authorship rather than surrender our voice to the strategy of others, no matter how prevailing that discourse may be” (*Women* xxviii), which takes us to Dorice Williams Elliott’s statement that

because no women are present in the decision-making or policy-setting councils of the church, they have no official voice in the management of the church or in the pronouncements that seek to define their role and to determine the quality of their church experience. Thus, the roles and division of labor we hear preached and praised so often in our meetings, our magazines, and our lessons are clearly male-defined. Women, so often admonished to value themselves, are not in positions where they can define their value, worth, or roles. Women have their own, separate sphere assigned to them, but even within it they are subject to male supervision and intervention. In current church practice women are taught correct principles and then are governed. (Elliott 205)

Rich denounces that “women have always been seen as waiting: waiting to be asked, waiting for our menses, in fear lest they do or do not come, waiting for men to come home from wars, or from work, waiting for children to grow up, or for the birth of a new child, or for menopause” (Rich 39). In Barber’s collection, they no longer wait, but stand and move, drive, look, search, seek. In the trying, they show that they feel an invisible incapacity, probably rooted in the source of her motivations, in the goal, maybe in the fact that the unsuccessful achievements of these women occur because they are moving forward but in search of relations again, rather than in search of self. Or maybe that connectedness is feminine and necessary and they are looking for the right portion of their identity, even though it is always related to someone else. In any case, the unfruitful end draws a set of significant conclusions that help to understand the beginning of the end more than the in-between of these stories. This book is written in a style reminiscent of Raymond Carver, not meaning that she uses a minimalist technique (even though she does make slight changes in her normally baroque or elaborate style), but rather in the sense of her spacious

perspective or involvement. Like Carver in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1989), Barber looks as if she were approaching her stories from a seemingly monotonous, insignificant point of view, in a steady line that mimics the flat, simple lives of characters who finally undergo a significant moment, point in that line of dots, and that is where the reader becomes involved in the story.

The other collection, *Parting the Veil: Stories from a Mormon Imagination*, deals mostly with these gender themes from a Mormon point of view since this book is rooted in Mormon tradition. In *Parting the Veil: Stories from a Mormon imagination* Barber deals with themes of gender and motherhood as well, but this time they are woven through the history of Mormonism and the actual context of Mormon society. In short stories such as “Wild Sage” or “Spirit Babies,” motherhood and the conflicts that it causes in the characters will be the main focus of Barber’s writing. She will also develop all these ideas in her only novel, *And the Desert Shall Blossom*, where Esther Jensen stands as a symbol of the roles promoted by the Church for women and how these constrain and dismantle their lives, provoking painful consequences.

In general, in all her books, Barber illustrates the distinctions between rigid gender roles for males and females, especially, in the often limiting, even repressive sexual and moral codes of the Mormon context. In fact, in her stories Barber points the readers toward equally unhappy conclusions for all women: no female, whether Mormon or not, “is in complete control of how she uses her body” (Bush, *From* 34), the body being a symbolic materialization of the deficits suffered by women. Moreover, as mentioned in *The School of Love*, these women lack confidence and the ability to use their hidden virtues to operate in circumstances when, thanks to their rebellion against the *status quo*, they happen to be out

of their place in society. None of Barber's heroines seem to surpass the tragic nature of their heroism. In fact, they are fighting to recover their *individuation* in a society that defined them in relational terms, as mothers or wives. In 1979, Leonard J. Arrington describes how, after discussing the question with Mormon female writers and critics such as Maureen Beecher, Jill C. Mulvay or Carol Lynn Pearson, he came to the conclusion that Mormon women have perceived their identity (when concerning Mormonism) in a triple way. Arrington annotates how this threefold identity has been fluctuating all throughout the history of Mormonism, being one or the other the aspects prioritized in each specific historical period and due to certain historical circumstances:

They are *daughters* – individual children of God responsible for making choices and actualizing potential. They are also *mothers* – partners in the bearing and rearing of the spirit children of God. And third, they are *sisters* – essential contributors to the Kingdom of God upon earth. (Arrington, *Persons* 1)

As Glen Lambert says Mormon “theology emphasizes free choice, direct inspiration, choosing our path” (Lambert, *Ten* 26), but Mormon society is, in truth, highly hierarchical and limiting. Culturally, Mormon theology is tightened. Barber, however, places the stress on the individual consequences rather than on the cultural or social origin of those consequences, implying one's responsibility but perfectly describing how that inability can be explained from an induced psychological and cultural role definition.

When regarding the concept of body, Barber deals with that restricted conception of sex and the idea of body as a temple of purity and loyalty. But body for Barber is also a centre of emotional energy, the physical potency of the body with its mysteries of biological heritage is the mirror of an emotional interior. In “Body Blue: Excerpts from a *Novoir*”, for instance, Barber illustrates these ideas with the blue, the physical pain because this is

translated into the dance of sex as an image of marriage and the tragedy of hemophilia, but those physical performances in which the body is a main part are the reflection of inner tensions, imbalances and anguish:

Everything is turning, it seems. Turning strange. My autonomic body has secrets it's kept from me, things like physical changes in chromosome relations, biochemical changes in the condons that make up the genes. Mutations. Changes in the lineal order of the ordered. Accidents. Surprises. And my emotional body is more complex than I'd imagined – pride and wounded pride, shame, anger, motherly love for the flesh issuing forth from my body and frustration at being asked to carry this burden. All this behind my friendly face. (Barber, *Body* 71)

The body is here charged with the energy or burden of different feelings that are transpired through the physical appearance, but Barber has also space for that bare body that expresses no significance when loses the emotions that give transcendental shape to the body: “He looks small in his nakedness. His family jewels are at rest, unengorged, hanging quietly. He is a man. No more. No less. A simple man with a penis, pelvis, a hairy chest, arms, legs, and a head and whatever else” (Barber, *Body* 75).

Bruce W. Jorgensen notes how even though Mormon scriptures do not enact sex as a sinful practice in essence, but defined it as “eternal and godly,” LDS doctrine have adopted a concept of chastity that transmit the idea that sex is “unwholesome, contaminating, defiling, dirty” (Jorgensen, *Reading* 44). Lambert concludes that “Mormons are allowed to enjoy sex” (*Ten* 23), but since that license is only extended to marriage some issues arise into the process, some of them, leading to a second trouble that Lambert proposes as a source for conflict in a couple: expectations unfulfilled (*Ten* 23). Barber explores these sexual and marital tensions. Jorgensen again proposes marriage as a method of literary criticism to analyze from a different perspective Mormon fiction. First, he began by deciding what could be defined as Mormon marriage:

There is no ideal or archetype or model of a modern Mormon marriage, even if all or most of them might share certain minimal traits or conditions. We can suppose that they will all be (as “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” describes or prescribes) heterosexual and monogamous; yet we can’t suppose that all will be temple marriage (though clearly the Proclamation would prefer that). And however “eternal” they may be in wish, or sanction, the ones we can watch and write about, here and now, will be temporal, however long they last (Jorgensen, *Toward* 36-37)

Jorgensen then derives that almost all fictional value is based on trouble and that it is very difficult (not impossible) to write a good story about a long love because conflict is the basis of fictional food: “stories are about trouble” (*Toward* 43) and he names Barber among the Mormon writers that he proposes to list in his survey of marriage in fiction. She uses Ida in “Ida’s Sabbath” and interprets “Almost Magnificent” to propose Barber as an example of “afters”, those stories that show how “an ended marriage still intrudes its ghostly presence, welcome or not” (Jorgensen, *Toward* 39). Barber, and Jorgensen is right, focuses on conflict, on consequences, on the process of hard work and the time when there is no success. In her fiction, women suffer the same that enjoy the illusions drawn upon their marriages, showing how the explanation comes from sexual and social training when individuation determines certain clash between oneself and the expectations demanded by society. Many of these female characters facing challenge in her books, reach to that situation after feeling that their marriages have failed. After reading Barber’s literary work, the conclusive sensation is not that marriage is designed for failure but that it is a device that needs proper conditions to assure success. Barber does not distribute guilt or responsibilities but portrays the circumstances which a failed marriage leads to. Focusing on women, probably because, as Lambert states in his analysis of Mormon marriage, “women seem to feel more deeply, particularly in Mormon culture, because marriage is so emphasized as a solution to life’s problems” (*Ten* 23). The institutionalization of marriage as a final goal in women’s purpose in life determines the conflicts that they suffer within

their marriages, from issues concerning gender roles to psychological tensions on their individuation. Mormon marriages are not alien to the alterations produced by the economic and cultural changes in the last decades<sup>174</sup> (Lambert, *Ten* 24), but Mormon orthodoxy still encourages a tendency to promote stereotypes that prioritize women's role in society as that related to raising children and tending their homes, as Linda Sillitoe puts it: "motherhood is the most valued status women attain in our society" (*New* 50). In *Raw Edges: A Memoir*, Barber gives an unconcealed and personal chronicle of her own marriage's failure and she shows how hard it is when "a good marriage, I've been taught, was the responsibility of the good woman who endured to the end" (*Raw* 140).

Women bodies, thus, appear as a ground for mapping the consequences of that opposition. When Esther tries to "get to her feet with some dignity" it seems almost impossible: "She'd had three miscarriages, and seven children counting the twins who'd lived for two days. She'd been pregnant so many times – full-blown round – that she forgot which figure was really hers" (Barber, *And* 84). She can barely recognize herself. In fact, the only scene of sex we have is disrupting. Sex in those pages is rotten intimacy, distance, pain, no more babies, no joy, a task for her, a right and a relief for him: "Esther, habitually submissive, pelvis tipped forward, took his penis in her hand to guide it" (Barber, *And* 22). Sex means and it is described in different ways, depending on the protagonists: Alf, Esther, Cynthia or Serena. When Alf and Esther (or even Cynthia, the prostitute) are the protagonists, sex seems unsuccessful. Sex has the Victorian characteristics that Chodorow saw of "passivity and subordination of sex to procreation" (111), or even just of male

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<sup>174</sup> Lambert proposes the following economic and cultural changes as the reason for a growing change of model in the concept of marriage: "Economic pressures around the world, including in the U.S. – it often takes a two-income family to sustain the lifestyle that a one-income family produced previously – make a difference. Add the pressure to succeed financially, to provide a multitude of experiences for children, to get ahead in one's career, to fulfill the many expectations of a spouse that were not usually demanded in previous generations, plus a lessening of extended family support, and the pressures on the modern-day marriage can be substantial" (Lambert, *Ten* 24).

“relieve”. In those scenes women are in supine position and in silence whereas when Alf makes love to Serena, there are words and different positions and oral sex.

Nonetheless, the idea of body as something that has been usurped from women or that they cannot use freely goes further than simply picturing some of Mormonism’s cultural restrictions. Barber links this idea to western culture, basically through the influence of Las Vegas. For instance, the young Phyllis in *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir* is forced into being an attractive object for male eyes in different ways. First, there is the virtuous, pure Mormon girl who waits until the appropriate Mormon man chooses to marry in the Mormon temple, and Barber skillfully describes the origin of this in “The Rose”: “Marriage meant the Mormon Temple for time and all eternity, a worthy man kneeling across the altar, white pearls, white lace, white roses” (*How* 163); but equally as controlling is the way that secular culture instructs women to seek the attention and favor of men<sup>175</sup>: “I wasn’t Thora and Herman Nelson’s daughter. She wouldn’t be doing this. I must not be a very good Mormon because I was wearing a bikini under this fur coat and was about to show it to everyone. I wasn’t anybody I’d ever known” (Barber, *How* 186).

Thus she establishes a liaison from Mormon gender issues to secular issues that does not try to rest transcendence to the first or to set it into a wider context but basically follows the natural consciousness of the limitations imposed upon women in both the particular and a universal environment in which she is still to embark after *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*.

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<sup>175</sup> In “New Voices, New Songs: Contemporary Poems by Mormon Women”, Sillitoe faces a similar coincidence when analyzing a poem by Kristin Barrett. Sillitoe interprets her line “in his image they are created” and the whole allegorical power of the poem as a metaphor of Mormon temple rites. However, Sillitoe declares her surprise when the author of the poem confesses that she was talking about a beauty saloon (*New* 56). The trick in this interpretation resembles Phyllis Nelson’s realization that there is a double kind of limitation, the shame limitation for both the secular and the spiritual spheres in which she grows.



In 1969, Betty Friedan puts forth her theory about women mystique. In her book, Friedan expands on the role of wifehood, and she states the following: “the new image this mystique gives to American women is the old image: ‘Occupation: housewife.’ The new mystique makes the housewife-mothers, who never had a chance to be anything else, the model for all women.” (Friedan 43) Friedan’s book, which sparked a historical movement that seems to be out of frame in this dissertation, is, in any event, also aware of this constriction generated by motherhood. Friedan adds that “they must keep on having babies, because the feminine mystique says there is no other way for a woman to be a heroine” (45). In a second reading, these quotations seem to lighten a different reading of Mormon gender issues as if it was an out-of-time issue. Friedan’s opening words talk about these issues as something that had “no name” (32) and that remains “buried, unspoken” (15). The same feeling hovers over the choice of “dark” as an appropriate term to illustrate her ideas when Hélène Cixous was theorizing about *l’écriture féminine* in “The Laugh of the Medusa” (*Laugh* 334). That silence that demanded a new shouting voice for women is the voice of Barber, however hurting, complex or unfinished as it seems. And, in fact, when Cixous tries to describe that voice, that feminine voice, she talks about a duality, a complexity, a composition that reminds me of many of the things to be derived from Barber’s fiction:

To admit that writing is precisely working (in) the in-between, inspecting the process of the same and of the other without which nothing can live, undoing the work of death – to admit this is first to want the two, as well as both, the ensemble of the one and the other, not fixed in sequences of struggle and expulsion or some other form of death but infinitely dynamized by an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another. A process of different subjects knowing one another and beginning one another anew only from the living boundaries of the other: a multiple and inexhaustible course with millions of encounters and transformations of the same into the other and into the in-between, from which woman takes her forms (and man, in his turn; but that’s his other history.) (Cixous, *Laugh* 340)

That duality in Barber follows as well Luce Irigaray's call for defining "(re-)discovering" for women, "could only signify the possibility of sacrificing no one of her pleasures to another, of identifying herself with none of them impartial, *of never being simply one*" (Irigaray, *This* 354). That last part in Barber is not only a relief but just the opposite, a pain necessary to recover the multiplicity of one.

Summarizing, Barber deals with the role of women in society all throughout her fiction. She does not hesitate to take those roles to the extreme, portraying the consequences that they bring for women who become consciously or unconsciously disturbed by the expectations and responsibilities that they themselves would have preferred to avoid or put aside. In this way, Barber contributes to the body of American literature, thus enlarging the fiction concerned with Western American woman's experience. Her motley disclosure of female characters within a Mormon frame functions as a suitable scenario in order to discuss further the formation and promotion of gender roles in Mormon culture. However, Barber goes beyond that context to raise universal questions about the furtherance of those roles in western society. Barber does not hesitate in taking those roles to the extreme, portraying the consequences that they bring to women who become consciously or unconsciously disturbed by the expectations and responsibilities imposed by roles. Barber's female characters, women like Esther, Ida, Chloe, Delta Ray, Miriam, Hortense, Anne, or young Phyllis and her mother Thora show how fighting against the established preconceptions of the social structure means fighting an unfair battle against oneself and the long and powerfully, socially and culturally carved expectations and attributes that shape our identities.

#### 4.3.2. Motherhood: Wombs for the Kingdom

In her book about Sylvia Plath, Janet Malcolm writes about the forces which make writing a more difficult task for women. One of these forces is the institution of womanhood understood as a gender role that privileges marriage and reproduction. This is the sociably accepted role of woman in society. Malcolm mentions Plath's former biographer, Anne Stevenson, who explained the conflict between being a mother and a writer, about feeling guilty for not being a good mother because you need time to write and these two obligations do not come to terms with each other. Stevenson named Jane Austen, Emily Brönte, Stevie Smith or Marianne Moore as women who had to sacrifice their lives as mothers to become writers (Malcolm 67).

As a professional writer, Barber faces the same kind of challenge. The problems arisen after she decided to be a professional writer, both as a woman and as a Mormon, have already been pointed out, but the same compulsion to override demands on the individual to fulfill successfully the role as a mother can be found in her fictional characters. In both her autobiographies and her fiction, this conflict is meticulously portrayed by Barber, either when mirroring those women who try to confront this problem whether successfully or not, or when portraying those women who submit to the standards of Mormonism and accept their role as mothers and wives. But even when picturing this kind of woman, Barber uses a personal gaze to behold the women behind this mask of mother and wife.

In *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*, Barber's mother is presented as a middle-class American mother, dreaming and fighting for her daughter to become something greater than what she herself has become. Her mother is described as a righteous Mormon

and virtuous wife who is highly concerned about her daughter's education and training. She is even willing to postpone her daughter's domestic training for the piano. Nevertheless, young Phyllis is always playing with her "two" mothers, the one who is visible, evident, palpable, official, and the invisible one that she suspects behind: "My mother's elegant face softened into a young girl's shyness. I loved this girl who sometimes slipped from my exacting mother: vulnerable, holding out bare fingers to be touched, letting oyster shell colors escape from her fortress" (Barber, *How* 26).

This feeling that there is a different woman behind the façade that her mother shows to her is also disclosed when compared to the temporal relationship between Lili and young Phyllis. In this short story, "Bird of Paradise", the reader travels to a special day in the life of a child. In an apparently happy day, Barber introduces the reader in hidden corners in a powerful and significant way. Through the visit of these different people from Hawaii, the reader comes to see some of the insufficiencies that young Phyllis identifies in her relationship to her mother, most of them contextualized in the idea of physical contact: "She [Lili] stroked my neck and rocked me like a new baby. I closed my eyes and stopped wondering about anything" (Barber, *How* 28). The presence and visit of the Hawaiians is even more important to the mother than to her daughter, but it also helps young Phyllis shape a feeling that she has inside: that there is another woman behind the figure of her mother. This is something that she suspects but cannot see: "I never forget the picture of my mother caught in Samy's arms. Authority erased from her face, surprised before she could protest" (Barber, *How* 32). A man hugging and squeezing her mother reveals a completely different dimension for that mother, free from the corset of her role.

In a very symbolic final scene, mother and daughter are left alone, in silence, holding hands on their way to school and real life. Nonetheless, we can feel this disrupting back to life and the powerful feelings left behind after this experience. The reader perceives how difficult love between mother and daughter can be when it is constrained by the weight of their roles and the features of a Mormon household. The Hawaiians represent the disturbing encounter with difference. The gap is wider if we consider the strict Mormon household ruled by high standards of obedience and responsibility. These bizarre visitors represent something more: an unleashed vision of feelings and life, far away from the Mormon conception. But this unleashing occurs not only from outside but also from inside, basically in the case of the mother. In fact, the reaction is not rejection of the mother, as the mother could have represented dependence in a psychological approach. In Barber, independence and individuation, as freedom and significance are not achieved by rejection but by comprehension, discovering. Both in the fictional Phyllis in her autobiography or in, just as an example, Mattie in "Mormon Levis," they do not reject or blame their mothers, but they try to stick to them, eager to discover that different side of them, instead of looking that individuation by being critical of her family and rejecting her mother and her home as they represent the ambivalent dependence and sense of oneness that they need to split in prepubertal and pubertal age.

Young Phyllis experiences the same sort of discovery while hiding under a table. Her mother is up above, talking with some other women about Mormon myths. While quilting, her mother confesses, unaware of the presence of her daughter, how she thinks that one of the children she lost is taking care of the family from the sky above.

Sometimes I think my little boy who died is watching over me, " my mother said and my ears opened wider than before. I'd only heard stories of how he'd died in her lap

on the way to the doctor's, how he took his last breath; she said she'd never forget the sound of the death rattle [...] 'Sometimes,' she continued, 'I think God assigns members of our family to watch over us and guide us through difficult times. I was with Sister Rasmussen when she was ready to die, and she said when she reached her hand out, she felt someone clasping it. The veil is very thin, don't you think? All that spirit life out there? All those angels watching over us?' (Barber, *How* 120)

This discovering may correspond to the idea of expectations that Chodorow proposes in *The Reproduction of Mothering*. Chodorow explains that through her theory of object-relational experiences "reveals the conscious or unconscious attitudes and expectations that all people – male and female – have of their mothers in particular, and of women in general" (Chodorow 91). Barber tries to see beyond those expectations, an action that is related to faith and that is why the parting the veil concept applies here.

The discovery of a different person behind the mother's mask also works for the father. This is also something spontaneous that does not have an extension at the end of the excerpt. Again, as occurred with her mother and the Hawaiians, young Phyllis seems to discover a different idea of her father at the Talent Show where she was asked to perform: "I laughed until tears rolled out of my eyes and my legs felt weak. My father, the dancer, the joker, the bishop of the ward" (Barber, *How* 51). She feels proud but regarding her "mysterious" father who has performed in an unexpected way: "I sensed I was hugging a mystery, even a trickster like Loki in the Norse myths my teacher read us at school" (Barber, *How* 51). In any case, this new discovery is mixed with a sense of deception when she realizes that her father himself is enjoying his success "too much." One of the most important features stressed in the Mormon household is humility. So, young Phyllis has to work against the feeling of misleading false pride and happiness at being praised. She sees that her father is enjoying the sensation that he tries to suppress in her. The suddenly discovered talent of her father for comedy illuminates the controversy between pride and

love which soaks the whole story: “He was smiling, waiting, yet I could see him attempting to mask his eagerness. He didn’t want Sister Earl to know it mattered; he didn’t want himself to know it mattered. He was preening, tail feathers alive. He was puffing up before my eyes” (Barber, *How* 51).

In a different section of her autobiography, young Phyllis’ father says that some prostitutes were angels according to a story that one of the uncles told about his childhood. The young Phyllis looks at her father through different eyes: “I felt the sympathy rising in me, the quick water in my eyes, for the sense of a powerful gift given to my father” (Barber, *How* 112). That is also a thin veil, a mysterious veil that young Phyllis wants to part. She discovers her own father through the words and the fiction mixed with memories in the beautiful excerpt dealing with Christmas time and the old custom of telling stories. She discovers her own father in relation to the world outside of her own home. It is the same veil that her grandpa parted a long time ago. Grandpa is presented as a man who had seen the world and lived to tell about it. He is a mystery man of whom she had only heard in whispers, “a man who bought a new car when he hadn’t paid for the one he had, a man who had enemies because they owed him money, a man who came home late at night and made our grandmother cry” (Barber, *How* 123). While telling stories at Christmas, she will be witness to the veil parting for these characters, a different parting far removed from the religious conception of this metaphor, but equally significant to illustrate this idea of a young girl trying to discover the truth under the misleading disguise of roles and attitudes delimited by those same roles.

In any event, the most important idea that emerges from the relationship between young Phyllis and her parents, mostly with her mother in *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*,

regards her training to be a wife and a mother in the future. In her autobiography, Barber develops the conflict between two opposite but equally restrictive types of sexual instruction that make her feel as if she does not own her own body.<sup>176</sup> She narrates how she is trained to discipline her body in order to behave according to at least two seemingly opposite gender scripts for girls: one, sexual purity from the Mormon culture she is part of. The other, sexual desirability to attract men by becoming a mere source of physical temptation. Trying to live according to these opposing codes produces in Barber the understandable emotional conflict which she explores and illustrates throughout the book.

Her mother stands as the guardian and promoter of the first code – sexual purity – always linked to religion and her Mormon heritage. She summarizes this idea: her flowering will come in the role as a wife and mother. Mother values Victorian ideals of female domesticity, motherhood and sexual purity that have permeated Mormon culture from its beginning. But when daughters resist the desire to be mothers, especially in Mormon culture, conflict erupts.

In her narrative, she portrays her mother as a firm symbol of Mormon doctrine, “an unflinching believer in the Restored Gospel and a lioness of God” (Barber, *How* 56). Choosing to love or not to love her mother has become very much like choosing to love or not to love motherhood and Mormonism. This conflict is strong and difficult for her:

[My mother] whom I loved more than my own skin, my mother who lived in a world where everyone who was worth anything abstained from cigarettes, tea, coffee, alcoholic beverages, swearing, fornicating, bearing false witness. She believed in being honest, true, chaste, virtuous in all things. She was a warrior for righteousness, and, for some unknown reason, I all of sudden wanted to shock her, make her lost balance on her white horse galloping toward the unmitigated certainty that the

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<sup>176</sup> The symbolic value of this metaphor will be analyzed later on.



righteous would rule the world. Something was working tricks on me. It wasn't like me to use treachery. I was my mother's girl. (Barber, *How* 71-72)

She is referring to that moment when she accuses Mrs. King, one of the teachers who give her private piano lessons, of playing the piano in a Cowboy Bar in order to get rid of her simply because she does not like her. A whimsical attitude that hides meaningful reasons.

But, her mother possesses an alternative side too. There is, of course, that woman who young Phyllis discovers subtly as the book advances, thanks mainly to her own effort and personal interest in uncovering her mother's secret identity. But in addition, her mother will reveal herself to be a woman who supports her children's involvement with culture. She will be in fact, so supportive that she will even be willing to suspend Phyllis' training for future motherhood: "You can stop your lessons if you promise you'll never stop playing the piano. I'll help you with your chores. You don't have to do any housework if you'll keep playing" (Barber, *How* 73).

Feminist theorist Nancy Chodorow argues that the compulsion to train daughters to become mothers does not occur because of biology or "intentional role-training" (7), but rather through "social structurally induced psychological processes" (7). Using the "psychoanalytic account of female and male personality development" (Chodorow 7), she demonstrates that

It is neither a product of biology nor of intentional role-training. I draw on the psychoanalytic account of female and male personality development to demonstrate that women's mothering reproduces itself cyclically. Women, as mothers, produce daughters with mothering capacities and the desire to mother. (Chodorow 7)

For Chodorow the reproduction of mothering is a central and constituting element in the social organization and reproduction of gender. The contemporary reproduction of mothering occurs through social structurally induced psychological processes<sup>177</sup>. Chodorow concludes that “coercion is not possible in the case of mothering” (32). She rejects the idea that the compulsion to mother is “sufficient” (Chodorow 33) explanation by means of role training or learning. Chodorow considers that “behavioral imitation” or “men’s power over women’s mothering” are not enough to “enforce women’s mothering” (33). She also rejects the notion of “physiological bases” (Chodorow 88) to explain mothering role and capacity. She thinks this role is psychological and produced historically through the process of capitalism, and induced somehow on some “*unconscious or conscious level*” (Chodorow 33). Barber, in turn, places most of the stress on role training and learning even though she pays attention to the psychological consequences of them. Thus in Barber’s fiction the stress is going to be placed in the role training, especially in the education about sex and mothering capacities. The point in which Barber’s depiction of motherhood as an imposed category comes to an agreement with Chodorow’s theory is in her underlying of the importance that the separation between the public and private spheres has to promote male dominance in a patriarchal society (9). Barber’s female characters fight to take over the

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<sup>177</sup> In the case of the Mormons, I believe that there is an element to take into account when considering the importance of role training. Here, the relation that Chodorow establishes between the mother and the daughter is complicated by the omnipresent energy of God. Chodorow considers that it is not enough to induce a role learning to an individual to explain this continuity of mothering, that it is necessary to consider the whole “organization of gender and the organization of the economy” (34). What if that economy is the economy of faith? As Knowlton says gendered concepts are woven in essential beliefs of the Mormon Church. Through marriage, it becomes celestial and a clue to be a God yourself and thus a pivotal part of Mormon belief. Gendered concepts are communicated in Mormonism: “To become Gods – i.e., to attain exaltation – Mormon thought requires that man and woman be united through marriage. The roles of each seem established according to divine fiat. As a result we segregate the genders at an early age in their church in order to teach them things specific to their particular gender. Mormonism attempts to inculcate both genders with roles and ideologies that oppose some problematic aspects of our modern national culture and that accept other aspects” (Knowlton 22-23). When those roles are promoted as a powerful feature of your community’s identity, when they are communicated as essential molecules of your spiritual constitution, how can you avoid the social dimension of it? Women writers and characters in Mormon literature seem to have a close connection to their mothers but I do not see how this is related to a close psychological connection to their mothers if this is not related to the discovering of a secret identity of the mother that destroys or enlarges the one they have of them as mothers, wives and Mormons. As Knowlton puts it, even if he is talking about men, “a strong positive discourse of maleness linked with religion. It attempts to give these attributes such positive strength that they will have priority in our lives over the contrasting American values to which we are also socialized” (24).

power of their own bodies, a role that limits them to the private sphere of their homes, drifting them away from social visibility or success.

In *Raw Edges* the same topics are developed in a dimension of time that establishes complex meanings. Here, she herself is the mother and the one expressing the role of motherhood, but she does it with references to her mother as a connection to the past that derivates in the delineation of a timeline. In *Raw Edges* Barber decomposes her identity and one of the main elements which are deconstructed is that of being a mother: “Mother motor. I didn’t know what to do with myself when there was no one to look after” (*Raw* 20). Barber describes her role as mother in a tangled chronology that takes the reader back and forth as to see both the sources and the consequences in a sequence that illustrates the complexity, power, derivations and problematic of this role. Being a mother for Barber in *Raw Edges* is linked to a part of her life in which her identity was shaped by her marriage and her condition of mother. It was an easy, secure, understandable role that she is forced to break when her marriage collapses and she finds herself trying to adapt to a new situation in which she feels basically lost and fearful even if she unconsciously knows that this journey will take for her an experience that even if painful will be meaningful and human. In the end, she reconciles with all this through love, when she scrubs all the experience to find the nuclear truth on it. But before, she sways between feelings of pain and guilt that remind the reader of characters such as Delta Ray or Esther Jensen:

I said “No” and lifted my arms that could stretch across the room to save him because I was the Master who could freeze things. I was also Rubber Band Woman whose elastic fingers could reach as far as I needed them to without the rest of me moving. Nothing could happen if I sat still enough to make time stop. (Barber, *Raw* 74)

Here she resembles the Delta Ray in “Spirit Babies” who is able to be strong enough to keep her babies secure all the time. But, as in “Spirit Babies”, this determination is challenged by an event, in this case, the death of her son Geoffrey. In a scene where time is detained and suspense is delivered through a perfect sequence of syntax, Barber intensely describes the crucial moment:

I’d peek in on the babies as soon as I emptied my bladder, but then I rinsed my mouth with water, even brushed my teeth with what was left in the nearly spent tube of toothpaste: white paste, a small spurt, enough to clean my mouth and teeth. Then I let the water run to warm, soaked the washcloth, lifted the soap to my nose to sniff before turning it over and over inside the wet cloth. I ran a hairbrush through my hair. Tied it back with a clip. The babies. Check on the babies. I found my red-framed eyeglasses. I’d put in my contacts later. MOC: Poetry. Time detained. Ecstasy of chores. Suspense. (Barber, *Raw* 87)

She already had feelings of guilt when she said that “why couldn’t anyone find a trace of any such thing in my blood line? What had I done wrong to earn this punishment, to bring this affliction down on my son’s head?” (Barber, *Raw* 66) but the sense of guilt grows even in the funeral when she has to look for her other son when she feels the pain of the word guilt pronounced by her husband, even if he is saying that “there’s no need for guilt or sorrow about his death on either of our parts” (Barber, *Raw* 93). This sense of guilt is confessed in a burst of sincerity when talking to Spinner and she says that “I may have been responsible for my son’s death” (Barber, *Raw* 186). But that guilt takes even further when she is talking to her mother, a few days before beginning her journey across the United States and she says:

Pow. The Achilles’ Heel. My unpredictable, wild-card, free spirit sons. My broken family. A failed marriage. The maxim drilled into my head from doll-dressing days, both from my mother and the teachers at church, went something like, “No success can compensate for failure in the home.” It had made its Big Foot imprint on me. (Barber, *Raw* 22)

The same sense of guilt is found when we talk about her marriage. Since she has to struggle with her vows and her beliefs to keep on trying to cope with a situation that deteriorates her own identity:

I was definitely disenchanted with infinity at this point. Thirty years of marriage had been burned to a crisp despite David's and my non-blinking vow of "forever". We'd promised in the Mormon temple that our marriage would last for time and all eternity, not just "til death do we part." (Barber, *Raw* 19-20)

Her husband confesses to her that a "tension is driving him crazy", a sexual tension that puts her marriage into a challenge and threatens to pull down all her beliefs: "Mormonism had always been like my shoes and socks, my hat and gloves, the warp and weft of my being." (Barber, *Raw* 47) That Mormonism determined her marriage and partially her relationship towards her husband. After that confession, and the failure of her marriage, some sort of order is lost:

I listened intently. I'd lost the most valuable thing a wife could have – the honor of a faithful husband. In my thinking, I was no longer a treasured woman, a valued partner, a respected member of any community, let alone the Mormon one. I needed to make the world fit together again. (Barber, *Raw* 119)

The failure of her marriage, as described in her memoir, implicates a redefinition. The code of interpretation that she had used to design her life and define herself within a community is no longer useful. In that redefinition, her involvement with Mormonism seems to be in danger. Mormon Church is made for families:

Sunday mornings when I hauled the children to church by myself, sat on the long bench without a husband, and watched other women and their husbands and their children. Church became a lonely place where I sat and stared at what I thought I didn't have. (Barber, *Raw* 261)

In that trip for darkness or experience to which she was led after the failure of her marriage, that sexual tension turns into an experience of adultery that is wrapped with words such as “falling”, “betraying”, “dark hole”, “initiation”, “darkness”, “shattering” and “sacrifice” (Barber, *Raw* 144-147). But there we see the birth of consciousness. This experience sparks off the relative problem in her head, the conflict between what she was, what she wanted to be, where she belonged, where she was forced to leave, “the shattering of my vows, my promises, my ethics, my loyalty” (Barber, *Raw* 147) and the powerful consciousness of a possibility of rebirth, an initiation in a world that now seems desperate and dark but keeps a light at the back that rings a bell of locked dreams of possibility and experience: “*But maybe, just maybe, you are someone who is incredibly brave to break yourself to put yourself back together again*” (Barber, *Raw* 174). The prospect of freedom, if we understand freedom as it is understood by the poet Hasier Larretxea who defines it as the possibility of abandoning everything you own, everything that surrounds you and starting a new life (Larretxea 48-49).

This discussion over the roles of gender and the institution of reproduction is always present in her work, in the autobiography as well as in the fiction, because it is rooted in her involvement in the act of writing. In her fiction, a good example of this tension is the one provided by the character of Esther Jensen, the main protagonist in *And the Desert Shall Blossom*. When Esther worries about her oldest daughter, her concern is that she herself will be the object of public commentary for not having developed the mother role in her daughter. This concern is enlarged by her own conception of virtue framed by the Mormon ideals of her family, proper examples of the stereotyped virtuous Mormon household, as Wallace Stegner conceives the essential virtues of a Mormon family: “hospitality”, “familial warmth” and “a degree of community responsibility” (Stegner 102).

In “Mormon Levis”, Mattie’s sexual awakening with her first period is framed into a context of challenge between her faith and her sex appeal, which is not only a matter of teenage obsession with the danger or the things you are not supposed to do, but a temptation to resolve a psychological cross, and a source for determination, freedom and power which is illustrated by the presence of a constant reminder of God which is sweetly conflicting her faith and her physical temptations and feelings. And here mother plays a bridging role as a complex feeling in which Mattie feels her mother as a character of security and police but with love: “ever vigilant mamma mia” (Barber, *Parting* 117).

In fact, in many of her short stories, when developing topics concerning womanhood, Barber will develop an even more tragic character: women who did not reject motherhood, women who followed the “Big Wheel” but now experience the failure of being unable to be good mothers and the tragedy of being unable to be happy and at peace with themselves. In “Love for Miriam,” the narrator seeks clues on how to bear the burden of her failure as a mother. In “Radio KENO,” Chloe tries to find herself after surviving a failed marriage. And “Baby Birds” gives the definitive depiction of what in other stories is just summarized in a sentence. Here, Barber describes the gap that leaves a mother’s powerlessness to feel close to her son. The story provides few expectations; a sense of submitting to fate pervades, and both characters seem to be sedated. The mother cannot manage her son’s “greyness”. Her incapability and impotence is as shocking as her dual personality: “I’m still yelling at him, at least this stranger is yelling who lives in me and comes out at night to hate his son who messes with his mind and his head and his body” (Barber, *School* 99). The stranger inside is really her failure as a mother, her inability to be what she is expected to be. In her silent and helpless surrender, the reader feels the burden of the role imposed on a woman who still dreams alone in the oblivion awaiting her in bed.

This story pivots over the burdensome relationship between a mother and her teenage son. The mother feels uneasy and impotent to help a son who is having problems with drugs. Then Barber intertwines this story with a second one which opens a wider understanding of both characters. The mother evokes the second story in an attempt to project her stagnant energy into a new determination to find connection and esteem. The two stories are channeled through the mother just because she is remembering it, because, in fact, they are isolated stories which seem to have nothing in common, at least for her son. The storyline goes that Michael takes care of some birds<sup>178</sup> he found in the yard. He seems to be a good educator and the collaboration between mother and son looks like an open door, the last chance, but it turns out to be heartbreaking. She comes to be closer to him. By the end of the story, the mother is looking forward to behaving like he did with the baby birds, because she wants to be successful as a mother who knows how to give everything their kids need until they fly away from home. But that is both a desire and an obligation and in that balance we find the conflict. She loves that son and not the son who tries to find balance with his hands over the sink. What they got through the experience of the baby birds remains a mirage when the story turns to its end: “‘I wish I could’, I say all the way to my bed and the forgetting that waits for me” (Barber, *School* 104).

In this story the tone is different. Tone comes out of sadness, impotence, fragility, vulnerability, guilt, loss of hope so Barber writes to make the main character, a mother, talk different: softer sometimes, dubious, slower, with long sentences full of hesitating

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<sup>178</sup> Birds obviously work here as a double metaphor. First, they play the operational role of serving as a device that implies the definition of the main plot. Secondly, that they are birds and not any other animal or pet, reminds us of the nest, of leaving the nest, of freedom. Wider meanings could be interpreted a posteriori if we take, for instance, Terry Tempest Williams essential and lyrical feeling about birds: “In my young mind, it had something to do with the magic of birds, how they bridge cultures and continents with their wings, how they mediate between heaven and earth” (*Refuge* 18).



interruptions, and knifelike outbursts of anger and despair. In present tense, most of the narration develops in fresh and vivid dialogues turned into monologues garnished with desperate questions. Especially efficient for the coherence of the story, Barber works out inner dialogues disclosing the existence of a dual personality inside this woman, a silent tension. It is also referential how Barber drives her main character to pay attention to her sink, for example, so we can see how she is trying to evade reality, how difficult is for her to stick to facts, to avoid being absent-minded in the sense of having fear to important matters. Barber sharpens feelings with physical movements to liberate the dramatic emotion of incomplete closeness: "I sat on the edge of the bed and rubbed my son's back, a smooth hand sliding up and down his rippling backbone" (*School* 103). The cold description of the movement itself and the awareness of the moment make us feel the distance, the inability of that gesture. And that distance is bigger in the last part of the story when the final and anticlimatic dialogue fill the page with "Is", "Is" that belong to two different persons and never become into "Wes". The absent role of the father opens also a different reading of this story. Michael needs a father. He needs the love of her mother but not of the model of a mother, of a mother who is so aware of the time she is yelling, like if it was someone inside of herself who is coming out to yell. A mother who has repeated these roles once and again and who knows she did. A mother who is sarcastic with herself and says: "The poetic phase is coming. After the screaming and the cryings, the poetics, the philosophizing, the rationalizing, the appeasement of the hurt inside me and Michael" (Barber, *School* 102).

In *Parting the Veil: Stories from a Mormon Imagination*, womahood is one of the issues that Barber adds to her stories to make it more complex and enlarge the meaning of them. Female characters are the receivers of celestial intervention and they are also the pivotal

figure of family sustenance and responsibility. The mother in “Wild Sage”, like Delta Ray in “Spirit Babies” or Hilma in “The Whip” are the center of these stories and they all have to face the challenge of feeling guilty when trying to balance their determinations, based on their own criteria of what is good or bad (their moral) and the restrictions of roles or cultural codes, what they are supposed to follow (the imposed moral). In “Wild Sage”, for instance, the mother fights between the hesitation to believe that she made right because she did what was best for her son and the guilt of having broken the roles of loyalty that bind her to her husband, again powerful male figure which is totally absent, so he is gaining his power or his ascendancy through predetermined concepts rather than because of his actions, decisions or compromise. And, in this story, we have the figure of Russell symbolizing the perpetuation of the roles when he shows his anger because he is not taking the leading role and because the father is not there to take the lead. Jamie, the other son, the one who is sick, seems to be different, probably because he is sick, but sick in love.

The concern with promiscuity and sexual games, the fear of intercourse are also present in “Wild Sage.” In spite of the mother’s hesitations about her son’s sexual promiscuity, she is finally able to help him through the intervention of the Three Nephities. She sends her son a bag of sagebrush so he can make a tea that recovers him from his illness, but again the elements of the plot play a symbolical second meaning, since the sagebrush derives in echoes of home<sup>179</sup>. The heart of the story is the relationship between the mother and a son but the distance reveals a dimension that hides the facts to disclose the involvement of the characters in those facts. Mother’s faithfulness to her husband is also perceived as breaking

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<sup>179</sup> Robert Laxalt’s memory about sagebrush and Nevada can give as a clue to understand the symbolical meaning of the use of this in here: “Since that long-ago day when a single sprig of sagebrush brought Nevada home to me, I have taken her no more for granted. Always when I return, one of the first things I must do is go out into the sagebrush until its chemistry works in me and I know I am home again. But now, older, I find myself reflecting whimsically on how very much like the sagebrush the people are, at least in the hinterland that makes up the most of Nevada, setting down roots and thriving in unlikely places, hardy and resilient, stubborn and independent, restrained by environment and yet able to grow free” (4).

the norms to fit in both roles: “I’ve avoided a little something with God, with my husband, Royal, too. It’s about being a mother and maybe being foolish for my boy” (Barber, *Parting* 18).

She keeps a secret about her son that has something to do with a girl, but prays, doing everything possible to help him. Her mind is full of different emotions, all of them playing with guilt and doubt whenever she looks for reasons, for answers whether in or outside her beliefs: “I want to believe but sometimes I’m a foolish woman” (Barber, *Parting* 19). It is powerful how she portrays the mom at the beginning as tired, reflecting, harmless, oblivious, wandering, resting restless to go through her mind later and reveal her inner sufferings. Royal, her husband, is at one extreme, evoking feelings of failure and guilt because of her secret and her doubts about loyalty and faithfulness. On the other extreme, her son seems to play the role of motivation, launching her crippled sense of determination. Both limits seem impossible to balance.

Rich distinguishes between two definitions of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that the potential woman – and all women – shall remain under male control. Rich states that the institution of motherhood “creates the dangerous schism between “private” and “public” life; it calcifies human choices and potentialities” (13). Rich states that the institution of motherhood “has alienated women from our bodies by incarcerating us in them” (13). This is what she calls the “ghettoized and degraded female potentialities” (13). According to Rich the mother is expected to get her daughters ready to “enter that system without rebelliousness or “maladjustment” and to perpetuate it in their own adult lives” (61). This theory comes to

terms with the idea of Barber's female characters not being able to control their skills and powers in demanding circumstances because they are limited to "private" concerns, mainly the household, while not being promoted in public life. This also explains the need for visibility which, in Barber's fiction, is linked to love rather than to laudation. That visibility in which the Mary in "Silver Dollars" needs to shout "They don't see me" (Barber, *School* 5).

All this dissension, conflict and denunciation were developed in Barber's most powerful and tragic but heroic character, Esther Jensen. The Jensens are economically marginalized and Esther is described at the beginning of the novel as a "smudge" (Barber, *And* 5). Esther tries to recreate her dream of a home, doing all she can to keep the family together. Her identity lies in the past, in a well-defined place in a closed Mormon clan in Brigham City "where she's the pretty one who sings" (Barber, *And* 15). Now she is displaced, geographically and psychologically, in Boulder City, the scenario in which the erosion of her nuclear family occurs. In the end, everything falls apart to the point where she has to be admitted to a mental institution. The reader feels the absolute emptiness of this character who has nothing.

Esther is concerned about her role as a virtuous wife and mother. She always feels guilty about not loving her husband or taking care of her children: "You resent your own baby and never find enough good in your husband" (Barber, *And* 89). But she never seems to think about herself. She fails to educate Mary Elizabeth and Rebecca in the Mormon cultural sense, as mothers-to-be. Mary Elizabeth and Rebecca do take care of Inez sometimes, but it is not through Esther that they learn the necessary skills but simply in order to survive. Theirs is a spontaneous reaction to their mother's failure; they are forced

into the role of mother. Rebecca cries: “I don’t want to watch Inez. I want to go somewhere besides church and school or here babysitting Inez” (Barber, *And* 176). But she does babysit when she is promised money. Obviously, Esther is unsuccessful at training her daughters because she is surpassed by the circumstances after moving to Boulder City. She confesses it when she tells her baby, Inez: “Now that we’re in a home, I will love you,” she whispered to Inez, “I promise. I won’t let the poison take me away. You’ll be tether” (Barber, *And* 90).

Mary Elizabeth is an especially important character when regarding the training that a mother is expected to provide for her daughters. She is also a tragic character. A girl emerging at puberty, in a period of conflict, sexual awakening and tension. Aware of her sexual empowerment, Mary Elizabeth is too conscious for her age of what is going on around her. She is unable to fit into a Mormon context mainly because of the difficult circumstances they are living under: “So... big deal. Mother doesn’t like anything that doesn’t fit her picture. She’s gonna kill herself and all of us with her notions of perfection” (Barber, *And* 196). And Esther always clashes with her daughter on the subject of her attraction to men, but Mary Elizabeth plays with men as a source of confidence and power as Herbert, her own brother, discovers:

She seemed to have more energy than her body could contain, erupting out of adolescent chunkiness into an unmanageable beauty. Her laugh, her way of tossing her arms into the air and shaking her hips at convention frightened Herbert. (Barber, *And* 180)

As the book progresses, Mary Elizabeth seems to grow on her own, making us aware of how life and experience shape people. Her moral awakening surfaces in a sudden

demonstration of maturity. She summarizes the whole affair that her parents are trying to overcome in a single sentence: “You’re just afraid” (Barber, *And* 246).

Whether because she is unable to train her daughters or because of the failure of her marriage, Esther is afflicted by a poisonous emotion of frustration and loss. The implications are complex and many components interact to comprise a milieu in which identity has been erased by the opposing influences. In any case, that poison is affliction or melancholy or bare sadness. As Rich equates “pure affliction with powerlessness, with waiting, disconnectedness, inertia, the ‘fragmented time’ of one who is at other’s disposal” (158). All this can be seen in Esther Jensen. Rich adds that “loneliness, unshared grief, and guilt often led to prolonged melancholy or mental breakdown” (234), again totally applicable to Esther. It is a feeling that nothing will ever work so there is no need to go on trying, a feeling close to what Russell Banks explained in *Affliction* or Nacho Vegas, the Spanish author and songwriter, translated as “humidity”. The poison is a tendency to suffer failure without fighting against this sensation. It comes accompanied by a degree of sympathy. Even God seems to be part of this poison because He keeps Esther far away from her husband. She ties the poison to externals – the hot weather and the place, but the poison is internal. It has to do with what she considers to be the solution and quite probably is just the matrix of the trouble: “No more wasting time feeling sorry for herself. This was definitely a time for resolution” (Barber, *And* 94). Esther promises to fight against this poison by trying harder to love her husband and children rather than by confronting the struggle going on inside herself: “Life will not upset. Life will not upset me” (Barber, *And* 94). She fights to be able to trust herself, but the potential solution is channeled through those conceptions that dismantle her power and deprive her of the tools to handle the nature of the problem: being a better mother and a loving wife.

### 4.3.3. Womanhood: Visibility versus Chores

One of the main aspects of gender roles in Barber's fiction is her female characters' need for visibility. Thus, for example, in *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*, a major clash occurs between mother and daughter when young Phyllis wants to become a Rhythmette. Her mother, who is not supportive of this new whim, tells her:

Letting your light shine, Phyllis. The light of Christ who is the light of the world. Jesus didn't need to be a Rhythmette to be loved. Neither do you. The real joy in this life is in God's plan --- being a mother and multiplying and replenishing the earth. Not in some trumped-up organization like the Las Vegas Rhythmettes. It's phony. (Barber, *How* 130)

Nevertheless, Phyllis is quite sure of her new desire and she will keep on trying to become one. Unconsciously she wants to be a Rhythmette in order to be as far away as possible from the purpose in life that her mother is training her for<sup>180</sup>. This confrontation is faced by Barber with complexity, opting for one but without rejecting then the other. This complexity helps her to see a second, not expectable, confrontation, that of appealing men. But what she aspires for with this appealing is a source for self-esteem that establishes the ideas about body that I am developing:

When I entered Las Vegas High School next year, I watched the Rhythmettes in the girls' locker room slip in and out of the sleeves of their Rhythmette sweaters. I watched them walk gracefully around the school with their long flowing hair and manicured fingernails. I watched them dance at the halftimes of the football and basketball games. And I often paused at the bulletin board in Miss Stuckey's office in the gym. She'd tacked up rows of pictures of *her girls* marching in parades and shaking hands with Frank Sinatra. (Barber, *How* 129-130)

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<sup>180</sup> In fact, her desire to become a Rhythmette conceals more motivations than just the fact of moving away from her mother, as I will show later and as her subsequent engagement in dancing demonstrates, but for that it is necessary to read *Raw Edges: A Memoir*.

The description is accurately physical, plastical. Body is the main element of her visual imagery here and it does not reject the spiritual meaning because body encompasses as well freedom and determination, the power and energy of that freedom and determination is shaped from a physic resemblance of the body. It would be easy to see the “manicured fingernails” pointing to the moon, rather than the moon they point to, but even the perspective and voice of the grown-up Phyllis Barber here amplifies that of the fictionalized Phyllis Nelson to complicate the meanings and the transcendence of any action in the book. She even presumes that being a Rhythmette is not what she really wants, that it has to do with the same kind of values and attributes that she equally repudiates in Mormonism but with a different façade.

I wish I'd known to listen to the quiet, offbeat side of me that didn't need to prove itself or make a major statement. But I could only hear the public side of myself, so indiscriminate, a snaker fish snapping at the bait, a marionette jumping at every chance to be on stage, the part of me insistent on forcing the bloom. (Barber, *How* 132)

It is a second train, a second “Big Plan” or “Purpose of Life” that she does not really want to take. But she does want to face it, she wants to control it, to tame the rhythm. It is not simply a rebellion against her mother. It is a mistake that she wants to commit on her own. In her attempt to become a Rhythmette, she encounters one of her first harsh clashes with the real world: “... and I knew the four judges sitting in a tight clump on the bleachers would be blinded to the real Phyllis Nelson, the girl who believed in answers to prayers and wishes on stars” (Barber, *How* 134).

Yet, she is strong, brave enough to face those failures which, in all truth, are common to everyone. The Rhythmettes signify something different, especially, because they are not part of her mother and that world; but the Rhythmettes signify visibility too: “I was



somebody” (Barber, *How* 148). Such visibility should not be misinterpreted merely as a teenage device to attain social notoriety. It is not the same as the visibility symbolized by the “James Dean football players” (Barber, *How* 148). This involves another kind of recognition regarding culture rather than just being famous at school. “I was tired, however, of being earnest and unnoticed” (Barber, *How* 148).

That craving for visibility, to be noticed, also surfaces when Phyllis is selected to be the queen of a parade organized by a casino. She dreams with becoming Queen Phyllis, but the conflict is still there: “Here was good versus evil again, set on a table before me, waiting to be examined: a good Mormon girl’s joy comes from obedience to commandments versus Phyllis Nelson’s chance to be a queen” (Barber, *How* 171). Once again the clash between Mormon humility and the visibility she wants leads to a conflict between her own determination to decide and the parental voices at her back. The “you only want temporal pleasures” (Barber, *How* 173) versus the “you want to keep me from having fun” (Barber, *How* 173). And that confrontation echoes in her mind, not only as an auxiliary remembering but as a personal hesitation.

But her visibility is not connected to what her mother would have considered a troublesome desire for worldly pleasures; it is closer to the kind of visibility that Imburugutu, the giraffe in Barber’s book for children, *Legs: the story of a giraffe*, needs when he is at “the sharp edges of the unknown” (Barber, *LEGS* 40) where he encounters the rejection of the masai giraffes in the zoo, which were different from him because they had “different-shaped patches on their hides, almost like leaves or zigzags of lightning he’d watched in the sky. But they still had long necks and sticking-up ears and looked very much like his friends from home” (Barber, *LEGS* 43).

But, finally, one day, Imburugutu gets some recognition, some visibility, some substance in a world that was blurring him: “One of them noticed me. He sighed again. I’m not invisible. Maybe there’s a place for me after all” (Barber, *LEGS* 48). And that visibility gives happiness to an ending which seems apparently sad but which propels a bigger vision of expectation and joy.

That is the kind of visibility young Phyllis seeks throughout her memoir. It is the same kind of visibility most of her female characters lack and that she herself fought for by becoming a writer. This has little to do with being famous or receiving applause or being the center of attraction. In fact, once Phyllis becomes a Rhythmette and controls the rhythm, she realizes that the prize is not so big: “There was no jungle here, no danger of being eaten alive, but there was no sign of any raw animal power either” (Barber, *How* 136). She is not so much attracted to the football players but to their forbidden jokes or where they stand, the world to which they belong that is so different to hers. She wants “to be in the world but not of the world”, but not in the way this meant to the people in the Relief Society. “I want to glow on my own” (Barber, *How* 140), she says to the moon, but to achieve that objective she has to handle all that means danger to her mother. Once she gets to be a Rhythmette, doubts arise: “What had I purchased? Another train ticket?” (Barber, *How* 142) She realizes that once again she is subject to a plan to shape and train her, a plan that is different from the one proposed by her mother and Mormonism, but one that is even subtler and more invisible:

We were Baby Rs, on our way to being grown-up and bonteous and leggy and ready for the grown-up world where our prancing legs would be someday spread apart to make babies and birth babies or avoid babies or wonder why we couldn’t have babies, all in accordance with the plan. We were being danced on our way by our hormones,

by the mandate for procreation, by the rhythm of life, not knowing it was bigger than we were. (Barber, *How* 143)

She realizes that Miss Stuckey, like her mother, is just trying to train her according to duty: "... but really preparing us as gifts for the men who watched, men subject to their own hormones as we strutted and paraded across the stage, displaying our wares for them, the particular curve of our hips, the winning smiles" (Barber, *How* 143). This is the other train that parallels her mother's train, the one that she had tried to avoid. A new "Big Wheel", a new "Plan", a new "Purpose" that she seems unable to avoid because it seems to be coming from the inside, from natural instinct, from her hormones. Miss Stuckey, the woman responsible for the Rhythmettes, would be the mother of this new plan: "She herded us like fine sheep, watched who we dated, checked our grades every term, told us to stand up straight, told us to be proud of ourselves, as not everyone was able to make the marks required to be a Las Vegas High School Rhythmette" (Barber, *How* 171).

For Barber it seems that there is no way out. Both male and female characters are bound to their roles and their instincts. But once again, an invisible expectation, an unstated way-out always lies behind any lack of resolution or determination that Barber tries to hide: "There's no escaping the rhythm" (*How*, 170). The idea does not insist on escaping, but on confronting and controlling it. This is her visibility in a sense. Visibility means being brave, determining your own choices and finding a place of your own. Not to escape any of the two ways that she could take because both are equally submissive and limiting. As Laura L. Bush explains, Barber unveils a dual attempt to discipline her body from "two seemingly opposite gender scripts for girls" (Bush, *From* 33). One is that of Mormonism which advocates a vision of pure sexuality and the other is that of western culture which projects women's sex appeal from an objective perspective. Bush concludes that "living according

to opposing messages such as these produces understandable emotional conflict” (*From* 33). But, in fact, even if the conflict is not resolved, Barber’s character shows that this tension is accessible from a positive perspective, when she, instead of rejecting, or reacting violently, enacts an active awareness that disarms both definitions. In any case, the conclusions drawn by her autobiography can be considered only to be promising, since the end is open, the years are to come, and the experiences are only pre-assumed. *Raw Edges: A Memoir* will bring light and knowledge to interpret these events and articulate fresh conclusions.

Bush concludes that “her writing illustrates the narrow ideals available to female both inside or outside the Mormon Church” (*From* 34), but, in fact, my vision is much more positive, rendered through the perspective that there is a third way. In spite of the “unhappy conclusions” (Bush, *From* 34) or the “ripe peach and the peach schnapps” (Welker, *Sexual* 41), Barber’s description of the conflict between the proposition of a Mormon training that accentuates domesticity, motherhood and sexual purity and the western culture which proposes them as objects to seek men’s eyes offers a positive reading. Barber’s trains do not clash, they diverge, but they leave a third way that it is not tracked. That untracked way is illustrated in the complexity of the whole set of relationships that Barber displays in her autobiography, whether it is her father, her piano teachers, her first boyfriends or her mother, with whom she maintains a complex relation of love and rejection showing that Chodorow’s ideas have to be amplified with the cultural and biological perspectives that Chodorow avoids. There is hope when, at the end of the book, the character knows that heat will be with her all that time, but she is conscious of the heat. There is a hope that transforms in surviving but crippled love when pains are persistent but not lethal in *Raw Edges: A Memoir*. And there is also some hope when the text is taken as part of a whole. A

whole that encompasses the text, the writer and the act of writing. A whole that encompasses the words, the stories and the reader. Cultures that dialogue and stories that illustrate connections that could not be a matter of choosing between one or the other, whatever it is what is being offered. There is hope.

In her fiction, Barber expands on the topic of visibility as means of self-esteem and determinacy. Esther Jensen in *And the Desert Shall Blossom* longs for some kind of public recognition as well. This visibility, once again, means more than just being praised or noticed. Barber only gives her a couple of moments to enjoy this visibility, this chance to trespass the borders of her adjusted concerns and embark on a challenge that gives her confidence, dignity and pride. One is when she felt proud of herself after defending her project to provide an education for their children because she dares to confront the situation. She is out of the domestic sphere, talking in front of a man who stands for the place she is out of. Chodorow says that

One can distinguish analytically in all societies between domestic and public aspects of social organization. Mothers and children form the core of domestic organization; domestic ties are based on specific particularistic relationships among people and are assumed to be natural and biological. Because of their child-care responsibilities, women's primary social location is domestic. (...) It is therefore assumed that the public sphere, and not the domestic sphere, forms "society" and "culture" – those intended, constructed forms and ideas that take humanity beyond nature and biology and institute political control. Men's location in the public sphere, then, defines society itself as masculine. It gives men power to create and enforce institutions of social and political control, important among these to control marriage as an institution that both expresses men's rights in women's sexual and reproductive capacities and reinforced these rights. (Chodorow 9)

But the excitement will end as soon as she goes back home and the experience turns not to be totally successful. The second big moment for Esther takes places in the local theater, when she sings "Habanera". Impersonating Carmen gives her a sense of power and dignity.

She is able to express herself thanks to the mask of a fictional character. She ends her performance with a surreal dance in which she loses her sense of reality. As Hélène Cixous puts it, it is only through performing drama that a powerful dialogue is established:

We don't have the right to complain truthfully; we don't have the right to die for love, or we don't have the right to proclaim hatred and demonstrate it. It is only possible in a very special place which is the theatre. When you write for the theatre you have a kind of special right, a strange right, which is utterly reserved for the stage. You can be a criminal, you can be passionately in love, you can be Antony and Cleopatra, you can lose the whole world for a kiss, everything is possible. (Cixous, *Difficult* 21)

It is in the theater where the couple experienced a scene of unfruitful redemption, one important scene when Esther and Alf are both set in the Boulder Theater like they were some time ago when Esther was singing and Alf fell in love with her. Barber places both characters in that theater. It is a briskly, clearly, happy moment when communication and possibilities are at hand but she traces all their knowledge through inner monologue: “this is my husband, she whispered to herself. Sometimes I forget things have been hard for him, and sometimes I don't understand who he is” (Barber, *And* 164). There is no communication: “Out of some perverted sense of respect, he wanted to speak the truth of their marriage, the half-love, pretense, the cycle of being in and out of love and always looking for something better (Barber, *And* 165). Instead, he looks at her. Alf's wonderings are lost in time. He evokes his wife who wanted to be a Queen. And he remembers himself wanting to be a King. The situation is equal for both. Like Esther's above, Alf's statement accompanies his own sense of pride and confidence, “the man visited by God and the man who could make a difference to people if they'd let him” (Barber, *And* 165), but that statement expresses the same needs as in Esther:

Esther could surprise him still. Mulligan's stew. Her rapidly changing moods, her frailty, her devotion to Joseph Smith and Jesus, her repeated attempts to love him

from a new angle, her valiant effort to say nothing against Serena even though this other woman had cornered a measure of his affection. (Barber, *And* 164)

The feeling of impossibility seems bigger. Nobody says anything even if they are in the stage: “He wanted to talk to her and say these things, confess his failures, confess the half-life he’d given her” (Barber, *And* 165). The lack of communication delivers the action with failed steps. Esther will end up in a similar way after the closing scene at the dam<sup>181</sup> when she faces her husband while being interned at Sparks Mental Hospital. Here she talks about darkness as both a place where she can rest, in the sense that she is numb to any kind of negative attack, and a place where she feels lonely. When Esther arrives at Sparks Mental Hospital, the doctor’s diagnosis is that she is “dying from a broken heart” (Barber, *And* 204).<sup>182</sup> Her son, Herbert, adds that she is: “Just too finely tuned for her life” (Barber, *And* 244). From that theater where the couple was unable to perform a successful dialogue, to the hospital where Esther finds a painful peace, both characters follow a track of lost opportunities and crippled promises. Esther needs visibility, and Alf needs esteem, and both needs are sourced from the same insufficiencies.

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<sup>181</sup> This final scene with Esther collapsing in front of her husband and family could be read metaphorically if we applied what Marder stated as the concept of marriage that Virginia Woolf had. Marder affirms that Woolf considered marriage as evil if still dominated by patriarchal institutions but that she believed in a marriage free of those conditions, a marriage whose “ideal sense exists independently of social or historical accident” (60). To explain it, Marder relies on the figure of two persons facing each other “on a cliff above a torrent” (60). Barber places Esther and Alf on the edge of the dam with the Colorado as witness. The purity and energy of the scenery are disrupted by their conflicts and tensions. The elements of the metaphor are transformed in Barber. For Woolf, if agreeing with Marder (138), lighthouse was the symbol of the combination of the masculine (the tower) and the feminine (the sea). In Barber the masculine (the dam) and the feminine (the river) rather than taking to the androgynous mind, take to the pathologic mind.

<sup>182</sup> In her analysis of Mercy Baker, the main character in Virginia Sorensen’s *A Little Lower than Angels*, Helynne Hansen says that the source for Mercy’s final illness could be that of the incapability to verbalize her emotions. It is amazing the parallel that could be drawn with Esther Jensen. Yet Esther talks by the end of the novel, but her words are no longer understandable. Her words are a poem that sublimes the extravagant nature of her healing.

In any case, Esther does not succeed in attaining the visibility she longs for and deserves. Not when she fought to obtain a place for schooling her children in Boulder City<sup>183</sup> nor when she sang “Habanera” in a crowded theater. Once again, visibility is a source of confidence, pride and determination that will enable her to overcome her own failures and individual urgencies, most of them hidden or blurred in the light of her obligations as a wife and mother. A determination that, in fact, she shows two times in the book. There are two key moments when she acts with full determination, two times when her melancholy flies away. Both are violent and sad experiences in which she performed some skills that others refuse to exercise. Both experiences led to critical consequences to help her crack instead of taking positive conclusions for her own confidence.

The first one is the powerful image in which she deals with a corpse. She is needed. Her husband seems to be proud of her even though she executes everything with some sort of numb consciousness. Her determination is cold. It is a braveness which shows better skills to deal with death than with life: “The men looked away as Esther lathered the soap to peaks. Esther nose to nose with life gone limp” (Barber, *And* 41). In the second one, Esther is listening to the wobblies when Serena asks her for help because she found a kid roped beneath the sun. As in the first one, someone is claiming for Esther’s help and in both she behaves with determination: “‘Esther, Esther Jensen.’ She recognized Serena’s low voice, though something was different about it. ‘Esther. Oh God, please help me’” (Barber, *And* 54).

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<sup>183</sup> This scene operates as an explanatory performance of Hélène Cixous’s words of “Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing, at times entirely lost of words, ground and language slipping away – that’s how daring a feat, how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak – even just open her mouth – in public. A double distress, for even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine” (*Laugh* 338).



Esther rebaptizes the kid and asks for a new beginning, even for Alf. The Colorado River is the witness and it is becoming a part of her faith or her dreams: “Serena harmonized with Esther though she didn’t know the words, both of them oblivious to the fact they were singing in the church of open sky accompanied by the sound of the Colorado River and an occasional explosion” (Barber, *And* 56). This memory will permeate the whole relationship between Esther and Serena, who, from here on, will show an admiration for her which signifies more than what it means when it is approached with Alf in the side.

In her collection of short stories, *The School of Love*, Barber develops most of these themes about womanhood through fictional characters that are frequently placed in complex situations where they have to apply attributes or skills (words that she listed in her article as improper for Mormon women) to handle them, but they realize that they are unable to do so. Often, they are even unaware of the chance to do so. In this sense, the reader is left with the feeling that it is difficult to escape or overcome the limitations and constraints imposed by strong role training. The visibility I have been talking about is here the ability to execute that determination rather than achieving some kind of recognition through public display. In any case, both situations communicate the same basic feelings.

In “The Glider,” one of the most accomplished stories in this collection, a bright, lively, and competent ranch woman has to choose between a square cinderblock the shape of her father and an illusionary, probably dead, pilot. This story retrieves what Toscano calls a “role reversal” (*Are* 23) story but in fact the end and the conflict in Martha shows a total different approach. She is a woman among three men who are mostly absent. Firstly, her father, to whom she promised to take care of the farm. Her father acts as a symbol of nostalgia, she misses his companion and advice, but also of limitation because he is the

reason why she keeps living there. Secondly, Harold, the figure who symbolizes the sensual gap or lack. Harold does not take her seriously, always joking about conceptions of gender. He is, at the same time, the target of her anger and her insufficiencies. The reader feels her need for what he offers physically, but she rejects it because she does not want to pay the price. Harold plays his powerful, sexual role as a male and she is unable to confront it because she has a real need for a man or she is unable to be strong enough to avoid needing a male figure even worst when she is taking the role of a man. That is why it is rather disturbing and powerful how the almost dead man in the glider is a remaining symbol of her longing for a man. This man is the third one in this set of relationships: the pilot of a glider that hovers over the farm, that sometimes looks like God, or sometimes like her father who is taking care of her. Mostly, the glider is something beautiful and peaceful that watches over her and points to a place far away. The glider is expectingly referred sometimes as a divine figure, "even Jesus" (Barber, *School* 30). It leaves a stream of expectation across a blue sky. But the woman, standing at the edge of a chasm that keeps on growing wider, finally watches the glider fall down. There is a man inside and she goes into a panic when she sees Harold's car coming, so she takes the dead or unconscious man home and nurses him. The disturbing end leaves little room to believe in the silent rebellion of this powerful woman who seems to be constrained by the prospects that men have placed around her.

Barber exercises again her flavor for metaphorical apparatus when she constructs part of her power through the figure of bones (cowbones, lanky bones, long bones loosely connected) as to make a bodily description of characters that marks her stress over appearance, one own's perception of him or herself and the image that somebody has of you, but using bones rather than skin, she goes to the skeleton, to the interior, to the very

foundations of physical entity rather than the surface. It is powerful the way she describes his body while she unbuttons the glider man's clothes, as if she was watching it for the first time. "Lucky man with eyes to see you" (Barber, *School* 31). That was what her father told her and Harold screams when he sees that she has tits and the glider man has his eyes closed. Nobody is able to see her in a complete way, as a woman and as an individual. She remains partially invisible.

"Criminal Justice" is again a story whose main topic is that of the female character on the edge. This woman tries to react from a failed marriage and a failed model as a mother and wife from which she both tries to escape and clench, playing again with feelings of guilt, freedom, power, pride, and possibility. The story begins with a significant first paragraph that looks like a confession. A first person narrator talks to a second person:

I need to tell you this before I tell you about that. I've baked lots of bread, nursed babies, and made quilts. I send thank-you notes and vote (even worked in two senatorial campaigns) and will do almost anything to avoid anger. Once upon a time, those things meant you were a good person, and try to be good. I try hard. What else do I need to tell you before I talk about Highway 89 and those Highway Patrol cars? (Barber, *School* 73).

The style this time is much more different, postmodern, direct, frank, open, emotional, naked, sincere, uncontrolled. The circumstances are delivered with loose, indirect and poetic style: Daniel with her dusk-to-dawn meetings, she being among the things on the list of things to do of her husband, Thomas putting his hand over her leg. The first sentence, "I need to tell you this before I tell you about that," reminds of Holden Caulfield's "you wanna know about my childhood and that David Copperfield's stuff" (Salinger 1) or Sal Paradise's "the time of my life I would call my life on the road" (Kerouac 3). And then she introduces herself like a personal context of her past. She uses "maybe I should" in the next

paragraph, offering this sense of still searching, rereading, reinterpreting, learning from experience. It seems that the narrator is trying to convince herself. This is reinforced by the fact that the retelling of this past experience is told in present tense, to make it much more close to present time, to the time of writing, implying that the story is not closed, that it needs being approached from a literary perspective, it needs to be analyzed, to be controlled, understood and accepted. Assuming that she is one of Barber's typical characters, it is understandable to suspect that she is a woman who has undergone some kind of experience that challenged all her ideas about the world and about herself. Later the reasons will be revealed, but right from the beginning the suspicion is that due to that experience she is going to lose her righteousness and respectability and her innocence will turn into silly deception: "Maybe I should admit I don't believe in heroes... The blacks and whites of my childhood are grey now [...] Funny. I'm pausing, wondering why I try so hard to be good if I don't believe in it anymore" (Barber, *School* 73). She feels guilty, even though probably she does not deserve to. And yet she accepts it: "I deserve this" (Barber, *School* 75). There is a constant complaint about trying to be good. It is depicted as a waste of time and energy. Her marriage was a failure. She was on the list of her husband's "things to do". She took a sudden decision to feel the energy of change, to liven up and she got arrested. Barber describes that arrest like liberating a back door in her consciousness, making it something sexual or sensual, but painful and chaotic at the same time.

She is not aware of anything: "This is a movie" (Barber, *School* 77). She is out of place, as if she were a puppet mastered by men who determine her fate. She does not look terribly upset, as if she were just expecting this to come with a meaning, like waiting for a gentleman: "saving from myself" (Barber, *School* 77). Suddenly she is aware of everything. She longs for innocence, for an innocence that goes further back, an innocence that does

not look so stupid as rocking babies while your husband watches TV: “For the first time since I saw the flashing red light on the patrol car, I face facts. I’m in jail, arrested for a federal offence. I want my mother. I want my innocence back” (Barber, *School* 77). She is strangely conscious of gender, of making an effort because she is a woman, accustomed to acting out roles: “my Adam’s apple starts to quiver. I don’t want to cry, not here, not in front of these highway patrolmen who haven’t believed in me like they should. I don’t want to waste any emotion in this shabby office” (Barber, *School* 81).

Silence surrounds her and it takes the shape and form of her solitude to express her loneliness and how her world is crumbling. Consequently, this character, as occurs with most of Barber’s characters in this collection, is a woman that suffers from a lack of what she really deserves and desires. Daniel, her husband, does not look like the supportive and lovely husband that she expected and she tries to look for this kind of love in Thomas, a friend who may become something else than just a friend but now she feels guilty. She takes a step forward and she shocks down. “My time has come.” She has no help. “I want to believe in a merciful, poetic, flexible God, a screenwriter or a novelist who can rewrite when the situation starts to overwhelm the protagonist, the truth, my time has come” (Barber, *School* 81). She has no determination, no energy to take control of the reins of her own life, but Barber’s narrative makes us understand that she is unable to do so. She lacks the necessary attributes to be aware and sure of that power to control and resolve this disturbing situation. As she crumbles, she realizes that there is nothing behind. She realizes that she is free because she does not have to make up another story in order to believe what it is not true.

The whole story is, in fact, a tough work of communication with herself that gets done when finally she feels unable to communicate with her own world: “There is too much silence in the world I once imagined I lived in” (Barber, *School* 82). Most of the dialogues are inner dialogues. She is always analyzing what is going around and playing with interpretation of that experience, even claiming for a focus on that experience, rejecting her continuous manipulation of it. The rest of the dialogues, with officers and with people on phone are all a failure; there is a sense of lack of communication, an inability to inform and communicate. The final paragraph is quite typical: she is alone in the cell, she has some kind of vision which can be interpreted as a mere realization that she finally came into terms with herself, that she found the way to love herself as she wanted to love herself, without pretending she is another one. The whole process has been some kind of unmasking of her real self but this has been painful and she was reluctant to let it out completely so she worked all her guilt, power and pride. Barber executes all this transformations through inner monologues which structure the character in relation to the actions going on around and how she gets to manage with all of them. “I’m free” closes the text even if no one is there to hear her.

In “Radio KENO”, Barber talks about a first and lost love. Chloe lacks something; she is not happy, and the failure of her life is expressed in the way she talks about her husband – “My husband is a nice man, but he’s lost somewhere in the middle of his niceness” – and her children – “They weary me. I shouldn’t have been a mother or a wife” (Barber, *School* 90). While driving, her thoughts fly and she confesses that she is looking for Wagner, a former boyfriend, looking back for a lost chance to have a different life, a lost chance to be free (Barber, *School* 90).

“Almost Magnificence,” a poignant metaphorical short piece of fiction about a woman’s story of pain, paints an allegoric picture of an eccentric woman which introduces some of the topics Barber will be developing in her collection. Barber depicts the downfall of a woman who failed to be a mother and has to pay the price. For Paul Swenson, a noted Mormon writer, this is a “striking image in modern feminist fiction for the sense of loss felt by many women in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (Swenson 1). This very short story is built around a central metaphor which parallels the character’s inner sufferings with a sawdust doll. Since Barber is not specific or explicit about the sense of loss that Swenson praises in this story (husband, kids, God, and her own mind, all of them are involved in one way or the other), the story opens a wide array of possible concerns that makes the message overall and appealing. This woman lacks, in fact, a sense of love for herself, a sense of her individuality, a possibility of being herself without being related to all those things she has lost. That dryness referred in that image conceives many different images. Once again, a good example of these distracted women who try to take control of their lives.

In “Love Story for Miriam,” three characters unified by a blood bond share a mystery that the narrator is trying to unravel. Thus, even if the story is written in the first person, the main character is a triangle formed by three women. Barber mixes present and past in a perfect ensemble that makes us feel how all is intertwined. There are three main characters, Miriam, Hortense and the narrator, Madeleine, but the relationship between them is rich and complex, full of corners and meanings, and this is the center of the story. The most remarkable literary device in this story is the discovering of the narrator, how the reader discloses the temptations and needs of the narrator through her recollection and imagination of her family. Barber creates a composition of memory, narration, imagination and almost unsaid anger or pain.

The narrator can be perceived as the grown-up version of the young protagonists in “Oh, Say, Can You See?” or “Silver Dollars” who listen to the story of a family that seems to parallel their own stories. In “Love for Miriam”, the main character’s secret mystery implies a feeling of deception or impotence that she is unable to confess. Miriam and Hortense are sisters who share a difficult story. We first encounter them in a retirement home but the obsessed perspective of the narrator uses flashbacks to keep looking for something in Miriam even though she does not know what it is. She needs to love her because Miriam symbolizes broken dreams. She is a woman who lived by her own rules, outside of the world, dreaming of higher, illusory and romantic goals.<sup>184</sup> But maybe the person whom the narrator should love is the worldly and plain Hortense. What is the narrator looking for? Why is she so interested in Hortense and Miriam? Here lies the powerful meaning of this short story. Barber directs our attention to the story of the aunts, but the melodrama resides in the undeliberated confessions that construct the deep interest of the silent narrator. When she talks about Miriam always taking care of a doll as if it were a baby we have the first clue: “Why not dedicate a life to a doll who never soils a diaper or spits up on clean clothes? Why should the baby or Miriam spoil themselves?” (Barber, *School* 63) That is why she prefers Miriam to Hortense. Hortense has always been a mother, first her children, then Miriam herself. At one point in the story the narrator offers to help with the ironing but Hortense rejects her offer: “No, dear, you’ve got to get back to your children. They need you, you know” (Barber, *School* 65). The conflict regarding motherhood is perceived in Madeleine’s attitude but, in fact, she even confesses it in a desperate outburst of sincerity:

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<sup>184</sup> There is a mysterious story in an unsuccessful affair between Miriam and a man called Edward Titley: “You’d only want me to be different” (Barber, *School* 64) says in an Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* way. That is a lesson in love: freedom to kiss, to love, to feel happy, in connection but not getting married, not possessing.



Why do they need me? They'd be better on their own, actually. I love them because of duty and guilt, except for when they're asleep. Safe. Wrapped in nocturnal arms, which are so big and roomy. What kind of gift am I giving if I don't know how to love? (Barber, *School* 66)

The main topic is that of a woman searching for some kind of clue in her past that helps her feel reinforced in some feelings that are disturbing. Miriam is the fantastic model she wants to construct. Miriam is absent, living and dwelling in a world of her own where everything is beautiful and there is enough room for glittering and light. She matches some other characters in Barber's collections, such as Sara with her obsession for being different, for being a lady. Madeleine looks for that model in Miriam so she does not feel lonely about her recent feelings. Her family used to say: "Don't be so choosy. So self-centered. You'll end up with nothing" (Barber, *School* 61), like Miriam, and now that she has certain feelings of guilt, she needs to look back and try to find in Miriam a way out from that guilt or remorse. She is looking for some kind of reliable example or model but Miriam is sick, she is not consciously aware of her freedom and when they finally talk the communication is uncomplete and clumsy, but Madeleine, finally, takes another lesson: "to remind me to love my chance to be human and not try to escape too soon" (Barber, *School* ). Maybe the model is Hortense: feeling emotions though painful, not avoiding but confronting, not floating but fighting, not escaping but turning back. In a sense, Barber is talking about the failure of roles in marriages when these are imposed or accepted by obligation and the consequences that assuming them can take, but we also perceived the silence wrapping the stories of these three women and how, again, that visibility is here communicated through the unveiling of those silenced stories.

The book closes with “Anne at the Shore.” In this story, one of the most perplexing, least linear (one day is lost in the chronology) yet most powerful stories, Barber ends with a potent image that is both moving and satisfying. A dream of terrible clarity, in which what happens is less important than the feeling it provokes: a timeless evocation of need and longing. This story is the dreamy evocation of Anne’s drifting. Her dreams on the beach are full of horses, dolls, little girls, even crying. This is Barber’s most lyrical and symbolic short story: all is mixed in a chaos of symbols, images and dreams, but all are understandable: wings, dolls, birds, the beach and that final scene with Anne making a woman out of sand.

In short, in this collection, as I have tried to show through these many examples, Barber expands her idea of womanhood constrained by the limiting and nullifying roles that society prescribes for women. In her memoir and her novel, Barber develops these topics by talking about visibility. Visibility involves the struggle to come out of the darkness of a place, a routine or a duty that was not chosen by women themselves but was imposed on them as roles generated by patriarchy and the standards promoted by Mormon orthodoxy. Visibility, then, connotes dignity, pride, determination, self-esteem, confidence, promises, dreams, all the attributes and emotions that those women had to repress for the sake of their purpose in life. This is the train that young Phyllis did not want to board. In *The School of Love*, however, that visibility transforms in a desperate attempt to stand up, to rebel, to search or to avoid acceptance and apathy.

Additionally, in *The School of Love*, Barber develops love from a different perspective. She expands on the pains provoked by an idealized conception of love. Love as something of painful consequences when it becomes the only reason to go on even if these women

realize that love was not what they were told it was going to be. Thus love is understood in terms of the couple and marriage as a new device to trap the free will and individual determination of these women. And when women give vent to their compulsion to behave differently and satisfy their instincts and hidden desires, they find that this is almost impossible unless they are willing to give more than what they are going to get. The reader also feels that love is painful and, in most cases, it is impossible to achieve the idealized conception upon which the idea of love is constructed. Worse yet is when love is forced into the institution of marriage. As Helen B. Cannon explains in “Strange Love: The School of Love by Barber”, in this collection the reader is “schooled in love that defies conscious expression – love that wells up from the subconscious” (173). Love throughout all these stories draws a synergetic nature that seems to connect all the stories. Barber draws an almost invisible connection between different stories that seem to establish some kind of general coherence to the book. This connection helps make a school out of all these lessons. Thus, the stories “White on White” and “Radio KENO” are unconsciously or undeliberately pronounced in “Silver Dollars”: “I take the box to my room, slip it under my bed, and listen to radio station KENO” (Barber, *School* 12) and “...to circle my arms around his white-on-white shirt” (Barber, *School* 12). But there are more, if in “Silver Dollars” we see the link between this and two other stories because Barber mentions those two expressions at the end of the story<sup>185</sup>, in “White on White” we have a third link and it is the bond established between this story and “Love Story for Miriam”, through the coincidence on names between the narrator of the last one, Madeleine, and the friend who encourages Sara to get the white dress. Barber, thus, offers a complex secondary reading of

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<sup>185</sup> I interpret that Barber is offering a new and original interpretation of these three stories as one long and single story. The grown up women in “White on White” and “Radio KENO” can be read as if they both were the girl in “Silver Dollars.” Barber thus draws two possible endings for the story that was pending in “Silver Dollars.” First, if we understand that the grown up woman in “White on White” was the little girl in “Silver Dollars”, it seems that Barber is offering a new story in which that girl follows the rigid concepts of purity. If we do the same with “Radio KENO”, it looks like if she chose to marry someone like Mario in “Silver Dollars”, thus taking the opposite direction.

connections which could propose different meanings when those women are approached in connection to each other. A connection established through their different but comparable responses to love, because, in the end, there is a feeling pervading the book that hurt and healing prevail in equal measure.

In any case, Barber skillfully hides one expectation that remains latent, *veiled* and waiting to be discovered by her female characters and by those readers who do not lose heart until the *veil* is parted. The general overview of the collection as a contemplation of feminine issues, whether within a Mormon context or not. Determining if any persuasive outcome could be stemmed from the integral reading of the collection as a whole remains a potential opportunity to draw conclusions which prove unstable and contradictory with the tone and the divergence of the stories.

#### **4.3.4. Manhood: Roles Out of Home**

Male characters also play a key part in the depiction of gender roles in a Mormon context, basically through the values and responsibilities of fatherhood but also as husbands who follow the attitudes promoted by the Church and by society at large and this is placed as the primary role of any man who is a member of the Church and aims at being worthy: “your responsibility as a father and a husband transcends any other interest in life” (Packer 21). Additionally, they are also asked to help promote the “divinely appointed role as a mother” (Hunter 50) of their wives: “we urge you to do all in your power to allow your wife to remain in the home, caring for the children while you provide for the family the best you can” (Hunter 52). As B. Kent Harrison and Mary Stovall Richards declare this definition of roles has affected both sexes, since if women have been limited by social,

political and economic power, “men too have suffered from narrow definitions of masculine behaviour” (192). Chodorow explains that mothering also affects men since the psychological process of reproducing mothering roles in the female prepares men to locate their primary place in the public sphere, worried about the public life rather than the family (9). It creates a sexual and familial division of labor that puts each member in the proper place on this role map<sup>186</sup>. This notion of the home as a cultural construction for the benefit of a capitalist economic system is also proposed by Rich and it comes from Engels definition of monogamy as “a great historical advance, but at the same time it inaugurated, along with slavery and private wealth, that epoch, lasting until today, in which every advance is likewise a relative regression, in which the well-being and development of the one group are attained by the misery and repression of the other” (Engels 74). From here Rich concludes that “for mothers, the privatization of the home has meant not only an increase in the powerlessness, but a desperate loneliness” (53). Carrie A. Miles also concludes that “the social system called patriarchy, or less pejoratively, the historic sexual division of labor, was the natural outgrowth of the economic conditions that prevailed prior to the Industrial Revolution” (*LDS* 2). In Mormon culture, the male figure is also stereotyped by a set of standards which demand a particular code of behavior and a group of responsibilities from men, also derived from a certain economic division of responsibilities, thus fitting into a definition of patriarchy that has been developed by authors such as S. Scott Bartchy in relation to religion and that Miles summarizes as “the rule of a few men over *everyone* else, male and female” (*Patriarchy* 71). Basically,

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<sup>186</sup> Gayle S. Rubin, in her article “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex”, published in Reyna Reiter’s *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, in 1975, wove her theories with those by Engels, Levi-Strauss and Freud to come to close terms with Chodorow’s stress on psychological bonds as a way to analyze sex-gender systems and the inequality promoted in them. Rubin focused on kinship, heterosexual marriage and families, but basically on the Oedipal complex, like Chodorow. She states: “Kinship systems require a division of the sexes. The Oedipal phase divides the sexes. Kinship systems include sets of rules governing sexuality. The Oedipal crisis is the assimilation of these rules and taboos. Compulsory heterosexuality is the product of kinship. The Oedipal phase constitutes heterosexual desire. Kinship rests on a radical difference between the rights of men and women. The Oedipal complex confers male rights upon the boy, and forces the girl to accommodate herself to lesser rights” (Rubin 198).

fatherhood consists of a basis concerned with the leading as head of the family and the bearing of economic welfare for the family. Hunter says “your leadership of the family is your most important and sacred responsibility” (50) and Packer adds that “you are responsible, unless disabled, to provide temporal support for your wife and children” (21). In Barber, home means home, and the roles are criticized or approached in a more sentimental way, because the bond is so energetic that it is practically impossible to approach from an objective point of view. Economic or political visions of construction in familial context are slightly studied in this dissertation.

The male characters in Barber’s novel *And the Desert Shall Blossom* are those that are elaborated best. This is especially true in the case of Alf Jensen, the main male character in the novel, a complex character who needs to be envisioned in different dimensions and analyzed from different perspectives, as Esther Jensen herself does: “She glanced over at Alf who had once been lost in the middle of eleven children, some dead, some alive, the son of Mama Kristina who never talked about her husband after Alf found him in the coal shed” (Barber, *And* 81).

However, some of the features that Barber will use to construct the character of Alf Jensen or the tension between him and his children are already described in the fathers in “Oh, Say, Can You See?” or “Silver Dollars.” Economic matters seem to surround both of them, basically as one of the standards that they have to complete is that of supplying support for the family: “the lord has commanded that women and children have claim on their husbands and fathers for their maintenance” (Hunter 52) and this is an insumortable obligation that, specially in the example of Alf Jensen, drives to some short of sickly obsession with his duty as supporter of economics both because sometimes he is unable but

also because once he is rid of this burden he feels that his main obligations with the family are done. Derived probably from here, there is a sense of failure that never abandons him and that seems to be attached, somehow, to her wife: “but why, every time he looked at her, did he feel like some sort of miniature jackass?” (Barber, *And* 9)

Herman Nelson, Barber’s own father, is the father in “Oh, Say, Can You See?” This short story, published in her collection *The School of Love* in 1990, was later incorporated into her autobiography *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*. Herman summarizes happiness in a sentence: “I have a job, a wife, three children, and an address,” he said. “God bless the government” (Barber, *School* 7). This makes Herman resemble Alf Jensen, presented at the beginning of the novel, the Alf Jensen who tries to convince himself of all those things. The difference between the two men is that Alf Jensen is not able to believe in that idea any longer. In the short story the dam plays an important role as it will later in the novel. Phyllis situates herself in an oppressive, limiting atmosphere. Physically because of the dam, the heat, and the mushroom in the aftermath of the atomic bomb tests, but psychologically, as well, because of the male adults like Uncle Tommy and her father. Mary Elizabeth, in *And the Desert Shall Blossom*, experiences the same physical and psychological oppression. “Oh, Say, Can You See?” is the title of this short story and both young Phyllis in this story, and Mary Elizabeth in *And the Desert Shall Blossom* see further. When Ike comes to see the dam and her father puts her on his shoulders to see him and later her Uncle Tommy lifts her to see over the dam wall or when the Jensens are at the dam expecting to hear “The Star-Spangled Banner,” in both those scenes the girls see more than they are expected to. In the first case, young Phyllis sees deception. In the second one, Mary Elizabeth sees fear. Although they are accompanied by her fathers in both cases, their

fathers trigger those reactions rather than acting as supporting figures to lean on when the girls feel fear or deception.

The father in “Oh, Say, Can You See,” and in the entire autobiography and Alf Jensen are secondary characters but they carry a rich symbolic weight in the stories. Alf Jensen is a fully developed character that undergoes his own critical experience, but most of his conflicts and battles are described and developed in comparison and relation to his wife, the main character in the book. In some way, he reminds the inner conflict of the frontier man:

... the frontier made Americans American and that America was the strong white man, the restless individual, both self-reliant and unsatisfied. Born of no family and producing no progeny, the American was “made” out West, both satisfying a nation’s sense of its exceptionalist difference from the inherited history of the Old World and simultaneously generating anxiety about how this exceptionalism might be perpetuated through a continuing national genealogy. (Handley, *Marriage* 25)

The main difference between Handley’s portrayal and Alf Jensen is that his drama relies on his desperate attempt to become an exceptional hero. Rather than being a hero, Alf has adopted the pose of being. His circumstances evoke those Handley lists in his quotation: Alf is a frontier-type both physically and psychologically. In any case, I am reluctant to apply this pattern to Alf Jensen, even if he seems to be shaped by these motivations. He is in the perfect place and circumstances to be a frontier man “made out West.” He is absolutely unsatisfied and he is restless. He is a white man who believes he is strong. He tries hard to be self-reliant. He believes in his exceptionalism, but the anxiety is stronger than the satisfaction. His family and his progeny, which Handley underlines as characteristics which the hero has to lack, are too strong for him to allow his entrepreneurship. His culture dresses him with an emphasis on conformism and communality that clashes with the potential emphasis on adventure and ambition. If



Handley says that American exceptionalism, which was forged in the experience of the frontier, was both a source of satisfaction and a source of anxiety because of the need to perpetuate it through a national genealogy, the Mormon genealogy in Alf's memory seems to force an anxiety that rather than perpetuating seems to be trying to blossom a specific spirit which is a seemingly imbalanced blend of frontier heroism and Mormon pioneering.

There is clearly something too complex about this character who suffers the tension between two different energies and the compulsion to see rather forward and the imbalanced burden of a past that still hurts him. Rather than being self-reliant, Alf is desperately trying to be self-reliant. His tragic heroism is the same dramatic impossibility to get rid of a fate that seems to regard him with almost automatic guilt and unsuccess. His tragic heroism is equal because he tries to fit his Mormon standards in a male world of strikes, workers and nepotism in which he built a character for himself, as he tries to do to fit in his Mormon dimension, trying to build a personal feature for her in which polygamy, communication to God and breeding his family seem to be enough. In both cases he is trying clumsily to fit in places where he is unable to complete the whole standard. On the one hand, he is trying to fit into the standards of manliness that Knowlton described as American complex of masculinity, values of "independence, strength, power, potency, aggression, competition, hard work, self-sacrifice, being in control of difficult situations, athleticism, success, and emotional solidity and control" (23). On the other hand, Mormonism shares some of these features when building their own sense of manliness but they add a few more:

Mormonism praises the man who is able to shed tears as a manifestation of spirituality. Instead of independence and aggression, it values the collegial man who operates within the domain of the Church in a non-contentious, cooperative fashion. It focuses on manhood as self-sacrificing service to family, church, and others. The man

is expected to be deeply involved in the family, perhaps even in a nurturing role. Official Mormonism does not allow for a sexual double standard: men are expected to be chaste until marriage, and then only to be sexual with their spouses. It stresses restrained and controlled sexuality. Additionally, it values, at least officially, a limited kind of male bonding between companions, and within quorums and presidencies. Here, such male bonding is positively sanctioned to build, and express with emotion, love for one another at appropriate times. (Knowlton 23-24)

Alf Jensen is somewhere between the orthodox Mormonism in which he never fits into completely and the possibility of petty power that makes him dip unsuccessfully into criminality and adultery. Mormonism brings also echoes of failure for him. He had a chance to ascend on Mormon scale but he failed and that memory is part of the psychological weight that determines his present actions and decisions in the novel. Toscano states that “ecclesiastical hierarchy stratifies men as well as women” (*Are* 26) but she explains how Mormonism sanctions or prohibits the exhibition of aspirations to climb in hierarchy because ambition is not a proper attribute (*Are* 26). In consequence, that failure is silenced, and the lack of verbliness seems to enlarge the influential potency of that emotion.

In Barber’s fiction the male figures are the ones who harbor doubt about Mormonism and who are able to handle the world out there. The female figures will almost always be limited and tied by Mormon standards and beliefs. The chance, challenge, or revolt against these beliefs is left in the hands of the male characters. However, most of this distancing from Mormonism takes the shape of sexual repression or worldly-minded concern rather than any kind of spiritual hesitation. In this case, unlike the spiritually-minded Esther, Alf’s flowering is materialistic. Despite their differences, Alf and Esther both violate the stereotypes of the faithless and the faithful, largely because of their love for each other. Both long for a visibility that could be translated into a hunger for speaking in one and for singing in the other. If Esther’s uncomplete reliefs will come from her performances at

stage, Alf, when changes to Alfred as his chest billows with a chance to stand up, is “anxious for an opportunity to speak” (Barber, *And* 45). Alf is a man fighting against failure, trying to dignify his identity. In a way, he is worried about not fulfilling his male role. He shows, as Knowlton puts it, “a secret fear that we might not meet the lofty and rigid standards of manhood” (19), or as Chodorow puts it, “preoccupation with masculinity and fear of being unmasculine” (ix):

In his head, he replayed his run to the commissary, his luck at knowing where the extinguisher was, his chance to be seen as he should be seen --- a man of action, always available in a crisis. But even Alf was swept back into events and out of his self-concern. The moment lifted him out of self-absorption, out of Alf, the uneven man who sometimes broke promises and spoke half-truths, who most of the time preferred hooch to the sacrament he took on Sundays.” (Barber, *And* 61)

He has internalized his failure from an economic point of view: “His wife stopped noticing the fine lines of his face when he couldn’t keep a job” (Barber, *And* 222). At the end of the novel, Alf gets a job in the municipal offices, so for him he achieves a certain kind of success. Nevertheless, something will make this joy incomplete. Money plays an important role in the novel as a device to differ or classify the characters. Some times, their differentiations seem to be established in economic terms rather than ideological or sentimental. Thus, Esther contrasts with Alf when Alf thinks big and makes money easy by the lending business while she keeps on saving coin by coin by ironing somebody else’s clothes which Barber executes with a beautiful parallelism because while Esther washes for money: “She’d decided to wash other people’s laundry to cool herself down and refill the blue ceramic teapot” (*And* 79), Alf washes money: “Alf: always looking for the bigger, faster, and better way to make money instead of plodding along on consistency and salary” (Barber, *And* 119). The image is powerful and meaningful and not only establishes a division of class but reports the echoes of this division in gender issues, as Cixous once

said when talking about the sexual difference in writing: “it is not simple, it’s not men against women, it’s one economy versus the other” (*Difficult* 23). Money in here, in any case, can only be understood as a conflict or a tension within gender issues if it is also understood in ethical terms. If the couple clash over this topic it is because of the moral understanding that each one of them does not share about how each other gets his money, especially in the case of the husband. Esther longs for her innocence and Alf billows in his discredit, lack of belief (Barber, *And* 88). As I already stated, both Alf and Esther share the same concern about failure and visibility; Alf was trying to be seen in a different way as well. In any case, Alf’s failure, although due to a certain degree to his role training as a husband, is largely based on his own conception of himself, his own dreams and ideals; Esther’s failure, on the other hand, is provoked solely by the role training because she is not aware of being able to do things any other way. Men are able to find promotions or promises outside the narrow context of the household, whereas women are always forced to promote themselves always inside the narrow boundaries of the kitchen.

Alf and Esther need each other to understand themselves as a couple but also as individuals. Maybe because, as Knowlton said, manhood is “a creation formed in opposition to a male-based discourse about womanness” (20), they need each other to break those codes and find oneself. Both have a dark, negative, sad side and a bright, positive, joyful one. The difference between them is the way they are able to access the latter one or whether they have to restrain themselves and stick to the former one. The first is set in the long run, it is a straight line, a long run for them both; the second is for both a matter of isolated moments, choppy instances, an album full of photographs with gaps in between.

Alf is the bulk of Esther's promises: "The man who represented too many things to her" (Barber, *Desert* 83). That is the main difference; Alf has hopes of his own that would be profitable not so much for the rest of the family but basically for himself. Esther, however, is only able to construct her own hopes through those of her husband. It seems as though she is unable to formulate hopes of her own. She looks back; he looks forward. Either of them contemplates the present. Esther, as happens with most of Barber's female characters, is dependent on a man and this dependency is unhealthy; rather than a claim or a complaint, it is a tacit fact that portrays the inability of a woman who has been trained to be dependent to break free. This is not an isolated example in Barber's fiction. In her short stories, most of the time men are absent but that dependency on men still seems unavoidable.

The clash between male and female roles in society and household is bitterly depicted in this couple when Alf asks Esther: "I'm sick of you females. Delicate sensibilities. Cultured. Who feeds all of you?" (Barber, *And* 85) Their relationships will be the main channel to understand the conflicts between them. The individual versus society is not only key to understanding much of the literature written by Americans in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; it is compulsory method of analysis to understand Mormon history and idiosyncrasy. In an attempt to avoid generalities but rather stick to the characters in Barber's fiction, a complex web of feelings is always present in the construction of the reality of individuals and couples. In most cases, the couples are unable to come together, but they cannot remain singles either. In the case of Alf and Esther, the inner conflict of their relationship is due to different perspective in each member. While she forces herself to remember him, he forces himself to forget her. For Esther, Alf is "still the man she loved more than she hated" (Barber, *And* 122). Much tension arises in the story as a result of this imbalance between love and hatred. But the sense of failure, even if experienced in different ways by each

character, is a shared feeling for both. Alf knows that he has failed with respect to her dreams. That burden is always present. He wants to talk to her and say things, confess his failures but he is unable to do it. Once again, the difference between them is that Alf seems to have an opportunity to reshape her definition and turn that bitterness into a last chance to succeed.

Apart from in relationship to her wife, Alf is also constructed through his relationship to Serena, the friend and neighbor who lost her husband in a labor accident. In fact, she is the one that tells Alf the truth about himself: “And you’re decent, Alf, even if you don’t appear that way to everybody. You wouldn’t dish a man, or a woman for that matter, any dirt. And you stayed faithful to Esther as long as you could. You’re decent, Alf” (Barber, *And* 223). The things she is telling him that she appreciates from him are not the wild, big image he wants to get. Decency is not his goal but all the source of his fear. He could say of his father that he was a decent man but he would not say he was a big man.

Serena looks stronger than Esther because she is able to handle her circumstances with a bit of irony but she is really equally as weak and just as dependable on men as Esther. This makes it even harder for the reader to understand how these women are tied by her role training and the circumstances in which they had to live. In fact, Serena is two different characters and none of them seems complete. On the one hand, Serena is the embodiment of independence and determination, even when this means a price you have to pay. Serena is thus the one who seems independent but who cries when her husband dies becomes truth becomes evident out of the blue: “I don’t know if I loved him, Esther” (Barber, *And* 111). Serena confesses that he stayed with him even if she knew that he was “a hard one to live with, but I stayed with him” (Barber, *And* 110), but she stayed. She was unable to get free

of that unsuccessful relationship, like Esther: “Somebody, let me have my Ed back. I’ll be nicer to him. I promise. He was enough. Why did I keep pestering him about a child? Why couldn’t I just love him?” (Barber, *And* 111) Serena feels a sense of failure as well, this time because she wants a kid but she is unable to have one. She talks with determinacy and dominates sex but she is not able to retain a man with her. On the other hand, Serena is only an instrument to x-ray Alf. From the very beginning, she is introduced into the fiction as compared to Esther:

She stood apart from the others, someone sure of her ground and her footing, a woman not bound to anyone or anything, at home in her body as if she’d been there for five lifetimes, a woman immune to the gravity beneath her. She seemed to know Alf. (Barber, *And* 46)

And this tendency continues all throughout the book and she herself sees how Esther is different because she aspires to a bigger standard and she and Alf are regular, something that Alf does not share when he looks at her. In any case, finally Alf will pledge to that special and painful magnetism in Esther:

An irregularity in his breathing always surprised Alf when he looked straight at Serena, full-faced. Green fanthoms for eyes, her pupils almost the shape of small marquise diamonds, almost like cat’s eyes that could open and close out the light. A survivor. (Barber, *And* 136)

And right next to this thought he goes back to talk about Esther, he compares Serena to Esther. Esther is always in his mind. She is always jumping into his head even if the memories or the reflections are hurting or disappointing. In fact, both characters do not seem to have the same concept of Esther and this point seem to be an equally understandable way of comprehending the distance that they share. While Serena remembers Esther as a “pretty tough” (Barber, *And* 137) woman and she reminds her of

that time in Ragtown when she was the one to deal with that kid roped, Alf reveals more about himself than about Esther when he opts to highlight that what differs them is a different concept of integrity, “the righteousness on her mind” (Barber, *And* 138).

Alf is attracted to Serena: “While Esther was a vulnerable creature, almost without skin, with no place to hide her feelings, Serena had a harder surface” (Barber, *And* 112). He feels attracted to the darkness, to the mystery, to what he cannot grasp at first. But the attraction also resides in her body and sex because it is easy to help Serena and give her what she is longing for: a child. As Knowlton says “the Church stresses over and over, from the time we are boys and through our adult life, that we must repress our libido” (25). Alf is repressed and Serena gives her a relief from it. He is also trapped by the imposed male role to seed females. While for women reproduction is, apart from a maternal instinct, a duty that they must obey, for Alf it is a source of pride, a way of feeling useful. It is also a duty, but much more positive than giving birth is for females. He gains confidence because making babies is the one thing he knows how to do properly. In fact, it is also when they talk about being a mother that the main difference between Esther and Serena is underlined: Esther wants babies to contribute to the building of the kingdom of God on earth whereas Serena wants the baby as “a connection to another life that would help anchor her own, maybe” (Barber, *And* 147). This is the conflict, the tension that Knowlton expresses in the following quotation:

As we seek the purity and spirituality desired by the gospel, we enter into the powerful conflict with our libidos and our sense of manhood, given the way national discourse formulates it, Mormonism exacerbates this conflict with its focus on sexuality as the major defining criterion of purity. But our penises and sexuality also become means by which we obtain salvation, in the sense that by marrying and raising a family we fulfil an important criterion for admission into the celestial kingdom. (Knowlton 25)



Thus Alf finds a balance between his spirituality and his adultery or promiscuity with Serena, he finds a reason to be successful, he is good at making children, but he is finally unsuccessful. Finally, Alf secures Serena's acceptance, but he cannot stop thinking of Esther. And he feels guilty because he admits that he removed her from her community. Serena means "peace" (Barber, *And* 221). She tells Alf that he is a decent man, something that he would like to hear from Esther. "You're a regular guy, that's fine" (Barber, *And* 221). He finds peace with Serena, but not with Esther. The same regular life is not enough, maybe because he is expected to give her things he cannot give her and Esther always seems to be the living testimony of his failure. Alf sends a letter to Esther while she is still in the hospital: "I love you, my dear wife, but I somehow don't think we are good for each other" (Barber, *And* 231). He feels impotent. It is the truth, kind of a confession. Apparently, he is selfish. He is trying to get rid of that burden called Esther, but he is sincere, stating his truth. Nothing is clear, nothing is easy. Everything has its good and bad side, its hurtful and its blessed side. But for once he is doing what he wants to, what he really considers that he should do, not just what he is expected to, what someone else tells him he has to do. He also seemed selfish when he began to get close to Serena, but that is Barber's technique. Nothing is evident or resolved. It is up to the reader to avoid passing judgement, to judge his or her own prejudice. By the end of the book, Serena is again compared to Esther but this time the loss is direct and not an interpretation of Alf's constant comparison-making with Esther: "Serena seemed a pastel picture compared to the passionate Esther" (Barber, *And* 278).

Alf is a complex character, in trouble with himself and set in between Serena and Esther. He approaches his instinctive desires. He is not attracted by security or stillness, perhaps because he has not been successful at providing either of these for his own family.

Something inside Alf longs for what he does not have, for what he is not supposed to have, but instead of a positive dream, his desires become ambitions which provoke his failure to be happy. Alf's failure resides in his trying to be a "Big Man", trying to fulfill his own ambitious expectations. But, in a sense, the reader is left with the feeling that he was also forced, thrown into this necessity for bigness. A necessity that unveils a crossroads in which Mormon upbringing and the male codes of ambition and improvement collapse to complicate Alf's self-definition. His tragedy is that he thought he should have been someone he did not get to be but this was really not what he was expecting for himself. Alf collides with their individual aspirations and dreams. Besides, those aspirations and dreams need to be validated publicly so they are true and successful, they have to prove visibly that he achieved those standards that reveal her manliness, the internal recognition of your validity is not enough: "He had to think of his own dreams too. And he liked to laugh, get down-and-out obscene and say all those things Esther thought were disgusting" (Barber, *And* 116). But Esther cannot do it the other way around. She cannot think of her own dreams too. Her dreams are shaped by what she is supposed to be and there is no way for personal ambitions in her world. Her tragedy is that she thought she should have been someone she got to be but this was not really what she was expecting for herself. That is the main different between these two characters.

This couple's final big moment comes during the picnic at the dam, when the wild, alive woman comes out. They argue and Alf slaps her and both lose control. Alf constantly demands the virtues she cannot provide: fresh air, stop whining and crying. But there is an unbreakable link between them: "Come on, sweet lady. God knows we've got some repair work to do, but I still love you." (*And* 201) Barber inserts a clear message right after these words: "The words surprised Alf because they rang true" (*And* 201). He is also surprised

when he thinks about Esther while he is with Serena because it is difficult to understand how you can love someone when it is impossible to be together. He has been fighting against that love because he could not manage to bear it. Esther was the glue. Now, with her in the hospital, Alf drinks. Barber does not say so, but the reader perceives the distance. Nevertheless, there is no chance for them to get together again: “You can’t control me with them anymore. All your sadness. All your melancholy. You can’t control me and keep me from life anymore” (Barber, *And* 265).

At the end of the book, Alf is still thinking about her. He feels free, but Esther is still present in his private inner feelings. The bond between them two, regardless of whether it was nurtured in poisonous waters or rooted in solid ground, will run wild and free of any dam. In fact, Barber establishes a parallel with the construction of the dam. The dam brought a good opportunity for Alf who felt that in those circumstances he had a chance to become the man he wanted to be, being strong enough to confront his inner disturbances with his faith and his social status. In the final scene, when Esther is back from hospital but refuses to sing, Alf finds out that he wants to take her home, leaving Serena, instead, on her own. The couple is back, but now Esther is just a kid, her emotional energy has been lost, and now she is the one who needs to be nurtured and cared. The roles are disturbingly interchanged, once the spiritual flow of the river has been harnessed. The conclusion that was anticipated in that “the words ring true” in the dam’s viewpoint closes the frontier-like period of this man. Once the frontier is conquered, Alf returns home because from the very beginning that energy, even if a tenuous energy, was the wildest and strongest flow of life that could not be harnessed.

Their marriage seems to bond them beyond the factual compromises that they blessed in the temple. All throughout the novel, they were overwhelmed by the circumstances, and their individual concerns seem to separate them rather than make them feel closer. But, in the end, a sense of tender fatality, because it is not joyous but nor sad, seems to force them to be together. Wayne Schow explains that even when you go into marriage absolutely sure of your feelings and the possibilities of happiness, it is difficult to avoid the disappointments of “the fact that life is flux, that not only do circumstances change but people in that moving stream change as well. Romantic idealism is based on the premise that the essence of relationship is permanent. But reality often challenges that assumption” (Schow 116).

In the case of the Jensens, there is a tendency to agree in that the essence of marriage is that a relationship is permanent. Mormon marriage is for eternity. It seems to come rather than from a romantic idealism, from a faithful duty. Alf and Esther change, transform, progress in the flux of life, in the flux of the Colorado River, and there is no way of stopping that flux, there is no way to stop the Colorado River’s force. In any way, they both seem to be together again in the end, after the changes, they come together again. But the circumstances and the conditions do not help to have a happy end. In fact, they come together after Alf commits adultery, or, rather, after Esther is conscious that Alf committed adultery, because, previously, she was trying to pledge to Serena’s and Alf’s affair in the belief that it was a blessed polygamous condition and, as a Mormon, she was compelled to understand. If, as Schow concludes “[a]dultery is forbidden to secure fidelity and stability in marriages, thereby reducing the disruptive effects of sexual competition and sexual promiscuity, and creating conditions conducive to rearing children” (118), something is not right in this relationship.

The moral tension established between both characters in connection to religious standards and economic circumstances is resolved by the end of the book when the two characters are aware of their smallness, even if, for both, means and has different consequences. With the surprising visit of Mr. Glavin, who seems a ghostly character, instrumental for Alf's opening, to the company which seemed the top of Alf's crusade towards success, he is aware of the matter of levels in which he has messed his problems:

“I didn't think big enough, thinking the problem was fear when really it's scale one needs to consider. A correct perception of scale! Some have big vision. Some don't. Plain and simple”.

“Who, Mr. Glavin, assigns big or small on the scale? Our fathers who hang themselves? Our mothers who endure? Where's the morality in this, good sir?”

“If you want to find fraud, you can. If you decided it's not necessary, then you don't. A word of wisdom from your seasoned investigator who's seen a few games, and not all of them big ones.” (Barber, *And* 253)

Alf realizes that both are the same but in a different scale or level. There is no use in pretending to be big. That is relative. Sid Empey is big. Alf is small but the problem is not coming from small to big but progressing forward in any of the two scales. He is accusing of being afraid to everybody around him and that is the core of the problem, trying to scheme a bigger scale to avoid facing the fear that harvests that unreachable goal. Next Alf questions the origin of that scale. But there is another reading available in Mr. Glavin's words: that fraud is found if you want to find fraud. Maybe it is all a matter of understanding failure. Alf thought that he was failing all the time because he was afraid to be ambitious and grow from small to big but it is not a matter of growing, it is a matter of ideas, you can stand small and still be dare and pure. That is the final lesson that seems to offer a source for peace to Alf. Esther has the same sensitivity about the dimension of her success but also she thinks in the same way about her failures:

She relished the memory of being alone on a stage and hearing the applause and the cheers, but she knew now it was only a brief thing, unimportant really. A star is bright, then a star fades, but it doesn't matter whether it is bright or faded – it's only on its way to becoming something else. A moment of brightness was a point in a long chain of events, and there was no reason to assign importance to bright or dark, being it was all a continuum. She knew that now. So she kissed her fingers and three a kiss to the Boulder Theater and the one moment of her life which had seemed so important. (Barber, *And* 257)

Again there are connections between these two speeches but the impression blooms that one is delivered backwards, Esther's watches backwards, and the other one, Alf's, is delivered by looking forward. Now, they both share a notion of present time and continuity that bounds them together and to the river. For Alf it is the first time. For Esther it is the first time without the burden of dark waters. And they do it in front of a dam that seems too big, epic, solid and unmovable, a project that "had captured America's imagination with its larger-than-life ambition in small-minded, depressed times" (Barber, *And* 262). Their final reunion does not erase but underlines the tensions that have shaped their marriage. Alf and Esther are, at the end of the book, the victims of their love, a love that was measured and sharpened by too many codes and expectations.

Another important male character is Herbert Jensen, Alf and Esther's son. Tender, sensitive, always in the background, but strong, rebellious in silent movement, he is the only character who does not seem to be sick, the only character who is able to face the context without being defeated. He is different because he has dreams. He feels connection, he is measured and reflects and in that way he is somehow accused of being effeminate, or, at least, too close to her mother. Herbert is also the only one who seems to see the real tragedy of all the concerns between his father and his mother, and he does it not with sarcasm or victimism but with a beloved expectation that tries to understand all the array of

possibilities in life: “Alf and Esther looked at each other with eyes that could have been bitter and both decided to smile instead” (Barber, *And* 178). The only witness of this little detail is Herbert because he is the one who watches, the one who observes and interprets: “Herbert watched her fold her arms and look straight ahead, no redeeming glance for her husband. He wished for once she could have kept quite, just once on this special occasion. He hated tension, the silences” (Barber, *And* 179).

Even though, he has been always caring for his mother, he is also condescending with his father because he is able to see and accept the flaws in all of them, even his own. He has expectations for both, not only for Esther but also for Alf: “He wanted his father to see something besides the broken shell of Esther which couldn’t quite repair itself” (Barber, *And* 177). He does not understand his father and he mistakes when he tries to help his mother but he has the original energy to face problems and try to find solutions and to see everything and everyone with critical but compassionate eyes. When his father tries to face him with all the gathered frenzy and anger, he does not respond to the attack:

It wasn’t good when their father came home drunk or angry. (...) They’d see him lash out at Herbert, telling him he was a Mama’s boy with a geletin spine. They even watched him kick Herbert, lift the toe of his shoe and kick him hard in the shins. (Barber, *And* 245)

In 1986, Barber published “Windows” in *Sunstone Magazine*, after this short story was rewarded with an honourable mention in the D.K. Brown Fiction Contest. That story is a flashback of the longer story that she would be telling five years later in *And the Desert Shall Blossom*. The characters are the same Jensen family, but this time, while they are still leaving in Ely, Nevada, a background in the memories of the same characters when they are developed in the novel. This time, the point of view is delivered through the eyes of a

young Herbert. It could not be better said, because eyes are the symbolical center of the narration, the pivotal axis that balances the plot. Herbert is an eight year old dreamy son who embarks on a short but complex journey with his father to take their old bull to the slaughterhouse. Through the walking, memory and present time blend as in one of the dreams that serve as a way of escape for the child. Herbert is developed through contrast to the other characters and in connection to his absent mother, who stays at home while he walks by his father. In that way, Jack, his older brother, represents physical strength and self-esteem, while Herbert has bad dreams, he is spiritual, and he reads *The Tales of King Arthur* and *The Book of Mormon*, both books a gift from his mother. Herbert wants to be what he is expected to be (or become) but he cannot be (or become) anything close to the stereotype that his father's expectations placed for him, so he always crawls into himself for shelter: "He sinks inward to his secret place, the pool where he talks with fish and breathes water" (Barber, *Windows* 24). The story is built in two dimensions united by quick and steady staircases. Present time and memory are woven through flashbacks that by the end of the story are confused with the action happening in real time. Herbert is described through contrast with the different models of his mother and his father or even that provided by Old Ben. His father is described through Herbert's memories as too gentle to women and half-drunk, and in present time, as too worried about money and success and unaware or reluctant to discover and understand life the same way Herbert does. In that way, the two opinions both parents have about the eyes of the kid are relevant. The mother says "my boy with the deep-water eyes" (Barber, *Windows* 25), the father replicates "stop dreaming and wipe those seepy eyes" (Barber, *Windows* 27). The uncomplete, clumsy journey that nothing discovers is finished when they get to Old Ben's slaughterhouse, and the Old Ben with his Mexican accent, whiskey steam and yellow teeth laughs at the masculinity of the kid because he wants to go to the bathroom instead of watching how he



kills the bull. His father follows this line and when “Herbert puts one arm over his eyes. His father pushes it back down” (Barber, *Windows* 29). When Herbert finally finds the determination to watch it is not because he grabs this model of masculinity proposed by Alf or Old Ben but because he finds a connection to the bull through his death eyes. It is not the courage and bravery that his father sees, but a connectedness drawn by the “deep-water eyes” (Barber, *Windows* 29) of the bull, eyes that make Herbert feel that the bull and himself are one. He remembers his mother’s sentence: “the eyes are the windows of the soul” (Barber, *Windows* 29) but when Old Ben sticks out one of the eyeballs the only thing that he sees behind is a “black-eyed window” (Barber, *Windows* 29).

Back to Barber’s novel, the grown-up Herbert still shows some of the characteristics that I saw in “Windows”. He does not only dream of going to university, a place to escape from the cycle of defeat he observed in his father, but he also dreams about a flowing pen in his hand. Words. The power of words is important when talking about Barber as a writer. In that line, it is significant that she bestows the power of words on a male character, but one who is quite close to Esther. Herbert is one of the few male characters able to overcome difficulties and cross the gap between Esther and everyone else. Barber gives him the symbol of being the memory of this story. He has the power to transform reality into fiction, thus paralleling her own process of searching for knowledge through words. Herbert is also the observer, the one who sees the pearl beside “the broken shell of Esther which couldn’t quite repair itself” (Barber, *And* 177). He is able to identify her parents’ mistakes as the cause of the failure, but he is unable to understand them. Herbert is the character through whose eyes we see things clearly. He is the only man who seems to understand women, thus symbolizing the last opportunity for understanding between the

sexes, the last chance to cross the gap, to span the wild river that no dam can tame and no role can shape.

Finally, when considering manhood it is also important the compulsion that Barber possesses to talk about the relationships between fathers and daughters. In *And the Desert Shall Blossom* there is a sense of estrangement between Alf and her daughters, an estrangement that goes as far as to become a physical and emotional tension in the case of her older daughter Mary Elizabeth. But this is not the only example in Barber's fiction where we see a study of these relationships. The examples are varied and from very different points of view.

As I said, in *And the Desert Shall Blossom*, Mary Elizabeth seems to be closer to her mother the further she comes from her father, with whom she shares a relationship of unsaid words and distant potencies which are basically constructed through issues dealing with gender and faith.

As he briefly studied Mary Elizabeth's face, he noticed Esther's arch of brow and the suggestion of her in the eyes, and yet the color of the eyes was Alf's as well as the shape of the forehead. A synthesis. Two in one. Splintered selves gazing back at him, Alf Jensen. But she ignored him when he approached her. She grabbed the arm of the closest person. (Barber, *And* 47)

Mary Elizabeth, who calls herself M.E., has her own personality even though her father seems in her some kind of different continuation. She has determination. She inherited the positive from Alf and Esther but she was raised on her own. The approach is different when the physicality comes to terms. In a movement of tense happiness when they are dancing, Alf comes closer to Mary Elizabeth and the contact of her bodies produces a sick electricity that illuminates some of the ill proportions of this relationship: "He felt her budding breasts

under the sheer cotton blouse and for one moment, before he remembered he was the father, wondered if her nipples would respond to his closeness” (Barber, *And* 64).

As I mentioned before, there are some other studies of these relationships in Barber’s fiction, especially among her thirteen lessons in love gathered in her collection *The School of Love*. For example, we have the relationship framed by the Boulder Dam between the girl in “Oh, Say, Can You See?” and her father, but also with her uncle Jack. There is a distance and also a tendency to quarrel this distance but since this story belongs later to her autobiography *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir* the relationship between her father and young Phyllis Nelson needs to be seen in proportion with a general analysis of this book. The relationship between both is a constant struggle between a generic, faithful, generous love and a clash between a blossoming hunger for culture and thus for recognition and visibility and a father who venerates humility and pledging to the Church’s ideals, a very close relationship or tension to that experienced by the young girl in “Silver Dollars” and her father. These topics will be later developed. But in *The School of Love* there are some other examples that remind more that of Alf and Mary Elizabeth than that of her autobiography, especially in “Tangles” and in “The Glider”. Particularly significant is the example of “Tangles”. In this story, the difficult relationship between males and females is recurrent, especially between fathers and daughters who fight to establish a first lesson of love, that of truth and overprotection. Once again, the most important part of the story is the relationship between the father and the daughter, which is very close and powerful and thus is described through the final picturing of herself in her father’s eyes, something that she already said before in this story.

In summary, Barber shows through her development of male characters that a certain pattern of gender role formation for males is equally promoted in Mormon society. Both in her fiction and in her autobiographies, male characters are developed in detail and in regard of the set of relationships which establishes the specific denominations which make individuals subjects of social affiliation. As fathers and as providers of economic support, men are also subjected to a role definition within a Mormon community that bestowed on them certain attributes and obligations. The conflict between individuality and the community is complicated by the invocation of spiritual and familial concerns. Alf Jensen's complex definition of self reveals a tangled pack of elements clouding his personal preponderance to achieve that definition.

#### **4.3.5. Sex: Recovering My Body**

In *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*, the body becomes a symbol of the protagonist's place and shape in real life. It represents her visibility in the community where she grows up. As Rosalind Petchesky explains, feminists encourage a meaning of possession for the body that privileges both body and personal and the value of self-determination; it transcends the negative, exclusionary connotation of bourgeois individualism which often associates the body with property rights (Humm 293). In Mormonism, tendency is placed to promote a sense of body as a dichotomy of spirit. This dualism denotes that body is the opposite to the spirit, then body seems to communicate negative feelings closer to sin or evil, promoting all the positive adjectives towards the spirit. That education is dangerous in the words of Schow: "I would abandon the teaching of a body / spirit dualism that implies the body is suspect, the avenue of temptation, the enemy of spirit" (134).

In this memoir, Barber places herself in front of the nakedness of some showgirls to stress the shocking experience of the discovery of body for a young Mormon girl. Bush points out to this scene of “herself gazing at the bodies of other girls or women” (*From 33*) as examples of how Barber “feels the boundaries placed around her own body by her mother and the Victorian nature of her Mormon culture, which teaches her strict adherence to personal modesty and sexual purity” (*From 33*). The point is that Barber equally rejects the other extreme, and looks for a balanced angle in the middle. Nevertheless she did the same thing, as a grown-up writer, by making some of her fictional characters illustrate the sometimes dramatic handling of their own body and sensuality. Barber uses the same technique to dramatize the identical feeling of becoming a woman when the main character in “Mormon Levis” bumps into a showgirl who, by chance, needs a tampon the same day she herself menstruates for the first time. Here, the showgirl is not naked, but she is equally impressive because of the confidence and security with which she behaves and walks.

Owning her body gives young Phyllis in the autobiography a power that permits her to confront the limitations imposed by Mormonism and patriarchy. This empowerment, resulting from the recovery of the control of the body stresses when she works as a model for Betty’s House of Furs to make money for her freshman year at Brigham Young University. She has grown but she still suffers the dichotomy that makes life more complex for a Mormon girl living in Las Vegas, even though she continues to challenge it. First, she balances Mormonness, which is spirit, air, un-bodied with the material performance of modelling. Secondly, she finally faces modelling and perform on stage. Once she walks off the stage, even though she knows the real purpose of having her walk in front of those men in a bikini, once the second training is overcome, she can go. Bush concludes that, in this

experience of modelling, “she examines what she had been taught as a Mormon girl and how those teachings contributed to a sense of having multiple and emerging identities” (*From* 36). In fact, it is only one identity, even though it is true that it is emerging. It is only one, but complex, because a woman who, over the stage, is so conscious of her own body, both as a whole and as a set of elements, a woman who sees the power of her body being on her own hands, a woman who is initiated as a woman through the confrontation of a past that is faced in one momentary experience, that woman feels empowerment. Her double transgression melts in one. From the silent transgression of her invisible, personal, intimal Mormon spirit (not only training) and the second, the noisy transgression of her visible, secular, public physical spirit (not only training) she drives one conclusion that places both in the same level:

To the scant applause from one or two people, I turned on the staircase – a slow, languid turn as if I were a windup doll revolving on a music box pedestal. Slowly, slowly – the legs, the arms, one side, the back, the other side, the front, as people ate and talked and sometimes glanced. But no one was attuned to the fact that something important was happening, that a soul was swimming in unknown waters. (Barber, *How* 187)

In an unexpectedly twist, this last story is also developed in the present tense, not in the past tense as she did in the rest of the book, amplifying the conclusions derived from the story, conclusions that need to be interpreted by the reader as consequences for a future which is described only in terms of a vague poetical determination. Barber’s narration has taken here a slow rhythm, repetitive, weighty, pompous, significant. The words revolve like the doll which shows slowly the impersonal different parts of a whole that is connected into a soul, not only a body. The use of the present tense dilates the significance of the story. Both transgressions melt in one that after the connection transforms everything in mystery, “unknown waters”, but the mystery is both a threat and a possibility, and the experience

here becomes rather than a failure, a promise of a possible end for a coming-of-age. What brings her close to reality, what pulls her out of her dreams to make her aware of reality is the heat: “No matter where I go, no matter who tries to teach me what, the heat will always be with me” (Barber, *How* 186). Heat is the memory of all her learning. Heat, rather than sex, represents awareness of everything that she obtained through her defiance: place, people, experience, failure, success, but especially her body. Body is the metaphor for the potential power that Rich claims for women:

The repossession by women of our bodies will bring for more essential changes to human society than the seizing of the means of production by workers. The female body has been both territory and machine, virgin wilderness to be exploited and assembly-line turning out life. We need to imagine a world in which every woman is the presiding genius of her own body. (Rich 285)

For young Phyllis, the control over her body means not boarding any of those two trains, ways, but to keep looking for the one she wants to take. That is why in the last chapter she faces modelling. Subverting her own determination to confront the traditional exhibitionist role of women in secular culture as something disrupting for her Mormon upbringing takes consequences in both spheres. If when analyzing the exhibitionist role of actresses in cinema, Laura Mulvey concludes that “traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium” (436), Barber’s transgression functions also in two levels, the eyes of Roger and the screen into which this could have been screened to be seen in her Mormon household. Barber uses herself and the characters of Roger and Karen to illustrate that desire. She uses the present tense rather than the past tense as she did in the other excerpts to show that here is no escape, no way to avoid the heat. She has to face the same heat that did not allow Esther to control her problems by applying a Mormon interpretation to cope with worldly circumstances and troubles. Heat will hover above her

wherever she goes. Nonetheless, that oppressive heat will protect her from “the mirage of night dreams” (Barber, *How* 184). It is time to stop dreaming, it is time to be an adult. Time to be yourself in real life rather than in dreams.

I’m going to escape this life --- away from Bobby Jack; away from the call of the chorus line; away from the people who are going nowhere, making nothing of their lives; away from the desert with its bad attitude about universal order --- its helter-skelter city planning, trailless parked next to yucca and creosote bushes, its drifters. I’m going somewhere and leaving this chaos behind. (Barber, *How* 179)

She adds that the self she is taking to Brigham Young University, to her new life, is the self of her dreams: beautiful and cool in the shade, detached, serene, beyond all this (Barber, *How* 184). But she is going to take it from her dreams to make her a body, something real, herself here and now. The final achievement is a sense of responsible determination, a responsibility that gives also a sense of control<sup>187</sup>.

In her second autobiography, body is also an important part of the challenge between spirituality and materialism. *Raw Edges: A Memoir* offers several demonstrations of Barber’s spiritual necessity, in different churches and different approximations to the experience of the divine or the supernatural, helping to understand her strong need of that connection, and her latent rejection of limitations for that. Especially illustrative is her account of a powerful experience in an African American church where she is recognized and welcomed as a visitor and she meets this extraordinary old woman who sings a long prayer of blessings and she thanks God for earthly things such as “the lying down at night” (Barber, *Raw* 57). Barber relates this experience to her constant longing for abstract but compelling totality and she amplifies this spiritual, strong connection which transcends

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<sup>187</sup> A sense of responsibility that reminds us of the many questions that she made about her professional career. This could be an antecedent, a prologue, the sound before the bolt of lightning strikes. *Raw Edges*, as I will try to show here, closes the circle.



time and space, when she is physically close to the old woman called mama. It is symbolic because this spiritual devotion is balanced with a material stress on body, and the earthly beauty and the present time:

I stood next to Mama and felt the delicate bones of her hand, a hand that had done much, that had been witness to much. Delicate, yet firm. Strong. Resolute. Unafraid. This was the hand of a redeemer, a healer, one who had seen it all and could still forgive, one who could open her arms and receive the least of her sisters. I felt her power through my fingertips. I felt electricity coursing through my hands and arms to the woman on my right. A circle. An unbroken circle. (Barber, *Raw* 58-59)

Chapter six, titled “The Unpredictable Body” exemplifies the spiritual importance of body when she says that “my flesh remembered” (Barber, *Raw* 83), establishing the importance of body in both spiritual and earthly experiences, as if both were together. It is significant how Barber establishes this relevance of body and physical dimension in her spiritual experiences because this seems to break Terry Tempest Williams’ statement that in religion “it isn’t your body that is valued; it is your soul” (*Voice* 37). In fact, the book is backboned by the story of the bicycle, the physical pain of riding a bicycle across the country is the best way to penetrate into her own fears and understand not only her physical dimension but her ethereal nature. In fact, this is illustrated in her final conversation with C.J. in the aftermath of their cycling experience, when Barber is heading back home and C.J. pressures her to discuss about their experience and they accept that they have been “using the physical to bust the mental” (Barber, *Raw* 236) to come to the conclusion that “imperfection is perfect” (Barber, *Raw* 236), which is a statement that can be given as an axiom to undermine her sufferings both when related to her spiritual sufferings within the context of the Church and her marriage and her own romantic and sentimental approximation to life. Thus Barber establishes a sense of completeness that encompasses both the body and the spirit.

In the same line, the autobiography is consigned in a physical style. Barber writes like she dances, because dancing is a performance more relevant than the simple artistry of equilibrium and sense of movement. Dancing was “about the joy of your body, which is a temple” (Barber, *Raw* 139). When she talks about that period of her life engaged in learning and teaching belly dancing, she feels confident and happy, relieved because

I swirled in the twist of my veil, openly enjoying the art of the earthy feminine and the loosening of my boundaries. I loved the feel of undulation and swaying. I loved moving from the inside, feeling what it was to be a woman with a pelvis, breasts, a stomach, and a womb. (Barber, *Raw* 138)

All this confidence is lost when she performs in front of a group of men and she has to stop because they are not watching this, they are watching the danger, they do not feel “the joy and playful innocence” (Barber, *Raw* 139) but the disruption and lust. She discovers her body later on and it is always connected with dance and music as if that body and its discovery were full of electricity, full of that spiritual energy that is tamed all the time:

*I slipped the dress over my body. I touched my right breast. How incredibly soft a woman could be. I'd almost forgotten. I loved this softness. This was me, the woman who hadn't cared about anything except getting out of town when she left Fort Collins. Behind the dressing room curtain, I struck a flamenco pose, smiled a mischievous smile, snapped my fingers and stamped rhythms quietly against the floor.* (Barber, *Raw* 229)

The notions about the body that Barber develops in this second autobiography seem to close a circle that started when she wrote her first autobiography. In any case, apart from both autobiographies, this same conflict over the possession of the body is elaborated in many of the characters drawn in Barber's fiction. Women like Ida, Alice or Anna in the

short stories share with Esther, in the novel, this concern about the *repossession* of their bodies.

In “Ida’s Sabbath,” one of the short stories in *Parting the Veil: Stories from a Mormon Imagination*, Ida Rossiter, the organist of the Mormon ward, undertakes a self-redefinition after a tremendous change in her life. This change, as frequently happens in Barber’s stories, occurs because of an emotional deception. Her husband had abandoned her. Ida’s guilt is because she could not reach her husband rather than because she broke her loyalty to God, which was the real cause of the distancing. He asks her to take the garments off. Those garments represent a second skin that protects her from the hurting but dangerous possibilities of nakedness. The edge of this woman’s story sharpened the night before: “The world has turned last night, and nothing was the same” (Barber, *Parting* 38). That night was stormy in Gardenville and the light went off. That night she decided to stay naked. She took off her temple garments and enjoyed being free of zips and belts. In doing so, “she felt the absence of the shield of the Lord” (Barber, *Parting* 39). This woman, who “personified dependability” (Barber, *Parting* 40), feels free but, at the same time, guilty for having get rid herself of the sacred garments to discover her body: “Suddenly she felt as though she were six years old, and she was glad she’d closed all of the blinds in the house before her bath” (Barber, *Parting* 41). Barber, thus, communicates this paradoxical dualism that Rich places between the impurity, corruption and danger of female body, and the sacred, asexual, nourishing concept of the feminine body (34). That moment is symmetrically followed by the hardest part of the storm. Next day she goes to the ward, which had suffered the storm and lost its steeple. Everybody is upset and they feel something wrong is going on with Ida. The rest of the story is the inner travel through madly reflections, nuances and dreams of this woman until she is visited by a heavenly

being. She takes the sacrament and she falls down. Then she is reassured by Milly, her best friend and Bishop Jansen's wife who confesses that she used to take off her garments to comfort her. Ida can not forget how free and happy she felt then and the story finishes with Ida enjoying the music. After facing the heavenly being but especially after being comforted by Milly, she feels only the happiness of that freedom (Barber, *Parting* 50). In fact, Milly's comforting opens the right door for her: no folding, no breaking with all, balance, the middle, a little door in between.

Bassett is a new man in her life, a man ready to offer her a back to lean on. He is the one who says that she is *a sleeper* and that the lid will blow off some day, but she is reluctant to trust him fully. Maybe because it is what she is expected to do: marry a member of the Church again. Bassett is what she is supposed to do. She would not be a Hatch boy and she would not be a Hall girl, the two teenagers playing with their hands during the mass. She chose to be loyal to the Church and rejected the sexual appealings of her husband, then she lost him. She accepted that all that had to be done. Now she is discovering her body, discovering how all those pleasures would mean more than just a possibility to sin. She is now opening her eyes, and not closing them like she did with Louis in the parade, or like she does with Raylene in some way. Maybe because she is afraid of losing the same perfection Linda Sillitoe made her character Kristin suffered from: "She had been perfect once, too, so she knew how vulnerable that status could be. Once you lost your perfection, you never truly felt at home" (*Sideways* 36). Once you are unmarried, divorced, widowed, you lost that perfection. But it seems that she does not believe in marriage anymore. She does not believe in that kind of official love, mainly because it would not be like that young couple who she peers at from her place at the organ. But Ida is unable to feel on charge of

her own, of her own reigns freely because when she feels that freedom of being naked, she is naturally and directly feeling the fear and the damage of being free (Barber, *Parting* 41).

In this short story, sexuality is linked to guilt and the discovery of body by an adult woman who is going through hard times. It works as a symbol of freedom and control over the flow of life: “And when she returned the milk carton to the refrigerator, her breast brushed against the old kelvinator door and she stopped there, unable to more as she felt her surprised nipple grow hard and stiff” (Barber, *Parting* 42). Once again Ida is a woman quarrelling against her own sense of guilt when she left open her sexual innocence, when she felt “the absence of the shield of the Lord” (Barber, *Parting* 39) and she took off the garments and felt her nipples over the cold refrigerator. That shield is different from what Jonathan Wilkins in “Devil’s Horse” was looking in God: “no shield to safe but a shield to stop” (Barber, *Parting* 35). Barber makes the storm and the climax of her nakedness coincide. Her disrupting decision collapses with the storm. There we see that she is free, the storm goes so the woman feels free and guilty both at the same time and the sexual innocence triggers, unleashes the storm: the power of the woman’s decision is able to break the steeple of the ward, which can be obviously understood in phallic terms. Ida, the dependable woman, becomes Ida, the sinner, and the ghost of man hovers over the whole scene: Louis, her former husband, and Brother Bassett. But she wants to shoo them away. Louis had always wanted her to buy some special underwear “just for special occasions.” But she had been faithful to the Lord, faithful to the promise she had made within the holy walls of the temple (Barber, *Parting* 43).

In two other short stories by Barber, she executes performances of these topics I have been developing in this last section. “Tangles,” a short story from *The School of Love*,

becomes, for example, a disturbing fairy tale. The main character, a girl symbolically called Alice, is presumably walking on the border between madness and sanity, dream and desire. There is a gap between Alice and men, a gap that she does not find in her bears: “They don’t want anything” (Barber, *School* 18). Men surround her but it is not really her need: George, Dad, the Dwarf, the yolky-eyed old man, a bear prince... She does not feel like trusting any of them. Her fight to understand and attain love ends in a dreamy scene in which she dances with her father and asks him to “Tell me the truth, papa” (Barber, *School* 26). He is a father that constantly asks her to find a husband, to do what she has to do, get married. What all these men want is her body, both as something sexual and as the container of her womb, turning it into something that is not hers but something that she is taking away from them instead.

“White On White” is an exercise in idealism: “A lady is as a lady does” (Barber, *School* 40). Sara is living an idealized, dreamy, unreal life which apparently is not hers because she is pretending to be Grace Kelly. She is far away from being herself, from disclosing her own identity. She is obsessed with the illusion of purity, bleached of any emotion, almost sucked dry. The rhythm of the story is quite fast, like the easy directness of a fairy tale. This style helps the reader to understand Sara’s circumstances right from the opening image where she proclaims herself to be a lady to a stranger. Barber plays with colors to express a latent influx of sex in the girl’s behaviour. The perturbing influence of the mother can be felt or that of a distant husband with a cold connection, a lack that turns into insanity where dreams are just sick reflections of needs.

Finally, this is a topic that Barber will develop in *And the Desert Shall Blossom*; the gap, the distance, the incapability to understand each other is enlarged by the different

approaches to faith and sexuality. Problems grow worse because of the clash between the conception of life ruled by faithfulness and righteousness and a tender approach to this life, always embodied in a male figure. This is similar to Alf and Esther's situation regarding sex as well. In "Ida's Sabbath," Ida Rossiter felt guilt after getting rid of her temple garments. In *And the Desert Shall Blossom*, Esther feels the same sense of protection but this time as an oblivious sight of her scarred body: ... "Esther often reminded herself, she had the holy garment of the temple to cover her body" (Barber, *And* 49); a body that she despises because the consequences of time have made it look as if it is not hers: "momentarily, she was the whale lady she'd joked and moaned about all summer, beached in the desert, fish body, no waistline, no delineation of figure anymore, her skin slack in soft rolling ridges" (Barber, *And* 121).

Linda Sillitoe expected "a harbinger of poems" (*New* 51) about body from a positive point of view. Back in the 1990s when she was reviewing contemporary Mormon poetry, she pointed out that there was a tendency among Mormon women poets to talk about "the terrors and deprivations of aging" and "the stress of giving birth" (Sillitoe, *New* 51). Barber's depiction of Esther is not versified, but her shape is lyrical and the approach is the one Sillitoe expected. A good example of this "negative perspective" when talking about the body appears when Esther confesses that she feels as if she were no longer the owner of her own body:

Esther was not lithe. She'd had three miscarriages and seven children counting the twins who'd lived for two days. She'd be pregnant so many times --- full blown round --- that she forgot which figure was really hers. (Barber, *And* 84)

This can be read two ways: first, because women act as simple containers of the ability to give birth and secondly, because they are unable to enjoy sex.

The model mother. The model wife. Alf was also a model husband, home on time, attentive to the children, mild mannered. They almost convinced each other that theirs was settled, genteel home life, except at night. Esther tossed and pulled the covers and tried not to scream and Alf curled into a solitary ball of himself, and they both mentioned how their jaws hurt when they woke in the morning. (Barber, *And* 208)

In conclusion, these examples illustrate how sexuality is confronted in the plots of Barber's stories. Barber details the repression of sex (and the sexual tension avoided) as something endemic to the atmosphere in which many of her heroines live and breathe<sup>188</sup>. When they achieve a measure of sexual independence or spiritual or emotional release, they always pay a price. They pay that price because they have been deprived of a series of features that would have made them able to handle sex in those circumstances. Sex is often presented as something disturbing, something that has not been properly communicated or inherited or even discovered. Sex is always surrounded by the dark places that Mormon idealism formed in these women who have been trained in a threatening manner to take care of their bodies like a temple to be offered to a man in the future. As Schow proposes "social groups have long understood that, in order to promote stability, peace, safety, and justice, certain natural impulses need to be restrained" (117-118). Among those natural impulses, sex is a source of potential danger and disruption, thus, it needs to be controlled and shape in the benefit of society or community.

Apart from women's incapacity to deal with sex and to control their bodies, a situation derived mainly from a strong, limiting education about purity and virtuous repression, Barber also deals with the Mormon view of polygamy. In this connection, she has already

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<sup>188</sup> Bush places this tension in the clash between Mormon training and western cultural training: "... the strained position twentieth-century Mormon women find themselves in with regard to their sexuality, alternately working to achieve the Victorian-Mormon ideal of women's chastity, while also shaping themselves to become the object of men's desire and, at times, the survivors of men's sexual exploitation" (*From* 28).



confessed her intention to denounce the repeated misconceptions on which the prejudices against Mormons have been built. And among those prejudices, polygamy or plural marriage has always been the most debatable and controversial, leading even to the Mormon War at the beginning of Utah statehood. As Barber herself declares

Whether members of the LDS Church like it or not, this is a subject that won't go away. Nor should it. Many contemporary Latter-day Saints are descendants of polygamous unions, and there is often a debate among modern-day Mormon women about whether or not they could "live The Principle" if they were asked. The subject hovers as if it were a pesky fly at a picnic, and now, for the first time, it has even become television's darling in the popular HBO series *Big Love*. (Barber, *Big* 199)

Thus, in *Raw Edges*, where polygamy is approached from her personal experience, she considers that polygamy in the days of its practicing was not "a simple matter of lusting after young women in the first bloom, as many of its current-day critics were insisting it had to be, polygamy, in its early incarnation among the Mormons, was supposed to be a matter of everyone involved wearing bigger shoes and filling them well" (Barber, *Raw* 71). Polygamy is introduced in the picture of the plot when they accidentally move to a house that belonged to a daughter of Reed Smoot<sup>189</sup>, then Barber takes advantage to tell her own vision of the practice:

David and I were both descended from this polygamous bucket of worms. It was part of our heritage, even a notion skirting the edges of our modern-day sensibility. We'd heard the stories of great-great-grandfathers – our own and others – with three or more wives. We were acquainted with the vast scope of Joseph Smith's efforts to restore the pure religion, and, like it or not, Abraham and other Old Testament notables had more than one wife.

If asked what I thought, I would have said that polygamy had some strong attributes as well as problems: women had more time to pursue their professions, their independence and self-reliance; child care was shared; single women and widows could be included in a family where they might not be otherwise; and ideally, everyone could work together to build the Kingdom of God here on earth. When I

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<sup>189</sup> Look for further information in the introduction to Mormon history.

thought about it in any depth, the concept seemed at least more responsible than serial monogamy, affairs, mistresses, or a ménage à trois... (Barber, *Raw* 71)

What could be seen as a statement in favour of polygamy is resolved with her habitual resort for complexity and different perspectives. She gives numbers to show that divorce rates in Utah at that time were “astonishingly high” (Barber, *Raw* 72) and she closes it with a hesitation about the possibilities to achieve the endeavors that are characterized by an idealistic nature.

Polygamy is also present in *And the Desert Shall Blossom*, where Esther always looks back to the decent, solemn picture of her polygamist aunts, trying to discover in them a clue to find the way to love. Polygamy is another example of how Barber exercises different points of view about the same topics, exemplifying the complexity of them:

Then Esther saw Alf and Serena dancing together. She wanted to be happy for Serena, who had been through so much in the past few months; she wanted to smile beneficently at them, glad Alf could help someone out. *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.* Esther wanted to feel generous. She'd seen her polygamous grandmothers living contentedly with each other, loving their sister wives even though it wasn't always easy. She wanted Serena to have some love in her life too, but her heart clenched, a dull thud in the middle of her chest. Alf was laughing, his eyeglasses sparkling with the overhead light. He was holding Serena close, leading her backwards at the moment, leaning into her almost. Esther could even imagine the words he was saying to her, the ones he sometimes spoke to her when he had that look on his face. (Barber, *And* 124)

She herself will have to submit to destiny when she has to admit her husband's love for Serena. This apparent resignation to a circumstance not accepted by women is presented by Barber as both a sign of courage and a natural assumption of their faith. When Esther looks sympathetically back to her polygamous aunts, she is probably missing a sense of emotional shelter. The same idea of help and support that Sandra Cisneros proposed for women and by women in *The House on Mango Street* or that Sillitoe's characters in

*Sideways to the Sun* missed or that could be found as well in Virginia Sorensen are equally found in Barber's fiction. The same "unexpected intimacy" (Barber, *Parting* 50) that at the end of "Ida's Sabbath" Ida feels towards Milly when both female characters share a climatic moment for Ida. A sense of communion that Rich calls "a strong line of love, confirmation, and example stretches from mother to daughter, from woman to woman across the generations" because if not "women will still be wandering in the wilderness" (246) and Chodorow adds:

What is also often hidden, in generalizations about the family as an emotional refuge, is that in the family as it is currently constituted no one supports and reconstitutes women affectively and emotionally – either women working in the home or women working in the paid labor force. This was not always the case. In a previous period, and still in some stable working-class and ethnic communities, women did support themselves emotionally by supporting and reconstituting *one another*. However, in the current period of high mobility and familial isolation, this support is largely removed, and there is little institutionalized daily emotional reconstitution of mothers. (Chodorow 36)<sup>190</sup>

But Esther's challenge to face this reality is hard and dubious. While she is interned in Sparks Mental Hospital, she splits her determination into defining her husband's relationship as polygamy or as simply adulterous, in the same way she perceives her husband as the one "who made her happy and angry and sad" (Barber, *And* 232). She pledges to a concept of loving that imposes liberty: "You can't possess anyone," (Barber, *And* 233) and in here the three polygamous wives of Grandpa Carpenter impersonate the Three Nephites in a miraculous vision. She relies on God as a guiding light to refrain from caring about what her husband does so here we see an independence from men that takes to a dependence from God, or a feeling of detachment that seems a blend of certain remorse and a forced attitude of evasion and indifference. In the end, Esther comes to this

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<sup>190</sup> Chodorow herself directly pointed to the necessity of female communication: "one way that women fulfill these needs is through the creation and maintenance of important personal relations with other women" (200). In Barber, few are the cases of this working, and all of them problematic, like Esther and Serena, forced, like Ida and Milly or artificial and desperate like Miriam and Madeline.

conclusion in a lucid summary. All these ups and downs, she concludes, do not resemble a polygamous exhibition:

But wait a minute. Esther hadn't agreed. The first wife always had a say about other wives. Alf hadn't asked her. He was supposed to ask, not just take liberties, and now there was another woman to deal with, a sharing of her husband, a decree to share everything for the common good of the kingdom, more children, more progeny for God. *But this isn't polygamy, Esther. Polygamy would be easier than this. This is adultery. A broken commandment. This is my other half breaking away, splitting off from me, discarding me, leaving me alone.* (Barber, *And* 239)

If polygamy for Esther can be a chance to feel a sense of female community,<sup>191</sup> in her literature, Barber also depicts different reactions towards circumstances shaped by polygamy. In the short story "Bread for Gunnar", Barber travels to the times when the Principle was starting to be promoted among the leading members of the Church. The main character in "Bread for Gunnar" translates the situation provoked by polygamy into a personal feeling of internal strife, an intense situation of social and individual pressure in which her desperation takes the shape of sickness.

In this story, a Mormon woman struggles with her husband's obligation to live the Principle<sup>192</sup> and do like Abraham who had more than one wife during the pioneering days. Anna Candall becomes interested in her mysterious neighbor, Gunnar Swenson, who digs, rakes the soil but never plants a thing. They had come back from a mission to Call's Landing and she feels that her husband, Heber, silently accuses her of not being tough enough. She feels guilty for having caused her husband's feeling of deception because it

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<sup>191</sup> This could be what Barber calls the beauty of it, a paradoxical dimension of polygamy that has reverse only to its negative side: "Maybe, just maybe, while it has beauty, intelligence, and integrity, this lifestyle may also be a maze of corrupted power, manipulation of women's and young people's lives, and a sometimes self-serving entity touting the rightness of its cause to the detriment of its followers" (*Big* 203).

<sup>192</sup> Here, she is referring to plural marriage. The practice extended in the early days when The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints settled in the Great Basin. It took different names, being The Principle one of them. This principle was rejected after the conflict that arose when the federal government sent troops to Salt Lake City.

was she who could not handle the circumstances of the place where they went on mission: “We failed the Lord”, he reminded me the day we stuffed every crevice of our already overloaded wagon. “If I didn’t love you and the children, I’d stay and finish the work” (Barber, *School 76*).

She sees accusation in his husband’s eyes, yet they seem to be in love: “You’re an angel. Most of the time, that is” (Barber, *School 77*). Again, what is not said is more important than the things said, especially between Anna and Heber, whose conversations seem poorer and crazier than the incoherent, sick conversation between Gunnar and Anna. The narrative is slower, with proliferation of nouns, longer sentences, placing of inner reflections almost verbatim, pauses to describe someone’s action or shapes or colors when Anna’s life is slow, routinely constant and normal. But the narrative turns crazier, quicker, uncontrolled, dangerous, with more commas, skinny sentences with flowing grammar, short paragraphs, more dialogues, less descriptions, when the encounter between Anna and Gunnar makes the narrative frenzy. Since Barber gives the control to Anna, introducing even exclamations, this reality is even more important to show that the narrative is totally Anna’s and that is why we give importance to the silence as much as to the voices.

Heber is chosen to take the Principle, blessed by the Gospel and Brigham Young. But the acceptance of the gospel always seems to cause imbalance. This time, the imbalance is on the woman’s side. Heber says: “Serving God is more important than my life!” (Barber, *School 77*), but possessives have a different meaning. There is no choice for her. Anna refuses angrily to be supportive in this enterprise. She talks to her husband when he is asleep. She would like to be loved like the flowers that Gunnar makes for his lost sweetheart. She begins doubting her faith and her neighbor Gunnar is the only one who

helps her forget about all these things. But Gunnar is insane. His intervention is unconscious and unrelated. He opens the door when she finally decides to visit him and confounds her with his lost beloved one because both were called Anna. She is totally attracted by Gunnar's other worldliness, a way, like any other, of being free. His independence of everything, though apparently sickly, looks to her like a personal choice of freedom that she does not have because now her kitchen is like a jail. Everything has lost meaning. She wants to help Gunnar as a way to help herself, as a way to show affection to another man, as a way to find another love, perhaps the love that she sees between Gunnar and his lost wife. She loves him because she loves the character that she plays for him: "I close my eyes and take a deep breath, inhaling God's mysteries" (Barber, *School* 88).

The sublimity of love is drawn and quartered by polygamy in this story. Polygamy makes the topic of gender even more complex. Barber expands on the topic of polygamy, but not thoroughly or directly. She prefers to deal with it as part of the meaningful background which she elaborates to enable the reader to understand her characters. Thus, polygamy becomes transcendental and significant, even though it is not analyzed fully. Polygamy may be the only area in which women seem to be reluctant to avoid the lines of the official Church, as compared to the male characters. However, the main character is unable to go away this time. Louis, Ida's husband, did leave home and Alf did find Serena. The woman in this short story is unable to do so. Like Esther, she bends to her husband's will. Anna is a woman on the edge, a woman who experiences a shocking change in her life, provoked not by her but rather, once again, by a man. It is then that she realizes her life is a fake, but she has no power to react and take control, so she tries to do so in a way that turns out to be a new mistake. In the end, she gets *scolded*.

When it comes to womanhood and gender roles, Barber writes on two different levels. First, she tries to build her own identity by recovering her memories and reflecting on her education and her life. Thus Barber begins her first autobiography with a meaningful story about a girl wandering alone at night. When the police stop her and ask her who she is, her first answer before having to give more details is: "I'm me" (Barber, *How* 1). This innocent reply introduces Barber's personal goal in writing. She is attempting to find her own identity as a woman and as a Mormon from within the wide scope of her memories and training to be both a proper example of the roles which have been attributed to women and to Mormon women in particular. Her innocent reply reveals to the reader the brave challenge she has assumed.

Eloquently enough, her second memoir, *Raw Edges: A Memoir* will bring to these representations additional information that, in a way, will help to close some circles already opened in *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*. The generation of gendered roles within the Mormon community, especially when promoting the roles of mothers and wives for women, is perfectly illustrated in her two autobiographies. In fact, her personal experience, when taken to the written paper, operates as a metaliterary artefact which enlarges the significance of some of the conclusions derived from her literature<sup>193</sup>.

Barber writes on a second level, as well. This is a general overview of womanhood and gender within her community and in the world at large. In this manner, Barber draws the portraits of distinctive but diverse characters in her fiction. She opens a wide backdrop against which womanhood in the West can be understood. But not only is she going to portray the enduring Mormon women to whom Wallace Stegner attributes much of the

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<sup>193</sup> The play between Phyllis Nelson as character and Phyllis Barber as writer, or her personal recollection of how she became a writer during a complex and hard period of her life favour a dialogue between the act of writing and the personal figure of the author which complicates the substance and the essence of her memoirs.

sacrifice and effort required for the settlement of the Far West; Barber will try to picture the conflicts and tribulations of modern women as well. From the enduring woman who confronts a dust storm that keeps her and her children close to home while she waits for her absent husband, to the modern suburbanite who undertakes in a troublesome road adventure, Barber demands different attributes, virtues and values for every woman and for Mormon women specifically. Her concern is driven by her own experience, as she bravely and brilliantly explains in her autobiography and in her articles. But her taste for wide horizons and her rejection of simplistic goods and bads, blacks and whites, do not dilute vehement denunciations. On the contrary, it empowers her writing to the point where she feels authorized to suggest a formula to combat this imposition of roles that subtract from female potential: to balance the extremes.



#### 4.4. Place: *Phyllis Barber on Being Raised in Las Vegas and Boulder City*

*I wish I didn't live here, but then I can't  
think of another place I'd want to live  
Willy Vlautin*

##### 4.4.1. Introduction: More than Settings

Phyllis Barber, who has been praised for her contribution to the publicity of the state of Nevada, is included in the Nevada Writers Hall of Fame. Since the first inductees, Robert Laxalt and Walter Van Tilburg Clark, were named, more than thirty writers have been selected as recipients of this honor, among them writers such as Frank Bergon, Mark Twain, Stephen S.N. Liu or Ann Ronald. Barber's literature has also been included in different anthologies and collections of fiction that deal with Nevada or Las Vegas, such as *The River Underground: An Anthology of Nevada Fiction* (2001) or *Literary Las Vegas: The Best Writing about America's Most Fabulous City* (1995).

In the introduction to *Getting Over the Color Green: Contemporary Environmental Literature of the Southwest*, Scott Slovic summarizes what the recent ecocritical approach means and how it is applied to literature:

During the final decades of the twentieth century, there was a flowering of important writing about the relationship between human beings and the natural world, a virtual renaissance in the branch of American literature that scholars refer to as "nature writing" or "environmental writing. (Slovic, *Getting* xvi)

When considering place in Barber's literature, this "relationship between human beings and the natural world" is noteworthy and even disturbing. Although Barber's emphasis is generally placed on characters and symbols, the importance of setting in Barber fiction is

fundamental. In fact, I conclude that Barber's literary work stands among those testimonies that have expanded the ecocritical approach in the West. As Tony Magnana states when talking about Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* analyzed from an ecocritical viewpoint: "Although women have always been a major factor in the real, lived landscape of the West – as Robinson's own western experience affirms – it is often only the male West that is acknowledged, *his story* that is inscribed in the history and popular representations of the West" (357). Barber proposes both a feminine approach to Western experience from an ecocritical viewpoint and the tension based on difference between the female and the male approach through her characters of Esther and Alf Jensen and their relation towards the Colorado River. In fact, Barber's rendition of the setting explores a set of connections that delve into the tension of identity and place, how the place she dwells in influences her own concept of self. Moreover, Barber's sense of place not only resorts on the physical influence of the land but she also follows what Boardman and Woods call "the imagined communities"<sup>194</sup> (20). In that statement, Barber's main characters in *And the Desert Shall Blossom* could be framed from an ecocritical viewpoint.

The sense of place in Barber is both located in a specific land but it is also a matter of movement, a fluid sense of place, what Susan Stanford Friedman calls the paradox of location: land as something grounded and situated but also as moving and shifting, dynamic, full of permeable boundaries<sup>195</sup> (Friedman 15). In fact, Barber pulses the tension between moving and remaining, between migration and belonging, between a secure

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<sup>194</sup> Place means more than just a setting: "As powerful as the physical locations are the imagined communities, dictated by and exposed through narrative choice: submerged histories, legacies of migration, struggles over ideologies, and the economic realities that shape the way westerners move through their days" (Boardman 20). I totally presume those topics in Barber. In fact, some of them have been already analyzed, such as the economic issues, the tension provoked by Mormon ideology or the hidden stories which reveal new information to understand your own family. Migration will be important in this section.

<sup>195</sup> Friedman's attempt looks to use this idea from a theoretical perspective in combination with feminism, different, perhaps, to the practical approximation I do here. In any case, the notion I am underlying from her article pervades all throughout the reading.

household and an uncertain adventure, the tension between what Holly Youngbear-Tibbetts explains when she says how mobility can enable relatedness, an important feeling for the performance of an identity which is seen as a flux of relational and global connections. In other words, identity understood as a blend of rootedness as “in the mode of wild ginseng: established at one locale, connected by myriad, radial, extensive, and interconnected networks of whole societies and species” (Boardman 23) and between the rootlessness of migrants who as Stegner explains “deprive themselves of the physical and spiritual bonds that develop within a place and a society” (*Where* 71-72). Again, when Youngbear-Tibbetts concludes that “every environment has its risks and rewards, its resources and resistances, and that these too are a part of what it means to accept a landscape” (157), she is describing the possibility of committing to space even if that place is not our “preferred landscape” (YoungBear-Tibbetts 157). Belonging to a place requires certain share of responsibility that allows the affirmation of our subjectivity in relation to the space. Barber, in her fiction, shows how her characters long for being in communion to the landscape but she also shows how they feel a call to move, to detach from that need of belonging. This echoes Meinig’s ideas about the interpretation of landscape and exemplifies the complexity of personal definition.

From a personal point of view, Barber’s struggle to balance these two extremes offers a personal individuation of identity that she either owns in her autobiographies or executes in her fiction. From a general point of view, Barber follows Neil Campbell’s ideas to work on a different understanding of the West. One that sees the West from a point of view that “rather than the assumption that ‘roots always precede routes’ in the definition of culture, one might rethink ‘any local, national, or regional domain,’ such as the West, as an

interactive process of constitutive contacts and mobilities”<sup>196</sup> (Campbell, *Rhizomatic* 4). In that line, Campbell criticizes Frederick Jackson Turner when he says that

in displacing the uncertainty and fluidity of migration and movement he asserts a rhetoric of interiority, of essential, rooted identity as the focus for the epic narrative giving coherence and authority to the westward urge of nation building, providing America with a distinct creation myth, or what Bowden called the ‘perfect garden’.” (Campbell, *Rhizomatic* 6)

In criticizing here Turner, Campbell is giving a perfect summary of his own theory about fluidity as element rather than static visions for the analysis of the West and it all echoes most of Barber’s literature. In any case, rather than expanding on this topic, or framing her work within these theories or fitting into this pattern, Barber gives voice to the pain that we suffer when this situation becomes true. Fluidity or uncertain migratory definitions of identity can be as painful as the longing for rootedness, settling, place even if we see the good and the bad in both of them. Place as rhizomatic in Barber means crossing and a complex fluidity. Specifically in *Raw Edges*, she makes the way back to the pioneer track as a symbol of recovering her mind:

Turner’s “fluidity of American life” that begins his thinking about expansion and frontier mobility falters because it follows only a “single line” (the frontier), believing it leads inevitably to one destination (nationhood, union, a fixed identity). To rethink the West rhizomatically, beyond its function as national unifier – “a holding together of a prior or virtual dispersion” – is to view it as unfinished, multiple, and “open” and to recognize that “beneath... official histories and divisions there exist other powers,

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<sup>196</sup> Based on the theories by Gilroy, Pratt and Clifford, Campbell summarizes and explains their ideas in the following quotation: “Gilroy productively rethinks how essential, racial identities based on static concepts of “roots” and “rootedness” in place can be dialogized (crisscrossed) and hybridized by the exploration of the homonym “routes” as dynamics of encounter and travelling. An inward-looking study of culture and society sees the journey as ending in settlement, in achieving a finished self (or community), in establishing a firm grip on place and, therefore, forming an invariant identity.” In contrast, Gilroy stresses “a process of movement and mediation,” or what he terms “routes,” preferring an “interplay between these two dimensions” as a more full and sophisticated definition of cultural and identity formation that accepts pluralities and sees them actively engaged in the production of new identities and communities” (Campbell, *Rhizomatic* 26). These theories about settlement and moving ring a bell in Barber who, particularly in *Raw Edges*, and together with Youngbear-Tibbetts, goes for a complex and hurting identity that refers the same that longs for a place and a travel.

actualised through other kinds of encounter and invention. (Campbell, *Rhizomatic* 8-9)

Barber's definition of self is a matter of constant redefinition and that can be seen in her two autobiographies, but especially in *Raw Edges*, where the inner travelling backwards into the memory of her life is capitalized by a metaphorical recollection of a biking travel across the country in which Barber shows all the components of her literary fountain: inner turmoil, doubts, failure, success, resilience, wounds, effort, faith, loss, struggle, tenacity and love. Words which along the track seem to map her own personal enterprise. Her search for identity is thus performed as a process, as movement placed over ground:

Maybe there was only a mysterious river of divine liquid flowing through the terrain of everything. The core may not be solid after all. It may melt into the river of everywhere, everything, and everyone. (Barber, *Raw* 250)

Slovic conceives traveling as a source of meaning as well. Traveling has been, especially in literature, related to adventure, redemption or reconstruction, but Slovic here considers the constituency of its paradigm giving that

Travel itself is a way not only to gain new adventures and collect experiences but to ritualize loss and disorientation, to force one's mind to create new maps of meaning. The mind thus destabilized and invigorates, tends to see through established structures and patterns, even upon returning home. (Slovic, *Authenticity* 261)

Barber's bike trip in *Raw Edges* resembles these ideas. She herself clearly signifies that she is re-wandering through the trail of the Mormon pioneers, but in the opposite direction, which is *per se* a metaphoric revision of the "established structures and patterns" that shaped her. Her trip, even if it goes in an opposite direction, recalls that trip done by Christopher McCandless, at least in Jon Krakauer's appreciation of the character: "the trip was to be an odyssey in the fullest sense of the word, an epic journey that would change

everything” (*Into* 22). The direction, the size, the length will be different, but the energy applied to it could be equally performed with the music that Eddie Vedder composed for Sean Penn’s adaptation of *Into the Wild*:

Be it no concern  
Point of no return  
Go forward in reverse  
This  
Will recall  
Everytime I fall  
Setting forth in the universe  
Out here, realigned  
A planet out of sight nature drunk and high. (Vedder, “Setting Forth”)

The tension between dwelling and travelling, between centrifugal and centripetal forces, between Gilroy’s roots and routes, interrelates with her “established structures and patterns,” a given from her cultural education within the Mormon Church which, as she shows throughout her autobiographies delineates much of her definition of self:

For a while I lost my reason. Having done what I’d done, I didn’t know who I was or what I wanted. I was thirty-nine, still a mother and a wife, and yet a foreigner in my own body. I’d blown up the walls within which I’d lived my entire life. As they tumbled down I became drunk with the craziness of it all. (Barber, *Raw* 149)

Mormonism (or faith, religion) is much more attached or related to something static, a place: “most people wanted to find answers in one place or in one sect or in one religion, but I’d always looked for the Source, Higher Power, the Divine Mother and Father, for the Way, for God and Goddess in all thigs” (Barber, *Raw* 233). Religion echoes meanings of belonging and community and stability and shelter, the pioneers settling the valley, whereas experience, in Barber, is linked to movement, adventure, learning and risk, the

pioneers on the trail. In this idea reverberates the words by Virginia Woolf<sup>197</sup>, but also those by a Mormon poet and scholar, Linda Sillitoe:

This time not only were there extra rooms, but also racks of costumes and clothing that I examined with amazement and delight. As I woke, instead of reconstructing the literal walls, I asked myself, what does this mean? Why do I keep dreaming this? In a moment a little answer teletyped itself like a fortune cookie message in my mind: “There’s more room in the house than you think.” More room in what house? The house I grew up in, the Church, the Mormon culture? How much room did I think there was? Absolutely none; I had acute cultural claustrophobia. But there were costumes in my dream. Did that mean there were other roles I could play? “There is more room in the house you think,” the message plinked. I decided to stay. (Sillitoe, *Off* 19)

Those walls are the same walls which Barber finds when, in *Raw Edges*, she tries to approach (and at the same time reject) the possibilities of meeting Jerry García in San Francisco’s 1960s (even though there she calls it chasms rather than walls) or when she recollects everything through the attic or when she has her first experience with adultery, but also the opposite feeling, the absence of walls is a source of pain: “I was still caught in the world without walls. I was used to boundaries” (Barber, *Raw* 179). But those walls needed to be pulled down, as Campbell says: “as in a complex transfusion, any closed system needs ‘new blood’, any rooted space needs rerouting and opening up, any house must be unhoused” (*Rhizomatic* 13). What Campbell has not measure is the emotional waste and prize you have to pay to do that and the final consequences of it, the constant tension between being and going, the game between indoors and outdoors.

In her two short story collections, most of the stories are set in the clearly recognizable landscape of the Colorado River Plateau, what she calls in the preface to *Parting the Veil*:

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<sup>197</sup> Woolf’s idea of the room has different connotations closer to the role of women within a literary context. Those connotations are close to Barber’s own experience: “The notion of service, that “other,” is my responsibility as well as my salvation, makes it hard to believe in my work. Everything else is more important” (Barber, *Mormon* 115).

*Stories from a Mormon Imagination*, “a fermenting ground for many kinds of dreams” (Barber, *Parting* x). In her novel *And the Desert Shall Blossom*, which takes place mostly in Boulder City during the building of the Boulder Dam<sup>198</sup> in the 1930s, and in her memoir *How I Got Cultured*, both the dam and the city of Las Vegas will be more than just background to the narrative. In *Raw Edges: A Memoir*, a bike trip will be the skeleton of the plot, as I already explained.

In fact, those places act as sacred space where the definitions of certain characters are elaborated according to a set of relationships that seem to have something to do with authority and power. If Chidester notes that “sacred places are arenas in which power relations can be reinforced, in which relations between insiders and outsiders, rulers and subjects, elders and juniors, males and females, and so on, can be adjudicated” (16), the labyrinthic design of Boulder City, the epic development of magnificent Hoover Dam or the blinding profile of Las Vegas skyline, all of them, because as Chidester himself states any place can be ritualized into sacred space, can be interpreted as an arena where Barber places her characters to give light to a set of interactions that derive in meanings which are either assumed or revealed through that clash. Barber’s illustration of these places offers a critical eye that helps us, as Boardman and Woods suggest, to “free places from rigid understandings (...) and rid people of unfortunate stereotypes” (19). In fact, Barber’s fiction opens a different approach to these places from a personal point of view but also from a gender issued consideration, because in her fiction the reader looks from the

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<sup>198</sup> The dam was originally planned for a location in Boulder Canyon. Later, the project moved to Black Canyon but was still known as the Boulder Dam. President Hoover's Secretary of the Interior Ray Lyman Wilbur announced in 1930 that the new dam would be named after President Hoover. When Roosevelt took office in 1933, Harold Ickes replaced Wilbur as Secretary of the Interior and he decided to go back to the first name. In 1947, the Congress, under the presidency of Harry S. Truman, restored the name Hoover Dam. In the novel, the usual name used to refer to the dam is that of Boulder. Consequently, that is the name I used to refer to it, even though, today, the official name of the dam is still a homage to President Hoover. The project was rejected by ecologists such as Mary Austin, as Glenda Riley remains “Over a decade later, she opposed the Boulder (Hoover) Dam, saying it was a “debacle” reflecting the greed of its brackers” (64).



“radically new way of perceiving the western experience” that Kim Barnes and Mary Clearman Blew see in women writing, a different vision that these two authors define as being drawn on “self-reliance and courage of the old western mythology but sees greater strength in community, in making connections, in interdependence” (xi).

In “Literary Place Bashing, Test Site Nevada,” an article included in *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, edited by Karla Ambruster and Kathleen R. Wallace, Cheryll Glotfelty observes that Nevada has been an appropriate place for a “negative” literature, meaning by “negative” that most of the writers who deal with Nevada in their fiction focus on negative aspects of either the desert or the urban setting, especially Las Vegas:

Despite their different intents, the most important thing to note about the two preceding examples of twentieth-century place bashers is that, like *Roughing It* and *Steep Trails* of the nineteenth century, they are written by non-Nevadans for an audience of non-Nevadans, or, in other words, by outsiders to outsiders. For these writers, Nevada sometimes serves as a foil character, highlighting by contrast the nature of their primary subject. (Glotfelty 241)

Barber’s memoir, subtitled *A Nevada Memoir*, is not a Mormon memoir, but a Nevada Memoir. Being a Mormon in Nevada is much more important than just being a Mormon. Moreover, at the beginning of her autobiography, she makes a conscious or unconscious statement of her intentions when she dedicates the book: “To the Real Nevada...” This brings to mind the words used by Miss Stuckey, the trainer of the Rhythmettes, when she tried to instill pride in young Phyllis Nelson and the other girls by calling them “the real representatives of Las Vegas” (Barber, *How* 148). Miss Stuckey encourages them to “show those New Yorkers that we’re not just specks of dust or whistle-stop creatures little better than the lizards. Do us proud!” (Barber, *How* 149) Here Miss Stuckey describes the same

kind of prejudice that young Phyllis feels herself when Leonard Bernstein, with his “new yorkness” (Barber, *How* 153), declares that he will never come back to Nevada because the audience was impossible. This awareness of prejudice foments her subsequent pride in the city where she is trying to carve out a little place for herself: “I know the beauty of the desert is hard to see, a place where nothing but scrub brush grows” (Barber, *How* 153).

Phyllis Nelson was sensitive to Leonard Bernstein’s statement in *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*, and Phyllis Barber, the writer, is sensitive in her approach to Nevada. She is an insider, writing for either insiders or outsiders. She does not criticize any of the mythic approaches to Las Vegas or Nevada made by other authors, but she is going to take her own personal perspective. In essence, Barber follows what Glotfelty says in her article: “While some groups protest the wasteland image and corresponding mistreatment of Nevada, other people work to create alternative imagery, perhaps in the hope that if Americans learn to reimagine Nevada’s landscape, they will not be so ready to abuse it” (244). In fact, this book is a perfect artefact to explore what Barber calls “the geography of childhood” (*Big* 201). Even if she was referring to Dorothy Allred Solomon’s book *In My Father’s House: A Memoir of Polygamy*, Barber’s following statement could be applied to her own autobiography:

But finding her own way and carving out a new niche is a huge challenge, as it is for anyone belonging to a tribe, a family, or even at large, extended family. One’s first home, after all, is the place where roots are nourished. It contains the emotional geography of childhood. (Barber, *Big* 200-201)

These words resonate as a profitable filter to stem the most significant meanings from her autobiography. Barber is determined to recollect her childhood and teenage days to evoke them in a meaningful way, sharing with Allred Solomon the same kind of challenge. But

the term geography to talk about the physical and psychological dimensions of her endeavor is totally appropriate when considering that place in *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*. Moving from her Mormon household to the Hoover Dam and Fremont Street will all play valuable roles in the so-called challenge.

Her only published novel plays also a fundamental role to understand Barber's personal perspective of Nevada. *And the Desert Shall Blossom* narrates the poignant story of a Mormon family that moves to Boulder City in the days of the construction of the dam. Hoover Dam is a concrete gravity-arch dam on the border between Arizona and Nevada. Ann Ronald says that those dams dotting the West function as a metaphor of "man's unfortunate anthropocentrism" (Ronald, *Why* 217). Here Barber goes to a fine example and takes it from the very beginning to show not only the consequences but also the source. The dam was named after President Hoover<sup>199</sup>, who played an instrumental role in its construction. Construction began in 1931 and it was completed in 1935. As Richard White explains, the dam can be grouped together with the other resources launched by the administration during the days of the New Deal and one of the examples is the big corporation that took responsibility of the construction of the river and which came under the name of Six Companies<sup>200</sup>: "the government not only provided cheap water and electricity in a region that lacked both, but it also created through its contracts large western corporations that would launch even larger government-corporate industrial projects during World War II" (*It's* 489). Without the dam and its water supply, the Las

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<sup>199</sup> Who, as William G. Robbins says in "Laying Siege to Western History: The Emergence of New Paradigms", was the first true Westerner to become President of the United States of America, providing, thus, an appropriate symbol for the American West at the turn of the century (Robbins 182).

<sup>200</sup> The Six Companies consisted of Bechtel & Kaiser and MacDonald & Kahn, both San Francisco construction companies; Morrison-Knudson Corporation of Boise; the Utah Construction Company in Salt Lake City; and J.F. Shea and the Pacific Bridge Corporation of Portland. (White, *It's* 488) In fact, Barber relies on the Utah birth of one of them to trigger her fiction in *And the Desert Shall Blossom* since the Jensens are helped by A.P. Watkins, one of the owners of the company to get a job in the project.

Vegas metropolitan area would have never seen how its population grew virtually two million by the year 2000<sup>201</sup>:

The Colorado, the wildest and most isolated of the major western rivers, succumbed first. The bureau began Boulder Dam, later called Hoover Dam, during Herbert Hoover's administration. Designed to prevent floods on the lower river, provide irrigation water for the Imperial Valley, generate electricity for Los Angeles and southern Arizona, and supply domestic water for southern California, the dam enjoyed widespread western support. Hoover, however, worried that the dam made the government a competitor of private companies, and he came out in opposition to public power and the building of lines to transmit power from Boulder Dam. Most westerners, who believed their future lay with cheap public power, were outraged. Hoover's defeat in 1932 by Roosevelt, who sided with the public power advocates, ended the dispute.

Although later renamed for Hoover, the dam under any name was a symbol of the New Deal in the West. Completed with PWA funds in 1935, Boulder Dam transformed the Bureau of Reclamation into a major developmental agency with resources its founders had never envisioned. Once restricted to revenues generated from public land sales and from costs recouped from the farmer who settled on project lands, the bureau began to receive large annual appropriations. And the more freely the appropriations flowed, the less freely did western rivers flow. Through the bureau the federal government had emerged as the most powerful authority in western water management. How it managed the water would do much to determine the shape of the Western's future. (White, *It's* 484)

Barber's novel, however, is not a historical account of the dam's construction. Her focus changes constantly from the epic of such a huge project to the humble perspective of the people contributing to its accomplishment. Both of those different viewpoints, setting and the circumstances surrounding the laborers and their work are going to play a fundamental role. This perspective could be seen as a representation of the idea Campbell proposes conceiving identity in two ways: "and the mythic quest for rootedness, settlement, and synthesis so often accepted as the outcome, the final point, and the essential identity of this fluid movement" (*Rhizomatic* 1). The fluidity of migratory movements, traders, okies, wetbacks is also completed with Mormon experience. In that line, *And the Desert Shall*

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<sup>201</sup> In his book *Nevada: A History* (1977), Robert Laxalt explained it very easily: "Even in Las Vegas, a railroad stop that had had an unexpected boom with federal government's decision to build a dam on the Colorado River..." (99)

*Blossom* depicts one of those final attempts to settle the West, revealing a subplot behind its chronicle of the construction of the Hoover Dam.

Robert Frank, in his famous photograph of the dam, offers “an iconic technological site providing water for the urban New West of Las Vegas, tourist destination and a symbol of human control of nature” (Campbell, *Rhizomatic* 190). Campbell highlights Frank’s play with perspective and the significance of frame photographing. The postcard as focus rather than the dam amplifies the meanings of what is in and out the frame. The same idea could be used to talk about Barber’s chronicle of the dam’s construction, which goes beyond the frame of genres (that of a chronicle) and epic (that of the grandeur) to complicate the meanings stretching from the specific to the general in a tangled cosmos in which the intricate coordination of both dimensions shows the substance of fiction and reality.

Barber first uses the dam as setting in her autobiography. In “Oh, Say, Can You See?”, the dam plays an important role in unfolding the problematic growth of a young girl. In any case, it is compulsory to read the novel to understand the whole symbolic meaning of that dam in Barber’s fiction. In a conversation that draws the overall significance of this setting from the process of construction to the mythical display of its grandeur. The novel and the story connect and propose a fundamental meaning when they go together. If Chidester and Linenthal say that “nature, in its human meaning and significance, is a cultural product” (12) and the sanctity of space is related to economy, politics and relations of power (14-15), in Barber the dam and the harnessing of the Colorado River re-examines the connection of human beings towards nature and the consequences of their actions unto the natural space. The Colorado River acts as an organic unity to which Esther feels a personal connection. When being compared to the attitude taken by her husband, this connection offers revealing

notions to understand their marriage. In the same way, when this analysis is widened to extensive dimensions, this is, when extrapolating Esther's attitude as compared with that of her husband to all the workers and the whole project in general, this contrast establishes the ground to make larger conclusions, founding the basis to understand the universal compulsion of human will to dominate nature and the essential consequences of the failure, being thus Esther a symbol of the consequences that this attitude could provoke in human health<sup>202</sup>:

Then she turned for the door and the heat and the river that was flowing steadily, wide water that frightened her with its sullen power. Esther stopped to listen and though she heard murmuring in the water, voices garbled by the swift current, and she wondered if God lived in the river because it never stopped flowing and God couldn't be trapped, could he? (Barber, *And* 42)

Esther links here the river and God. She thinks of suicide, blurring the lines (being the line that of the river) between life and death but Alf holds her and takes her back to the real world. In fact, Barber's confrontation of the couple's affairs through the presence and mirroring effect of the dam and the intention to control the river's flow reminds of Cosgrove and Domonsh's ideas of the gendered nature of science. In "Author and Authority: Writing the New Cultural Geography", they reject what they call a "naivety of representation as reflection of a separate reality" (Cosgrove 25) because they embrace a definition of representation that reveals the networks of power and moral claims implicit in our understanding of personal relationships towards the land. Following Harding when she says that some scientific contributions to culture can be described as assumed social

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<sup>202</sup> Other writers have relied on the Colorado River so as to reflect on her characters' mood or spirit. Jon Krakauer brilliantly analyzed the connection of Christopher McCandless to the river and its surroundings when he explained that: "This lower stretch of the river, from Hoover Dam to the gulf, has little in common with the unbridled torrent that explodes through the Grand Canyon, some 250 miles upstream from Topock. Emasculated by dams and diversion canals, the lower Colorado bubbles indolently from reservoir to reservoir through some of the hottest, starkest country on the continent. McCandless was stirred by the austerity of this landscape, by its saline beauty. The desert sharpened the sweet ache of his longing, amplified it, gave shape to it in sere geology and clean slant of light" (Krakauer, *Into* 33).

characteristics necessary to become gendered as a man, Cosgrove and Domosh consider that “the complete endeavor of science, then, may be read as ideological and male gendered, from the subject-matter that we choose to study, to the structures of enquiry modes, the discourse of verification and the claims of authority in scientific representation” (30). This could be translated to Barber’s contraposition of the dam as male and the river as female, the human enterprise embodied in such an engineering project contrasts and rises tension with the spiritual empowerment of a different experience of the energy derived from the flow of the Colorado River which is represented in Esther. In other words, it is the vision of landscape as artifact that Meinig describes as “the twentieth century concept of man as technocrat in charge of remolding the earth to suit his desire marks the more radical shift” (3).

Magnana states that “place is a fundamental category of human experience, central to our conceptions of ourselves and our world” (346). Magnana works on the idea that the West as an empty space has served many time as a playground to construct a sense of community that implies a challenge towards getting a shelter, a sense of identity that is natural in human consciousness, and he proposes it as a popular tendency in Western writing from the very beginning. In authors such as Cather, Roolvaag and Sandoz, he sees that “any successes that these authors allowed their characters were often depicted in such terms – as products of making a place of the West and of feeling at home within those adopted landscapes” (Magnana 346). Barber places her novel almost sixty years after Turner set the closing of the frontier, but her characters still behave as pioneers. In a period of deep economic crisis and social devaluation as it was the Great Depression, the characters in *And the Desert Shall Blossom* still look in eagerness to find a sense of place in a remote corner of the West, this time in a city that temporally was built to construct a dam, a dam that gave

birth to a city that engendered the American Dream and that proposed a temporal simulacra of community for a group of people that needed a bit of expectation, a feeling of shelter and belonging, of understanding and control. A spirit that bonds them to their heritage in a connection that will give light to the nature of some of their problems, as John Bennion says: “Esther and Alf Jensen are driven by the same dream which motivated their Mormon ancestors, that lives of faith, culture, and beauty can grow in arid wilderness” (*And 1*).

As Julene Blair puts it “setting supersedes character” and helps thus to understand how we are (Boardman 42). Barber’s fiction demands an analysis from an ecocritical point of view, since her concern about place as a functional category and element of self derives into a literary awareness of the interplay between characters and settings.

#### **4.4.2. City of Las Vegas: Behind Fremont Street**

Originally founded in 1905 after a land auction by the Union Pacific Railroad, Las Vegas was in the beginning an unfruitful land surrounded by gold and silver mines. To come from a railroad stop to the luxurious gambling and resort center that it is today, Las Vegas underwent a vertiginous process, and Mormons always played an important role in this process. From the first adventurers sent by Brigham Young, to the two mysterious, quasi-legendary assistants to Howard Hughes, Mormons always tried to settle the desert. In *Inside Las Vegas*, and with his own style, Mario Puzo makes a succinct account of the history of the city in which the presence of Mormons is obvious:

After we stole it from the Mexicans who had chased out the Spanish, Las Vegas was mostly inhabited by naked Paiutes addicted to long hours of rolling bones and coloured sticks across the sun and putting up their wives and horses to back their



judgement. (Could it be that the special climate and earth themselves nurture the gambling instinct in man?) Anyway in 1855 Brigham Young sent some of his best strong-arm boys from Salt Lake City, Utah, to Las Vegas to convert the Indians and make the area an agricultural wonder.

The Mormons at that time and in that place had a reputation for having green thumbs and bloody red trigger fingers but even they were no match for the hot sun and the gambling fever of the natives. After three years, the Mormons gave up and went back to Salt Lake City. It turns out they made a mistake, because beneath that hot sand was untold wealth in gold and silver.

But in 1955, nearly a hundred years later, another Mormon, a young banker named E. Parry Thomas, left Salt Lake City and settled in Vegas. Whereas Brigham Young's green thumb and long rifles had failed to turn the desert oasis into anything worth while, E. Parry Thomas worked his financial black magic to transform the little town into a legendary metropolis that fascinates gamblers the world over.

Thomas came to Vegas as a small-timer banker. But he had the vision and the nerve to risk enormous locus for the building of glamorous palaces in the desert. He is acknowledged in most circles as having been the most powerful prime mover in Vegas. (Puzo 28)

Puzo's perspective is that of an outsider who relies on a one-sided picture of Las Vegas.

Puzo even considers the irony of being a Mormon the one responsible for the blossoming of present day Las Vegas: "and it's sort of nice to know that Vegas came into full bloom because of a Mormon, finally" (30). His ironic statement about the Mormon origin of the city echoes the profundity of the gap he is leaving while approaching the city from a partial perspective.

In fact, this all happens almost twenty years after Governor Fred Balzar signed into law two pieces of legislation that changed the history of Nevada, one provided legal assistance for permitting easy divorce, the other permitted casino gambling (Laxalt 89), but the presence of Mormons in Las Vegas was still palpable, as Laxalt recollects in his history of Nevada:

Even in Las Vegas, a railroad stop that had had an unexpected boom with the federal government's decision to build a dam on the Colorado River, the new law caused hardly a ripple. Entrenched Mormon elders still controlled the town, and they looked with disfavor at what the lawmakers had wrought in Carson City. There were few

people in Las Vegas, old and new residents alike, who cared to cross swords with the stern Mormons. (Laxalt 99)<sup>203</sup>

In her review of Darrell Spencer's "CAUTION: Men on Trees," Barber recognizes the importance of place in literature: "I especially appreciate his perspective of Las Vegas --- that of an insider who knows the living, breathing world of Southern Nevada" (Barber, CAUTION191). Since she is an insider, this statement could be applied to her own fiction, especially her autobiographical novel, *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*, in which she recollects those days she spent in the dazzling city of Las Vegas. She starts from the same vantage point to construct stories that then sail to different shores. That perspective derives from a special relationship towards the city, a relationship that was explained by Spencer himself when he says that: "there's a frankness about Las Vegas. It's tacky, and it knows it's tacky" (Bigelow 183).

Glotfelty, in her analysis of outsider fiction about Nevada, underlines how, after Second World War, there is a change of focus from wild landscapes to urban settings. In what she calls, "a double jeopardy" (239), Glotfelty explains how the attention of the *bashers* moved from the desert to Nevada's cities, and especially to Las Vegas, the epitome of Nevada's

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<sup>203</sup> In his book *Nevada: A History*, Robert Laxalt traces a good summary of Las Vegas history in which we find the influence of Mormons in the building of the city. He does it in some seven steps which could be designed as follows: first, the Anazasis, a mysterious native Indian pueblo that was living in this part of the country. Second, the arrival of father Francisco Garcés who was looking for a way from missions in New Mexico to California in 1776. Third, Jedediah Smith was looking for beaver sources for the Rocky Mountains Fur Company, routes and the mythic San Buenaventura River. In 1830s, Las Vegas was already a regular resting stop for trader caravans along the pioneer trail from Santa Fé to California. In 1844, came John C. Frémont, the mapmaker. Fourth, the ever-colonizing Mormons were next to come. Many Mormons were sent to colonized adjacent areas in the West and one of those colonies was placed in Las Vegas in 1855 but it failed as soon as 1857, even before the Mormons were called back to help defending Salt Lake City from the troops sent by Buchanan. When they came back the fort they built to defend the pioneers going through Las Vegas was then a ranch of private ownership and before that it was Fort Baker. Fifth, in 1903, Las Vegas grew because of nearby gold and silver strikes at Tonopah and Goldfield. In 1910, there were flash floods which threatened the growth but it survived as a railroad stop with a few merchants selling goods to Mormon farmers and ranchers. Sixth, in 1931, the Government decided to build the Hoover Dam. In the 40s, came Bugsy Siegel with the first casino and the rapid growing of Las Vegas started. The seventh step in this scheme made by Laxalt is the growing control exercised by government in the 1970s and the coming of Howard Hughes a few years earlier (Laxalt 115). The eighth step, that Laxalt could not add because his book was published earlier, could have talked about the change from a money and booze oriented industry to a leisure and family show time industry.

urban development. Apart from the writers that Glotfelty analyzes in her study, other writers such as Tom Wolfe or Hunter S. Thompson helped to develop a stereotyped image of Las Vegas.

Barber's portrayal of Las Vegas is that of the "insider", the one who "knows the living, breathing" (Barber, *CAUTION* 192). Barber's Las Vegas has little in common with that Las Vegas of the casinos and trailer parks, the Las Vegas described in the fiction of Thompson or Wolfe's "Las Vegas (What?) Las Vegas (Can't hear you! Too noisy) Las Vegas!!!!". In "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas," Thompson's description of the city expectably adheres to the idea that Las Vegas is a center of jubilous and perilous entertainment in which immorality determines the level of pleasure:

Vegas is so full of natural freaks --- people which are genuinely twisted-that drugs aren't really a problem, except for cops and the scag syndicate. Pyschedelics are almost irrelevant in a town where you can wander into a casino anytime of the day or night and witness the crucifixion of a gorilla --- on a flaming neon cross that suddenly turns into a pinwheel, spinning the beat around in wild above the crowded gambling action. (Thompson 190)

Puzo's version of Las Vegas follows this line established by other outsiders who presented only a one-sided reality. Promoting that face of Las Vegas as a suitable place for gambling, boozing and wild women, it seems that there is no margin for a normal, conventional, non-glamorous life. Puzo even observes the temporary nature of the city when he states that "though I once established a residence there I have rarely been able to stay more than three or four days" (24). Las Vegas is thus an example of postmodern placelessness. An imagined place in which virtual and real space mingle: "full of hybrid, formal fusions, required its 'readers' to look beyond established lines of thought and be

open to other possibilities blooming in the excesses of the desert”<sup>204</sup> (Campbell, *Rhizomatic* 195). The multicultural, hybrid, and shifting identity of present-day Las Vegas germinates in a place of paradox. Wolfe, Thompson, John O’Brien or Puzo’s experiences of Las Vegas describe the city as a valuable artefact to denote certain mental state or attitude. Las Vegas is rather an artificial device, “a religion, a disease, a nightmare, a paradise for the misbegotten” (Tosches xv), a perfect scenario to take Raymond’s senses to the extreme, as Wolfe expounds in “Las Vegas (What?) Las Vegas (Can’t hear you! Too noisy) Las Vegas!!!!” (3) The city seems to respond to the writer’s necessity to find a fitting setting to illustrate their character’s redeeming or self-destructive catharses.<sup>205</sup> In fact, the city responds to an allegory. It has been ideologically constructed and Barber illustrates that construction in her memory *Raw Edges* when she recalls how being a writer she was first required to make an interview for *Today Show* because her book was going to be considered as part of the reality of a complex Las Vegas: “after all, there are 80,000 Mormons currently living and working there” (Barber, *Raw* 219). But when she goes there, she finds both a performance and a plot that are not what she wanted to say and what she wanted to communicate about Las Vegas:

Glibly, I told her how I’d wanted to be a showgirl, even though I also wanted, at the same time, to be a good Mormon girl. Both things mattered, I told the world.

The whole thing felt like smoke and mirrors – the room at Caesars palace, the town car with the chauffeur, the high stool where I sat in front of cameras with crowds of people hanging over ropes protecting the set. This wasn’t my Las Vegas. (Barber, *Raw* 220)

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<sup>204</sup> This is Campbell reflecting on Robert Venturi’s view of Las Vegas in his book *Learning from Las Vegas*.

<sup>205</sup> In “Radio KENO” the city of Las Vegas is used to communicate a different kind of feeling, but this change seems to be related to the characters and the story. Chloe is travelling back to visit her old friend. Las Vegas is presented as the place of the lights competing. Las Vegas seems unreal, Wagner as well. The whole situation is like if it was taking place under the water.

After taking part in *Today Show*, the BBC called her for a similar event which she rejected because after deeper inquiry, she realized that, again, the BBC had their own plan and the script was already written:

... the BBC had their own agenda, as I'd suspected – a story about a Las Vegas Mormon banker who'd loaned money to Jimmy Hoffa when no one else would. What did this say about Mormons and their ethics? Tsk-tsk. They needed filler material to sharpen the details of their flashy investigative reporting. And I was part of that filler. (Barber, *Raw* 221)

In his tribute to that city that he calls “miracle happening” (16), Puzo develops more than just a simple history of gambling. Even though he himself states that “gambling has been a very important part of my life, and not a completely destructive part” (24), Puzo’s point of view is melancholic, positively sincere when concerning his confession of the sins, dangers and consequences of this city. In the book, he presents himself as a man that has been so close to the true nature of the city (nature that others might consider inappropriate) that can scratch the dirt to see the beauty on the Strip<sup>206</sup>. Anyway, his main focus is still that of a city of glamour and chips:

Nothing can be done about the money-grubbing, sex and sin-laden metropolis, vulgar in its architecture and its culture. Nothing can be done because it’s too hard to disprove. This is just a book about Vegas as a dream world of pleasure, supplying one of the basic needs of human nature.

But still there is a time and place for everything. There is a time for champagne and there is a time for Coca-Cola. There is a time for French haute cuisine and a time for pizza. There is a time for James Joyce and a time for Agatha Christie. There is a time for lust and a time for true love. There is a time for a two-week celibate retreat to a monastery and there is a time for three days of gambling, boozing, and wild women in Vegas. So a book about Las Vegas can’t hurt. And who knows, wisdom can be acquired by indulging a vice as well as protecting a virtue. Maybe a little something can be learned. (Puzo 18)

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<sup>206</sup> The Strip or Las Vegas Strip is an almost five miles-long stretch of Las Vegas where the main casinos and hotels have been built.

Puzo establishes a dichotomy that rests Las Vegas half of its personality. Promoting that face of Las Vegas as a place for gambling, boozing and wild women, it seems that there is no place in a city like this for a Mormon trying to live and grow up. That Las Vegas is a place of paradox that becomes even more complex when Mormonism appears on scene. If Richard White explains the shocking paradox that became Las Vegas when it met the attributes of former Old West myth with the new values of the New West of Hollywood (*It's* 519), even more complex and paradoxical is when that environment clashes with the growing up as a Mormon of young Phyllis in *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*. When Mormonism appears on scene, Las Vegas becomes an even more convoluted stage. For a Mormon girl like her, being raised in Las Vegas, becomes a challenge, even a troublesome experience:

Maybe growing up Mormon in Las Vegas has a way of making one into an oyster, one whose soft lining gets irritated by paradox until a strange pearl is formed. One can't refuse to see the wider world growing up in that windblown city. It's sensurrounded in the Nude. (Barber, CAUTION 191)

Her memoir is precisely the story of that girl in an oyster who challenges the wider world around her. As she herself states: "I lived in Boulder City until I was 12, before my family moved twenty-five miles away to another planet called Las Vegas" (Barber, *Parting* x). The shock and challenge that this move meant for her burgeoning consciousness is emphasized from the very beginning. The family moved to escape from her father's hesitating faith after a Church member's suicide. They left perfect Boulder City behind and crossed the desert to live in a place which seemed totally foreign, a mere straight line dividing the desert, but a line that was constantly drifting.

As I will try to show through the analysis of Barber's rendition of the city, Las Vegas functions as a trigger for Barber's main character's psychological development as well, but, this time, by presenting a new contrast to the commonly pictured image of the city. Barber collaborates in showing a more intricate and ambiguous interpretation of it, especially when that glamorous and visible environment clashes with the growing up as a Mormon of a young sensitive girl who longs for new experiences. Las Vegas, in Barber's fiction, is a complex place. A place of paradox, a ground in which that glamorous side of the city comes across the backstage of such a cinematic scenario. Apart from driving the car along Fremont Street, Barber's Las Vegas also talks about what that newcomer, who Barbara and Myrick Land describe in *A Short History of Las Vegas*, cannot see from the airport:

Carried along by the magic carpet, travellers move into the atrium of a neon-lit terminal and disperse toward escalators or glass elevators, heading for baggage carousels, car-rental counters, and taxis. They're not all tourists and conventioners. Many are here to work in hotel-casinos on the Las Vegas Strip. Others have jobs in offices, hospitals, classrooms, or industries. A few have lived here all their lives. Their faces --- in all shades --- reflect a mixture of international origins. [...] Outside the terminal, waiting for taxis, newcomers survey the city skyline --- surprisingly close --- across a narrow strip of desert. From travel brochures they recognize a few fantastic shapes --- an Egyptian pyramid, a medieval castle, and what looks like the Statue of Liberty --- set among new towers and a forest of building cranes. What they don't see from here is the growing city beyond the Strip. On the outskirts, whole neighbourhoods are springing up in places that used to be empty desert. (Land 199)

Barber's Las Vegas is that of the streets far away from Fremont Street, closer to the desert, the wards and yards of the homes of her music teachers. Nevertheless, the shadow of that other Las Vegas, the Las Vegas of the lights and glitter is always as powerful as the one she uses to set her stories in. Barber comments on this approach to Las Vegas:

Writers the world over have tried to write from their sociological fascination with Las Vegas, but not many comprehend the true nature of the beast. They approach it from a mythical, bigger-than-life vantage point, while, truth be known, Las Vegas may only be pretending to be Las Vegas. (Barber, CAUTION191)

It seems a constant in literature that Las Vegas is characterized as a “double place”, as a space with two faces, virtually independent, and only one of them seems to be worthy of literary appreciation. Barber approaches Las Vegas with a conscious understanding of this dual character. In that border, Barber deliberately establishes a zone of tension in which both sides clash and unveil the manipulation granted by any superficial interpretation. That differentiation contributes to read this clash between both sides as an effective analogy of the same clash that Mormons happen to experience when they have to place their peculiar culture among a secular world which opens them to a whole range of possibilities. From their cultural environment to the possibilities embedded in a secular world, there is a gap enlarged by the conspicuous and overwhelming archetype provided by Las Vegas, where the extremes seem so palpable and accessible: “another planet called Las Vegas” (Barber, *How x*).

In Janet Brigham’s “Beyond the Glitter,” an article written in 1979 for the official Church’s magazine, the *Ensign*, the author summarizes the work that faithful Mormons were doing in Las Vegas, but she denotes how Mormons too favor notion of Las Vegas as a bipolar city:

Las Vegas, the gambling capital of the United States, is renowned for its casinos and shows, its pornography and prostitution. That side of Las Vegas exists, but not in the lives of an overwhelming number of Church members there; they live in another world, one filled with opportunities for spiritual growth (Brigham 1)

Las Vegas is introduced as a challenge that means rather than facing, avoiding, a temptation in which they live to pass that proof and come out of it enriched. In fact, as some of the persons that Brigham interviews for the article confess, this tendency is



obvious. President Tanner insists “there are places in the city where you just don’t go.” And he adds: “The kids have to be strong” (Brigham 3). And President Simmons when asked about the Strip answers concerning the kids: “They learn in their homes what it is. We don’t have to consciously counteract the bad influence” (Brigham 3). And finally Brother Hayes’ words conclude the article as reported by Brigham with a conclusive statement: “Las Vegas is a crucible as far as making moral decisions” (Brigham 4).

Barber’s moral decision is totally different. She turns round and looks right into the eyes of the snake<sup>207</sup>. Barber relies on that stereotypical image of Las Vegas to help it get rid of the overstated elements of the archetypal representation. Through her heterogeneous rendition of the city, Barber accomplishes a complete image that presents a wholesome, complex image of Las Vegas. Her portrayal of this city has been highly praised, especially because we get to see the other side of bright and gleaming Fremont Street, “the over-the-top vintage Vegas”, five blocks of thrills in the very heart of the city, over sixty restaurants, ten casinos, millions of light bulbs, miles of cable, tones of slippery luck in the shape of an elusive chip. Nevertheless, in Barber the reader walks away from the street every tourist must visit.

The opening sentence in “Silver Dollars”, the first story in her first collection of short stories published in 1990, introduces sunshine as an important element for describing metaphorically the meaning of Las Vegas and what it represents for a young girl. That

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<sup>207</sup> Brent L. Top and Bruce A. Chadwick affirms that most religious people believe that by transmitting religious values to young people, including involvement in Church activities and training, they would get to deter criminal behaviors, and Top and Chadwick add that this idea was based on the opinion of theologians and social scientists alike (293). However, in “The Power of the Word: Religion, Family, Friends, and Delinquent Behavior of LDS Youth” they note that in 1960s those assumptions were challenged by studies which could not justify that church attendance was related or not to the commission of criminal acts (Top 293). In their study, Top and Chadwick come to the conclusion that in Mormon tendency to link equally some code of religious behaviour with a personal experience of spirituality, some of the social assumptions of religious behaviour had no influence in deterring or not criminal attitudes.

sunshine will be later transformed into heat. The consequences heat provokes in the characters are used to illustrate uncomfortable, asphyxiating circumstances, something that Barber uses in *And the Desert Shall Blossom* as well: “‘Las Vegas is a good place to live,’ says my dad behind the morning newspaper. ‘Sunshine. And God’s with us here’” (Barber, *School* 1). In this story, a sensitive girl stares at the glittering lights of the city from the vanishing certainty of her windowsill:

Everything is alive outside, the night still happening. I hear the creaking rope of the trapeze lady at the Circus, Circus casino --- the rope she climbs to get to her trapeze where she does tricks all night long [...] A girl who dreams of being a showgirl in Las Vegas, since she isn’t really worried about her parents finding out because they never go out somewhere besides church meeting. (Barber, *School* 3-4)

Las Vegas is mystery and attraction, even more when she looks at it from the window of her Mormon household. She loves the night because night is mystery, adventure, something new. She feels attracted to what the city hides out there: the attraction of uncertainties. The silver dollar stands not only for money, but for success, recognition, visibility. It represents the stereotype of a successful person that we imagine in Las Vegas, someone like Mario Apoletti, her father’s colleague and the one who belongs to the Million Dollar Club. The sound of silver dollars in a pocket is the sound of success, security and the command of destiny. It is not the real money that counts but the sound, the shimmer of the coins, the girl dreaming of success, and a future in her life. Silver is a color that reflects what she longs for. It becomes an obsession when she sees it all around her, for example, on Fremont Street paved with silver dollars. Silver is the color of Las Vegas.

The young girl, Mary, is somehow obsessed with success and with her father’s success. Maybe it is because of the place she is living in, and the lights, the glittering, the music and the possibilities drawn by such a city, even worst when being compared to a humble house

in the rim of the desert, probably the same imbalanced comparison we could establish between her father and Mario. In fact, she is all the time comparing her father to his workmate Mario. In an attempt to help him be like Mario, she buys her father a fancy shirt but he refuses to take it. The lesson will be given at the end of the story.

In contrast to the fireworks and glitter of the city and to Mario's symbolic success, the humble, still Mormon household shields the battle between the roles played by the girl's mother and father, what she calls an "exercise in manners" (Barber, *School* 4). When she leaves the window and turns around to go inside her home, it looks like certainty reigning in there. This contrast is one of Barber's most powerful approaches to the places where her characters dwell: the confrontation between dark and light, playing them both against the symbolic image of certainty and uncertainty, security and adventure disguised as a snake crawling across the desert with an apple in its mouth. Mother is a figure of rectitude and religion. Father does not really mind. He is passive, always positive but conformist, even indifferent or indolent, but always on the opposite shore to that of ambition and success.

Barber stresses place as an important source to understand the girl's fixation on visibility and success. Mario and his silvery Las Vegas are what remain on surface, the stereotyped or initial idea of that city. Barber contrasts this perception with her description of a Mormon household. A final, unsuccessful dialogue takes place between the father and the girl. She tries to convince him of his potential to be like Mario. Her father knows the real story behind the silvery glitter, but she does not and she feels deception after her father's rejection of success and his pledging to humbleness: "But when you glitter, people see you. People want to be near you. They'll buy insurance from you then. Don't you understand?" (Barber, *School* 8) The father is unable or reluctant to confess how he perceives the

situation. It is also plausible that the lesson is double and it is the father who is learning from the experience. Two possible meanings complete the whole picture that Barber constructs with a playful use of setting.

An overwhelming setting to explore this circumstance is Fremont Street. This place means more than just a straight line. From *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir* to her fiction, Fremont Street guarantees a set of reactions: “Maybe it isn’t a street, but a way into a world where you can’t close your mouth, or into a cave where you find the wizard who’ll teach you all you need to know about escaping” (Barber, *School* 9).

In “Silver Dollars,” moving up and down Fremont in the chevy with her friends is like travelling to another world, like going to see the showgirl on her trapeze. She can listen to the sound of the coins in the slot machines, she can see the lights flashing, hear the bells ringing. People act as if they were in a foreign place, in a movie, but it is the real world, with backstreets and other roads running parallel or behind the casinos, where we can go to the ward, or to her home.

In *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*, Fremont Street is the sanctuary where people go to try their luck but young Phyllis prefers a different way: “I’d have to get what I wanted in some other way, maybe from God if I kept saying my prayers every night before bedtime” (Barber, *How* 169). She learns that the glitter and the bright lights are not the real thing going behind the spontaneous emotion:

But I’d been behind these buildings; I knew they were made of regular things like bricks, glass, stone, and clay, even though they were camouflaged by the lights and their storehouses of games, diversions, machines that seemed to manufacture money,

tables where lucky became rich, rich, rich when their hands curled around a stack of chips. (Barber, *How* 176)

That is the symbolic triumph over the challenge that Las Vegas meant for her. The vibrant triumph over her identity and her coming-of-age. She can go away and forget the nonsense of it all: “I’ll be at Brigham Young University where I can escape this place, this phony city, this Las Vegas of the mind --- desert, heat, gambling, no sense of higher values” (Barber, *How* 180). The challenge resided in surviving her Mormon training in a place like this. She was open to experience it, to face it, and she did. Las Vegas was a kind of handicap that she had to overcome to get to know herself and build her identity, as she has to do with Mormonism and gender roles, but here, every kind of challenge that she has to face comes to be enlarged because of the place where she was born and living and growing up.

In *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*, Las Vegas is essentially a character with a pivotal role. The Mormon ideals of purity, modesty and chastity do not come to mind when thinking of Las Vegas<sup>208</sup>. This new environment offered the young Phyllis experiences that enabled the seed of doubt that was disrupting her faith to develop. In fact, this is just reflecting her overall growth both socially and culturally.

The role of Las Vegas, and especially that of Fremont Street as a contrasting mirror that reflects the real conflicts of the characters wandering in the street, can also be seen in Barber’s highly praised short story, “Mormon Levis”, collected in *Parting the Veil: Stories from a Mormon Imagination*. This story, which looks like a new Mormon cover of Francis

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<sup>208</sup> In an interview to Nick Kent, Brandon Flowers, leading singer of the rock band The Killers, who happens to be a Mormon who was born and lives in Las Vegas said that “I’ve always been a believer. It’s always been a big part of my life even when I was young. There’s always been that push-and-pull of living in Sin City and believing in God” (Kent 1).

Ford Coppola's *American Graffiti*, shows another female character facing a world very different from the certain territory of her Mormon household.

Mattie lives exactly in the line with the desert, which symbolizes Las Vegas as a city that clings close to an abyss, the desert. The line that Puzo described as a "cordon sanitaire" (24) is where Barber sees more than just a sandy hollow.<sup>209</sup> This place where she lives differs totally from the place where she and her friend are heading, the center of Las Vegas: "As we and Shelley turn into the magic driveway under the blinking, rotating sign where the BRIGHT shines brighter than the SPOT, we're looking for the heart of something that probably won't be here until boys are" (Barber, *Parting* 114).

They go into the city of bulbs, of light, of sockets, of silver pathways, and she feels different. Mattie, who is described as a very sensitive teenager, asks herself if there is any chance to be different in this city: Can anything or anybody dare to be different? Or, once you are in Las Vegas, you have to be what you are supposed to be? In this short story, Barber dramatically proposes another kind of open ending. The further Mattie and Karen and Rod and The King drive away from Las Vegas, the more they head somewhere too far away, too far away from real life. Again, remembering Chidester's idea that "... cities; homes; schools; cementeries; hospitals, asylums, and prisons; tourist attractions; museums; and even shopping malls. At one time or another, each of these sites has been interpreted as a sacred place in America" (14), the reader visualizes Mattie's movement toward the desert as a meaningful moving in which human beings seem to avoid or face from a different perspective the duality of sanctity established by such antagonistic places as Las Vegas and

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<sup>209</sup> In the next section, "The Desert: Moving from the River to the Lights", I will expand on the symbolism of the desert in Phyllis Barber's fiction.

a Mormon household, both sacred spaces in the sense that they serve a classification and definition of human beings.

And outside of Las Vegas, the desert blurs the lines. It is precisely to the desert where Barber's fiction heads to. And, ironically or not, Las Vegas owes its birth and power to the second setting in Barber's fiction: the Colorado River<sup>210</sup>. Las Vegas was made possible thanks to the taming of the Colorado River. Unconsciously, Barber's fiction seems to follow a kind of sequence in terms of place: Las Vegas could not have been conceivable without the water from Hoover Dam. Nevertheless, before reaching Boulder City and the dam, one must cross the desert.

#### **4.4.3. The Desert: Moving from the River to the Lights**

It is only about half an hour drive what takes from Boulder City to Las Vegas. Less than forty miles and you go by Henderson, Nevada, where Phyllis Barber was born. On this short trip from the surroundings of Lake Mead to "the entertainment capital of the world," we feel the powerful presence of the Nevada desert, the *barren* place used as the atomic bomb test site. These places kindle the tension between feelings of entrapment and belonging in which Barber has to exercise all her skills to detach from prejudices; she has to scratch the skin to see the interior; or, as Ann Ronald puts it when talking about the last of those places I mention above: "the Jekyll-and-Hyde personality of the Nevada Test Site" (*Nevada* 133).

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<sup>210</sup> "An unseen narrator explained that Nevada's water allotment, granted in 1922 by the Colorado River Compact, was "infinitesimal compared to her present-day needs,"" (216) stated Barbara and Myrick Land.

In “Oh, Say, Can You See?”, the main set is Boulder City but the desert is over there: flats, yucca, sage, wind, heat, sand and the Colorado River are the natural backstage of the story. The memory of the bomb testing is described with disrupting innocence: discovering colors, shapes in the clouds, letting the wind play with her hair. Here, in fact, Barber uses her memory of the atomic bomb testing to illustrate the main character’s growing loss of innocence. She describes the bomb cloud from an innocent perspective: “I’ve seen many shapes of clouds in my life --- lambs, potatoes, even alligators --- but I saw only one like that lumpy mushroom” (Barber, *Parting* 46). Barber tells the story through the eyes of that little girl and her family with a direct, penetrating, naked, sincere style. The spin of the story is based on memory, visions, landscape, actions, characters and relationships. The backbone of the narration unleashes a remembrance that proposes new readings for old facts. When looking backwards, that innocence proves to be the source for a discovery in which feelings of guilt and pain illustrate the importance of determining the real nature of experiences.

The memory of that cloud still “drifts over my mind sometimes” (Barber, *Parting* 45). Her father says: “Nobody can get us now” (Barber, *Parting* 52) when talking about the atomic bomb tests. But innocently, she suspects that there is something she dislikes. She is afraid of a big cloud with such a horrible shape. More or less the same goes for the “redfire cloud”, the “mushroom”, but this time it is even worse because the father says, “That’s how I came home to you, everybody, just look at that power” (Barber, *Parting* 19), and that makes it even more complex for her. Testings are both amazing and a source of pride, because the government selected this place, but... and the “but” is something that the reader retains. Lavina Fielding Anderson concludes that Barber “ironically juxtaposes the heroic achievement of Boulder Dam and the misplaced pride of Nevadans in above-ground



atomic tests conducted after World War II, thus creating what may well be the ultimate expression of downwinders' experience in Southern Utah as well" (*Masks* 5).

Apart from being the site of memory that will accompany her both as a character in her memoir and as a professional writer, the desert is a symbolic line that divides the feelings of her characters. It stands for a place to discover, an open space which, even though if it does not seem favorable to settle a home, it looks like the right place to escape and try to find a way out to somewhere. Terry Tempest Williams resonates here as the desert is largely our own illusion (*Red* 5). Nowhere special, just somewhere. The desert signifies freedom and opportunity. The desert means the beauty that needs to be found. Desert means moving and not waiting. It is the reverse of the city, a different face wincing the same way, just turning a smile away and not being hospitable to people who are looking for a place to belong. Barber and her characters are able to see beauty in the desert, beauty representing the positive feelings of possibility and infinite opportunities. Desert and wilderness act as the point on the map where they set their dreams of conquest of the self and freedom, rather than the potentially damaging possibilities and conquests that have been applied to a place like the desert, described as an empty barren place:

Despite the rapid rise of a desert aesthetic between 1890 and 1910, (...) (d) eserts, for many people, remain simply blank areas on the map --- wasted paper, wasted land. Terry Tempest Williams powerfully articulates the implications of this attitude in her book *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (1991) (Slovic, *Getting* xvii)

If the desert is a "blank area", for young Phyllis Nelson or for Mattie "blank area" means a future that they aimed at filling with their dreams-come-true and their determination to cross it and walk with their chins up. The "spiritual resistance" that Williams placed on "listening to the land, the river, the rocks" (*Red* 17) resounds humble but loudly in Barber's

characters, not only when they listen to the roaring of Las Vegas or to the crying of the Colorado River but also to “the stillness of days in the desert” (Williams, *Red* 17). In *And the Desert Shall Blossom*, Esther sees her mood vanish and begins to talk about the “perversity of the desert” moving inside her. The emptiness of her surroundings represents the lack of culture in her life and its unavailability. For Esther, the desert means a challenge to see her rose blossoming, a challenge that differs from her husband’s endeavor, a challenge in which she is the rose and hers is the attempt to blossom<sup>211</sup>. As the doctor says to Alf by the very end of the book when Alf is starting to realize that there is a possible different way to look at her: “like those seeds on the desert that don’t germinate for sometimes as long as fifty years. Then everything comes together. The conditions are just right – rainfall, temperature, sunshine – and flash, a blossom. Maybe only for a few hours, mind you... (Barber, *And* 271) In Barber, wilderness is represented through the consequences that those places produce in her characters. Ann Ronald says that

Perhaps the only wilderness left on the Utah / Arizona border is the wilderness of self. Anyone who has spent a waterless day under the hot sun may disagree, but from a literary point of view, at least, red rock wilderness is no longer a pathless way. (Ronald, *Why* 216)

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<sup>211</sup> The expression *And the Desert Shall Blossom* comes from a quote by Isaiah that we can find in the Bible: “The desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose. It shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice even with joy and singing... they shall see the glory of the Lord, and the excellency of our God... for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert. And the parched ground shall become a pool, and the thirsty land springs of water... and a highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called The Way of Holiness... and the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” (Isaiah 35: 1-2, 6-8, 10) Isaiah’s is one of the best known prophecies in the Bible. There are different versions of his prophecy depending on the translation, but in his thirty-fifth chapter, Isaiah always says something alike in all the versions. Here is another example: “The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose. It shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing: the glory of Lebanon shall be given unto it, the excellency of Carmel and Sharon, they shall see the glory of the Lord, and the excellency of our God.” The story in the book could be summarized metaphorically as the momentary blossoming of a woman in a desert that is more than a vast extension of dry land. When Esther is talking to the gardener in Boulder City after telling her a bit madly that she is a rose, (which is linked to that sentence that I quoted above), Esther asks the gardener if love has enough trace minerals to help a rose blossom: “Do you think when my husband puts his arms around me and says he loves me that I am absorbing the essentials or does it have to be the truth to help?” (Barber, *And* 161) What the gardener does not say, and says the doctor by the end of the book, is that even if they finally blossom in the desert, sometimes those roses blossom “maybe for only a few hours, mind you...” (Barber, *And* 271)

This inner landscape, this wilderness of the self which Ronald distinguishes in this excerpt is how Barber looks to the desert. She is rather attempting to isolate from everyone not in a physical sense but through her inner feelings. The desert is just a projection of that challenge, a material portrait of a vast chance for danger as long as security when both mean opportunity, freedom and self-determination.

#### **4.4.4. Boulder City and the Dam: Emptiness, Straight Lines and Solid Concrete**

In the introduction to her book *Literature of Place: Dwelling on the Land Before Earth Day* (1970), Melanie L. Simo states the following when talking about J.B. Jackson and his work about the arid West:

Travelling as a tourist through the Colorado Plateau, in Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona, Jackson was struck by two related characteristics: transiency and mobility. In “The Four Corners Country” (1960) he noted some reasons for this lack of permanent settlement --- the extreme dryness, the rough ground, the high altitude, the traditional Navajo livelihood of herding, and the white man’s sporadic mining, ranching and dam --- and pipeline --- building. This region without visible boundaries, better known for Mesa Verde, Chaco Canyon, and the long disputed Glen Canyon Dam, had a great many trailers, or mobile homes, often occupied by construction workers. Jackson considered the trailer yet another step in the evolution of the American single-family home, which was being progressively stripped of traditional functions down to a temporary shell. (Simo 81)

In *And the Desert Shall Blossom*, Barber tells us the story of a Mormon family moving to Black Canyon where the Hoover Dam was built in the early 1930s. Hoover Dam, that solid and massive dam which threatens a small child just with its silent, monumental presence; the prefab Boulder City; the mobility of the Jensen family; and the Colorado River, “a sample and symbol of the West” (Stegner, *Stegner* 183)<sup>212</sup>... all these elements will be

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<sup>212</sup> Stegner was referring somehow to the over-utilization of the river. He expands on this points and adds: “Take the Colorado as a sample river of the West. The Colorado is already over-utilized. A good many places

major figures in a novel where Barber focuses on how the Jensens experienced the rough circumstances provoked by the extreme weather conditions of Southern Nevada<sup>213</sup> and the economic tribulations of the early 1930s. The story both chronicles the construction of the dam and the story of the Jensens, particularly of the parents, Esther and Alf. Nonetheless, equally important to understand their personal notions about life and marriage are their peculiar attitudes towards landscape. Both characters exhibit a different connection to the Colorado River but their different approaches are tied and intertwined.

In her novel, Barber parallels the construction of the dam with the deconstruction of Esther, who sees how her melancholy “rises” in the same way that the river is harnessed. As June O. Underwood proposes in “Men, Women, and Madness: Pioneer Plains Literature”: “Causes for mental breakdown range from economic frustration, personal displacement and loss of identity, to guilt and isolation. All these are parts not only of a physical environment but of a mental landscape” (Underwood 52).

In Barber’s example I prefer to change the order and say that for Esther, her mental problems are not only part of “a mental landscape” but also part of a “physical environment.” Nevertheless, the same connections that Underwood establishes for those characters and the novels settled in the plains can be transported to the canyons through which the Colorado River tries to flow wildly. Underwood explains her conclusions applying the cultural background and landscape, and obviously that is something I can apply to Esther. Her trauma is also a consequence of the clash between her expectations

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in the Colorado basin are already on the way to desertification” (Stegner 185). Barber draws a different symbolic meaning for that river going right back to the day and time when this process began.

<sup>213</sup> On page 50 there is an ironic comment that shows the climatic circumstances of the place and it is done through a symptomatic parallel worked upon religion: “Which kingdom of glory would he inherit then? Certainly not the celestial. Maybe the terrestrial. Hopefully not the teletial. The closest thing to hell Mormons had, except for southern Nevada” (Barber, *And* 50).

and reality, there is a frustration, economic and marital, a constant displacement that makes her long backwards with constant shifts, an isolation determined by a new community and the guilt of feeling responsible for her own situation and that of her family. Underwood talks about women in the plains, but the connection is obvious and the standard can be set: it could be easy to see Esther's melancholy related to heat as it was easy to see Beret's insanity in blizzards, as Peter Hansa, the main character, explains to the minister:

Well, you see, she may be all right for months; one who had never known her well would hardly suspect that anything was wrong with her during this time; she does her work like all the rest of us. In the dead of winter, of course, when the blizzards are raging and we don't see any other folks for weeks at a time, she has days when she seems to go all to pieces; but I hardly reckon that as the disease – that sort of thing happens to a good many of us, let me tell you!" (Rölvaag 378)

All of this is enlarged and understood through the connection Esther feels to place: the guilt is framed in the shack they live, the isolation is reduced to her wanderings through the lineal streets of the prefab city, her displacement is rooted from the experiences left behind, and the frustration takes the shape of a river and a dam that is being constructed to stop that river. For instance, Esther wanders through the grid<sup>214</sup> of Boulder City. Even if it was build for practicality, in the novel it works as a metaphor of order, rationality with no use for a character that feels lost, thus Barber describes the sickness of a woman that flies between the loss of all the certainties she seized some day and the uncertainty of a pattern that only helps to show the inability of itself when exterior order does not correspond with interior disorder. Barber thus establishes a complex image of grand and general context with little and specific detail. It is impossible to detain or change the pattern but derives into a personal, humble tragedy.

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<sup>214</sup> Here the reference of the grid is purposefully used to set a reference with the already introduced theories proposed by Campbell in *The Rhizomatic West*.

Barber's world at large is framed ironically in between the most influential technological achievements of the century: the atomic bomb and the Hoover Dam. Hoover Dam is presented in an innocent way, through the little joke of a child playing with the words "dam" and "damn." The dam is a constant presence in the life of young Phyllis fictionalized in *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*: "Whenever anybody came to visit we always took them to see the dam" (Barber, *How* 46). For her, however, the dam is not going to be such a source for pride. The dam "seemed an impregnable fortress to me" (Barber, *How* 4), both a menace and a mystery that catches her attention and shapes her understanding of adults through their comments on it. The dam is a place for setting nightmares, to scare babies, to feel fear, and for people like her father or Uncle Tommy, it is a place to feel proud because they got to tame the mighty and wild force of the river. It is precisely that attempt to stop something that is supposed to be mighty and untamable that she cannot understand. The dam is described as a reason for pride and confidence: "It was a constant reminder of the miracles of engineering and evidence of man's technological skill but also, it seemed to me, a constant sentinel posted to watch over the town" (Barber, *How* 46). Nonetheless, the dam serves as a spur for her growing hesitations and her desire to doubt and learn:

I'd been taught that being a good Mormon was the most important thing anyone could ever think of doing and that everything on earth was only transient, sandwiched between the pre-existence and the hereafter. I'd been told to keep my sights set on eternity --- the world beyond this veil of tears. My life was but a small part of the eternal scheme, a miniscule speck in the overall plan of existence, except that God loves me. (Barber, *How* 5)

Accordingly, trying to adopt something so shockingly solid, something that is so grounded on earth, so fixed and seemingly eternal makes her feel contradictions. Barber's conflict arises from the idea that for Mormons, all existence is temporary in this world. The

dam, however, looks like it will remain there forever and that fact makes her feel fear. In this case, her fear is synonymous with questioning all young certainties:

This dam, which magnetized hundreds of thousands of visitors to its site every year, conflicted with my young sense of order. It was temporal, yet huge, solid, and certain of its place on the river. But human beings who trusted in the arm of flesh were not supposed to be wise. When Uncle Tommy talked about the dam lasting forever, I knew he didn't know much. (Barber, *How* 5)

What really disturbs her is pride, the excessive pride her father and her uncles feel for both the dam and the bomb tests, two things that she perceives as dangerous and menacing. There is an obvious personal pride in her father because he helped to build the dam and because the government selected them to be the site of such an important technological experiment as the bomb tests, but what really makes them feel proud is that both the dam and the tests are symbols of that pioneering American spirit; they both stand for power, for the taming of anything that is wild and uncontrolled. It is a cultural, social heritage. President Hoover himself, as the novel recalls, stated at the inauguration of the dam, that the aim of that construction was "to preserve America rights in the flow of the river" (Barber, *And* 134). The dam also signifies the conquest of the West: "It translates itself into millions of happy homes for Americans out under the blue sky of the West" (Barber, *And* 134). Hoover Dam thus becomes a character in this short story, a kind of old friend of her father that she does not like completely. She is a girl and both her father and uncle are grown-ups, but she is immaculate, innocent, devoid of the pride they felt over these accomplishments regardless of their huge dimensions and consequences. Barber presents us with the assumptions that come out of the inertia of believing, of being a true member of a religion or a community when one is blinded and forced-willingly believes in a project that is presented before you; she, however, is still immaculate enough to see beneath what is being sold to them so dazzlingly.

This recollection from her memoir introduces a historical construct that talks about the sociological and cultural collective identity of the members of the Church. Mormons have a shared history with water and systems of hydraulic control. The history of the pioneering days and the conquest of the Salt Lake Valley has always been linked to the control of water. As Barre Toelken states “beyond pragmatics, however, there is a prominent use of water imagery and symbolism in Mormon culture: in vernacular speech, in oral traditions, in church ceremonies, and in the infrastructure” (191). Maybe that is because as Kristen Rogers confesses “Mormons are proud to claim that they invented irrigation. Or reinvented it, anyway” (68). As Edward Geary stated in his recollection *Goodbye to Poplarhaven*, “the story of the Mormon village is the story of water” (*Goodbye* 22). But, in Barber’s fiction, water is not only memorized as a collective heritage, it also has a symbolic meaning which helps to understand her characters and those character’s inner struggles.

Water in Barber is drawn through the wild flowing of the Colorado River and the attempt to stop its flowing. Barber writes ironically about Nevada’s satisfaction over “harnessing” the Colorado River at the Hoover Dam and her growing doubts about the positive assurances her Mormon faith has always provided. The National Academy of Sciences 1986 Report on the Colorado River claimed: “an uncontrolled resource is wasted resource and that if a man has the capacity to control and completely utilize the waters of a river he should do so...”

In her novel *And the Desert Shall Blossom*, the Colorado River loses its wild nature: “no longer wild and unpredictable, its volume of water fluctuating from day to day and season to season, the river would be controlled by dams, harnessed for power, and advertised for



recreation” (Simo 95). But, in doing so, Barber is going to follow the same process to parallel the deconstruction of Esther, the character who starts out as a “smudge” (Barber, *And* 5) and ends up calling herself “water” (Barber, *And* 281). The Colorado River is the energy, blocked in Esther’s heart, turned to mud.

Esther’s evolution is actually the opposite of the process that the valley follows. It starts out as a place with a wild river and ending up as a kind of “smudge” in that wilderness (Barber, *And* 181). When Esther begins to lose her mind, she becomes the river.

The river no longer flowed in its course of choice. It had been wrestled into man-made tunnels. Even its bedrock had lost its character and was now a smooth, blend foundation soon to be buried under a mountain of concrete. (Barber, *And* 191)

Controlling a river parallels controlling yourself, no longer its course of choice, no longer your course of choice. If Esther does not flow, she will never recover. “It’s not right to do this to the river,” says Esther. And the dam is a witness to their final struggle. The dam breaks and the river flows, but wildly, forced. “Look what they’ve done to my beautiful river” (Barber, *And* 200), Esther says. And in the final encounter when Alf visits Esther at the Sparks Mental Hospital where he himself interned her and he goes accompanied by Serena whom Esther can see through the window, water is a the metaphor used to interpret all these situation. Water has been the bond between this characters all throughout the book. Water means life, life “ongoing like a river” (Barber, *And* 234) in which her melancholy seems to be a “a dam on a river” (Barber, *And* 234) but also because a powerful symbolic image tied those two women from the very beginning of the book. Serena gave Esther a bucket of water at the beginning of the novel: “And Esther recognized the shape of the woman who held her husband. The woman who once gave Esther a bucket of water, and, of course, this made Esther her debtor. Right?” (Barber, *And* 233)

The clearest dissension between both main characters, Esther and Alf, is drawn through the opposed connections they establish with the natural landscape, especially with the river, a river that, at the beginning of the novel, acts as a mirroring device to disclose the afflictions and desires of these characters. The very first time they are in front of the Colorado River, both characters introduce their personal connection to that stream of life: “Here by the Colorado River, this was the time for Alf’s flowering” (Barber, *And* 6). Alf envisions the river as an opportunity he has to grab. He sees that river as a challenge he has to overcome, even an enemy: “Some huge clash of continents, buckling the earth and scattering the afterbirth --- a sea of rocks scored with massive scabs, fissures, obscene warts” (Barber, *And* 14). The characters in the novel, especially the male characters, are aware of the importance of a project that they took both as a challenge to control the wild power of nature and as a source for pride and self-assurance, a free but popular interpretation of Stegner’s concept of “the wilderness as opportunity and idea” (Bergon, *Wilderness* 329-330). If Stegner says that wilderness is “the thing that has helped to make an American different from and, until we forget it in the roar of our industrial cities, more fortunate than other men” (Bergon, *Wilderness* 329-330), Alf finds in the untamed force of the Colorado River, a chance to redeem himself, a chance to grow as a father, food-dispenser, but also as a man of courage and entrepreneur:

Alf important. Waving at Herbert who’d finally found them, at neighbors, at friends from town until people behind him felt impatient with his showboat exuberance but not saying anything because they were feeling their own pride too. Nevada. Important for the first time. Something of value to its country. Dignitaries. The President, even. (Barber, *And* 277)

In fact, Alf's approximation to the landscape is not emphatic when they stumble in Southern Nevada. The heat is also a presence that triggers a respond rooting in a past that pilots contemporary reaction. If landscape is nature seen through the sentimental eyes of people, in the beginning we see how landscape produces negative feelings or aggressive feelings because sadness or pain where there before. In this case, Alf is coping with his sense of failure and he is still attempting to deal with the violent death of his father. When he complains about the heat, he confesses that the sense of stillness and thickness of heat was "something more than heat" (Barber, *And* 26). Her perception of the surrounding space reveals the anger and pain with which he is beholding that landscape. Adjectives such as "igneous" or "pyrogenic" (Barber, *And* 27) comes to his mind in an exercise that takes him again and again to a pile of coal in a shed: "Volcanoes. Lava. Black coal. Black fire. *Coal in a shed. Black coal frawing a white-shirted swaying body. Black coal bedding a fallen man cut from a rope*" (Barber, *And* 14).

Esther, whereas, feels a different connection to the river, a deeper, spiritual connection that goes further in time and even in space<sup>215</sup>. She feels that connection that Williams places on nature when she bonds it to the "unlimited possibility" (*Red* 75), a connection that breaks isolation to expand our sense of community to all-life forms and different dimensions of time (*Red* 76). Barber, in short, uses the river to parallel again the character's response to place as a magnifying clue to understand them and their conflicts.

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<sup>215</sup> The same connection that Claire Davis used with another river, the Snake River, close to Hell's Canyon, in the border between Idaho and Oregon, to describe a woman's attempt to understand her inner feelings and relation to her husband. Especially beautiful and highly metaphorically skillful is how Davis describes the marriage through a river that first seems a threat to the main character, but, by the end of the story, that woman feels how the river connects blood and water in a metaphor of flowing: "I think about marriage, how difficult it is, the days of easy drifting, the turbulence, and at its hardest --- that most ordinary eddying of passion --- the time all couples come to when they bank on their accumulated years and history to tide them over, to carry them safely through to the next great flooding of heart. I love knowing a man so well that I recognize the sound of his step among many, or coming down a corridor, out of sight. I love that my heart still jumps and calms with the recognition, even after all these years, or perhaps because of it. For this deep knowing is like coming to understand some inarticulate part of myself, some capacity to respond outside of reason, the way water finds its own level" (381).

Where for Alf is a menace that promises success and possibilities because he is going to harness it, for Esther it means a continuity that transcends time and space and binds her to the earth and the animals giving some sort of peace and coherence to her own life:

And while they baked in the car, Esther listened to the sounds of the river for the first time, the soothing, the steady sound of water that never stopped. And she heard murmurings from the river and wondered about rocks, the fallen trees, the reptile skins and bird feathers --- things that were once alive and were now part of the river. (Barber, *And* 21)

Glenda Riley in *Women and Nature: Saving the Wild West* introduces this idea of the opposing connections that males and females feel towards nature. She says that “women’s interpretation of western landscapes even appeared soft and sensual rather than harsh and threatening” (Riley xiii), suggesting by “threatening” that most male settlers saw it as something they “had to conquer nature before it conquered them” (Riley 3-4), while women show nature as “rather than aiming to control and harness the environment, women sought guidance” (Riley 14). Riley places the origin of this difference<sup>216</sup> in the European cultural baggage of many immigrants who had been educated in a male orientation towards nature, as a natural resource that they had to conquer and exploit: “the disparity derived, at least in part, from white European societal values that urged men to exploit western lands in the name of progress but encouraged women to save and protect their families, cultures, and surroundings” (xiii)<sup>217</sup>. But her idea of a different approach to nature for women and

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<sup>216</sup> It is interesting to see how Underwood uses the same kind of gender differentiation to express the action and source of madness upon those characters settled in the plains. Even though, Underwood affirms that there are “a great variety of factors” (Meldrum 59) to assign this melancholy, she also expresses that: “The diaries and published memoirs show madness as a temporary element in the life of most of the pioneers. Women became depressed and silent for finite periods of time; men became violent and acted out their rage and frustration and then subsided” (Meldrum 58).

<sup>217</sup> This is also commented by D.W. Meinig who places the source of these ideas in recent years: “Ideologically this is a view of man as creator, not only emancipated from, but the conqueror of, nature. Although the concept may have roots deep in history, its full flowering is recent. In science it is marked by recognition of man as ecologically dominant” (3).

men could be related to Chodorow's idea of gendered women and men through psychic outcomes of oedipal processes:

From the retention of preoedipal attachments to their mother, growing girls come to define and experience themselves as continuous with others; their experience of self contains more flexible or permeable ego boundaries. Boys come to define themselves as more separate and distinct, with a greater sense of rigid ego boundaries and differentiation. The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate. (Chodorow 169)

This sense of connectedness, curtailed in men and promoted in women could be translated into environmental issues and the connection to landscape as Riley proposed, then giving a sense to the differentiation we have seen. In fact, this division has been highlighted by historians such as White as one of the founding basis of how the frontier in regard of the clash between human beings and nature was understood:

Old Western Historians culturally coded this far side of the frontier as feminine: There Mother Nature took care of her children. On the other side of the frontier, there existed a much more complicated relationship. Humans had mastered nature, but nature, as it were, wrote the terms of surrender. Nature for these historians existed in much the same way women supposedly existed within a Victorian family: Limited to its proper sphere and fruitful within that sphere, nature yielded a proper economy and society. David Noble has insightfully commented that for Turner coding of the physical place, nature was always feminine, always fruitful. Given this division and gender coding of the physical place, it was, of course, necessary that land on the far side of the frontier be "virgin," awaiting its white American groom, and so it always was. (White, *Trashing* 28)

All these ideas frame a possible analysis through an ecocritical perspective in Barber's *And the Desert Shall Blossom*. Esther, as I said, feels a connection to nature, especially to the river, that she shares with Williams and which differs from the one that her husband shares with most of the workers and the general spirit of this enterprise:

The stillness of stones, their silence, is a rest note against the music of the river. Our shadows on the moving water are no different than those cast by the boulders on the bank. Composition. What is the composition of the river, these boulders, these birds, our own flesh? What is the composition of a poem except a series of musical lines? River. River music. Day and night. Shadow and light. The roar and roll of cobbles being churned by the currents is strong. This river has muscle when flexed against stone, carved stone, stones that appear as waves of rock, secret knowledge known only through engagement. I am no longer content to sit, but stand and walk, walk to the river, enter the river, surrender my body to water now red, red is the Colorado, blood of my veins. (Williams, *Red* 150)

In fact, Barber depicts the close connection of this character with the river through Esther's dreams. The Colorado River was flowing but man fights and finally succeeds in harnessing the river<sup>218</sup>. There Barber establishes a parallel and a powerful metaphor binding Esther's mental sickness and the folding of the river's natural energy. The way she imagines the river changes from the beginning of the book to the end and that is the literary device that Barber uses to draw the metaphor that parallels the growing sickness of this woman and the progress of the dam:

She gave way to a watery sleep, floating in red-brown waves through rapids, surrendering to whirlpools when the circling water kissed her arms and breasts and caressed her hair and cheeks and stomach. And then the calm. The soft lapping water against a canyon wall, an eddy that gave refuge to water and Esther and kept them from rushing into mad catarats. (Barber, *And* 51)

At the beginning, her dreams of water are positive. Soft, assertive words such as "kissed," "caressed" or "refuge" encompass the significance of this dream. But the dreams reverse while the novel goes forward:

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<sup>218</sup> There is one silent almost inapprehensible character who announces the tragedy of this prompting to harness the river: "The Indian spoke a respectable English and had told Ed that white man was on the path to destruction because he didn't honor the land" (Barber, *And* 109).

And she was filled with nightmares of water rising swiftly, a hundred feet a minute, rising and pouring through the tunnels, crushing in the sides of railroad cars, ripping ties from the track laid at the edge of the river, carrying away steam shovels and trucks and drills and mechanics and truck drivers and her Herbert, Jack, Mary Elizabeth, Rebecca and Inez. It was rising above the cliff tops and fingering its way toward her home, flooding into her body and her life. (Barber, *And* 146)

Nevertheless, the negative agitation compressed in this second quotation is uncovered by the presence of the dam. The river tries to break the dam because it wants to follow its choice of course and the violence is released by this wild reaction. The dam is broken and the river flows, but wildly, forced. The dream is no longer a dream but a nightmare.

The final statement that closes the book shows how the connection between the river and the main character is completed by the end of the harnessing:

Nothing can stop me now. I am water. If they put me in a cup, I'll evaporate. If they hold me in their hands, I'll slip through their fingers. It is cool and dark here with my river. Smooth over flat rocks. Fingers of water splitting into channels, finding new paths. There's always a way through. (Barber, *And* 281)

This connection is, nevertheless, uneven. This is not a happy ending. Esther is sick. The flowing of the river is ruled by diversion tunnels and the flowing of her mind, the flowing of her dreams and fears seems rather a letting-go than an authentic stream of freedom.

In fact, by the end of the book, the family as a whole will be drawn through the powerful metaphor of the river and the dam which Barber utilizes to frame Alf and Esther's love story. This metaphor will be reinforced to cover the whole family when the rest of the members get involved in the issues between their parents. Thus, Barber totally intertwines the characters and the process of construction of the dam in a powerful metaphor with long

sentences of brief but condensed meaning: “While Herbert, Edna, Mary Elizabeth, Rebecca and Inez held hands and crossed Wyoming Street, someone was troweling cement on the intake towers” (Barber, *And* 246). Water is arrested and we see the paralleling process of two different realities: a family’s struggle and the dam. The Colorado River is stuck in the labyrinth of pipes and the family is quarrelling to flow. Two worlds collapsing in one. Barber links both dimensions, both waters by taking more time to underline one little detail that was missing in the other quotation: “While Alf and Esther’s children decided they should have their mother back home even if they had to set up an around-the-clock schedule to watch and be with her, more conduits at the dam site lengthened” (Barber, *And* 246). Their father is absent. Their father appears just one page later watching all these circumstances from a different point of view, from the pride of the overcome project, from the point of view of the dam:

Little men. Big pipes. Big plans. (...) Serve the little men like Alf, his son Jack, his son Herbert, their wives, their children, the families of those who lost their lives in the path of pouring cement – by asphyxiation in a tunnel, under the wheels of a crane, overcome by impossible heat. The pride of America. (Barber, *And* 247)

By the end of the novel, Alf is also enchanted by the river’s flow. He has undergone a change of ideology that I explain in the section “Manhood: Roles Out of the Home.” Now that he has understood failure and success, he perceives the river in a different way. Bearing in mind his previous ideological attachment to this river as an ersatz enterprise to calculate his esteem, this new attachment can be sarcastically doubted by a critical reader:

Nothing is done, Esther. Everything keeps going, always. It never stops until you do, but even then things keep going, just like the river down there by the dam. Nobody can stop that river. They can change its course, but nobody’s stupid enough to think they can stop it. You can’t stop things either, even if you die, something else is always being born. (Barber, *And* 265)



Nevertheless, his change is not only produced by an individual process. He sees how his wife has been transformed into water, how now she is different, “she’d evaporated” (Barber, *And* 280). And even if he cannot listen to her words, he has understood what she has come to be. He knows that this freedom is not positive at all:

Nothing can stop me now. I am water. If they put me in a cup, I’ll evaporate. If they hold me in their hands, I’ll slip through their fingers. It is cool and dark here with my river. Smooth over flat rocks. Fingers of water splitting into channels, finding new paths. There’s always a way through. (Barber, *And* 281)

Esther needed repair because she could not flow, she could not let her melancholy go and show her truthful individuality. The Colorado River was flowing but man succeeded to harness it. Barber established a parallel and a powerful metaphor binding Esther’s sickness and the taming of the river. The river was harnessed. The ambition of the federal government was a success: “*uncontrolled resource is a wasted resource*” (*National Academy of Sciences*). The river no longer flows freely and Esther feels the hurt of it: “*how can a man’s life keep its course / if he will not let it flow?*” (*Lao Tzu*). Those two quotations are citations that Barber placed at the beginning of the novel. It is not until the end of the book that the meaning is revealed.

In any case, both Alf and Esther, and the rest of the characters, are not only constructed in relation to the place surrounding them but also in accordance with the places they have left behind. The whole family suffers from mobility: “But as they moved again and again, her notions of how the world should work leaked out of her hands. In Ely, Malad, San Diego, McGill, Ruth, even in Utah where things were supposed to be ordered” (Barber, *And* 87).

Somehow, they look like pioneers looking for a home that never comes to fit them. They undergo that sense of being lost in a permanent search for a place to call home. Alf refers sarcastically to the photographs of Esther's ancestors, to which, by the way, she constantly looks back to find some certainty, as "Your fine pioneer family" (Barber, *And* 88). Alf does not realize that they are also pioneering right now and undergoing the same suffering of those days: "She'd have to wait, but when she had daffodils and apricot trees growing in her yard she'd have the whole of her dreams. She wouldn't have to grow things in her imagination anymore" (Barber, *And* 91).

In this sense, Esther safeguards her identity in a place she left behind, very far behind, a well-defined place in the past, in a tightly woven Mormon clan in Brigham City<sup>219</sup>. Not only does Brigham City become a sign of support, but so do places that were left far behind, like East Ely (Nevada). East Ely is presented as a paradise where they had a home of their own and Alf was the President of the branch. That is the kind of life Esther longs for. Those places in the past work now as an idealized lost opportunity. But this is not a dream that they share. Alf and Esther look back on different places. These are just Esther's. Besides, Alf prefers to look forward, and when he does look back, he looks as far back as the very moment when he saw Esther for the first time. In any case, as I say, Alf looks forward rather than backward: "No more Brigham City for Alf" (Barber, *And* 37).

In her study of Terry Tempest Williams, Joanna Brooks pointed out that Mormon genealogy "can be viewed as the effort to establish and maintain a discursive relationship with the past" (*Genealogy* 292). Brooks conceives genealogy as the attempt to look back at roots and "ethnic sensibility" to thus surpass the constraining definitions of Mormon

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<sup>219</sup> And as Boardman and Woods argue "being in the right place, being brought back 'home' through the intervention of friends and family, if necessary, is crucial for mental health" (8).

identity shaped by Mormon orthodoxy (*Genealogy* 297). Here that distinction is blurred, since those roots seem to evoke an ideal state closer to orthodoxy than that of the present time in which the values of Mormonism are deprived of quality by the circumstances. In any case, when Brooks signals genealogy as “a source of cultural prestige and distinction” (*Genealogy* 292), it helps as a contrast to the severe mobility that cracks this family with the obvious rendering of an uncertain state in which the certainties that define a meaningful paradigm are beginning to be lost.

Esther is displaced, not only psychologically, but literally also geographically. The newly invented city of Boulder grinds away at the family like the hot desert wind’s abrasive, constant grit. It erodes the boundaries of their nuclear family, setting sons and daughters adrift from each other and from their parents. Heat and wind are weather features that provoke psychological reactions in the characters that draw out their inner reflections. “There’s nothing gradual here. Just extremes. Hot. Freezing. Windy. Hotter. Boiling” (Barber, *And* 161). But not only weather makes it hard to live in Boulder City, it is the city itself, the city’s functional design and provisional condition that make it rather artificial and unreal to build a home in it.

In *And the Desert Shall Blossom*, Boulder City is a lively stage that dances with characters. Formerly, it was a federal reservation governed by federal appointees. State law had no voice in the city. It was a clean town. It was dry, even after Prohibition was repealed. It was an anomaly in the state of Nevada. Boulder City is not a living city; it is a phantom city, an ironic “nothing”, a city built to be bulldozed a little longer. While they are living there, both the characters and the city share the same ground, but while some people go up, others go down. Boulder City is something transitory: “There were no street signs

yet, only replica after replica of white cottage with a loosely plowed yard of dirt, broken sage, and lizards, scorpions, and vinegaroons skittering to find new homes” (Barber, *And* 85-86). And not only transitory, but an artificial exercise on efficiency and perfection which did not work with either perfection or efficiency:

It needed to be a model order and serenity, an exemplary mecca for the engineers, government officers, and tourists pouring in from the world over to watch this major assault on the Colorado, the most ambitious American engineering project since the Panama Canal. Meccass needed shade, not scraggly, clawing vegetation or dust-blown plazas. Someone needed to plant trees, shrubs, flowers, anything that would grow in that climate, in order to create the illusion of a real city with established trees and a pleasant history.” (Barber, *And* 142)

The connection to place that resonates in Barber’s characters as a pulse to define identity, is almost impossible in Boulder City, where the closest they come to feel a connection is in pretending, in attempting, a simulacra of home that works better as a metaphor of the impossibility or impotence of such gesture. Only a few kilometres away, the Railroad Pass, which is still surviving in Henderson, Nevada, was the oldest active gaming license casino in 1931 and it came to be an strategic place in the novel which functions a magnetic center to entice some characters: “Some big corporation decided to forget about precious metals and try a new style gold mine” (Barber, *And* 113) and this was the new giant casino. But, in some cases, Alf is going to find in this place, a certain haven.

In fact, Alf and Esther’s concept of home sways throughout the novel and Alf seems to find it away from a home in which he has a pivotal space to fill: “And then he drove down to the dam site in the moonlight to give himself a few more minutes before opening the door to his humble home. There’s no place like home” (Barber, *And* 139). Here the irony describes different dimensions in Alf’s attachment to places as a reflection on her ups and downs with his family. Stegner observes that “no place, not even a wild place, is a place

until it has had that human attention that at its highest reach we call poetry” (*Where* 205). If Barber is giving attention to these places in her fiction, we can conclude that that poetry Stegner talks about can be disturbing or hurting. Boulder City generates a sense of labyrinthic reality in which Esther, the main character, finds a setting to perform her sense of being lost:

And Esther had walked every evening after the summer sun gave up for the day. She walked and walked until she hardly knew she was walking anymore, like an air current floating over sidewalks. Esther was a common sight walking up and down B, C, D, and F avenues, California, Arizona, Wyoming, New Mexico streets on her broad-wheeled black shoes. She never walked on Birch, Ash, or Denver streets where the spacious government houses had been built, every one of them different in some way, individual, gracious, apart. Somehow she didn’t belong in that world, but among the rows of boxes built to be bulldozed after the dam was completed. The respects. The over and over houses like her own. “I’m grateful. I’m grateful,” she told herself as she ironed. “I have a home. Children. A husband, sometimes. I have God who loves me. I’m grateful. That’s it. Yes I.” (Barber, *And* 188)

Even if Barber plays the poet role that any place needs, it is too late for her characters, who act as artefacts for a success that they will not enjoy, in fact, they suffer it. Barber, rather than taking the role of the poet, takes in her novel the role of the chronicler. Barber takes long pauses when she forgets about the characters and talks about the place. In these instances, she steps aside and her style changes, describing both the place and the construction of the dam from a cold, objective perspective but never forgetting, as Mary Elizabeth puts it “those workmen on the trestle” that “look like ants” (Barber, *And* 191).

She places all throughout the book sudden turns into reality. She throws the reader into the heat with a change of style from metaphorical to technical way of describing. The style is almost journalistic, uninvolved: “Six Companies cut wages the first week in August” (Barber, *And* 68). The style turns into a scientific discourse at two different dimensions: one, the historic, epic construction and taming of the Colorado River, the other, the people

building it, the real protagonists who from atop the dam, are little dots in a huge valley. Sometimes, Barber writes so as to make us aware of this dual perspective: “But the fact remained. Wages had been cut. On August 7, 1931, a general strike was called. Walkout. Four o’clock shift. All tunnel workers except ten. Four hundred workers met at the River Camp cookhouse” (Barber, *And* 69). In the following paragraph she gives voice to the strike leader, concretizing the narrative and leaving the previous paragraph to read like an encyclopedia entry. Here we can choose the picture, or turn the page and look for what is inside. Barber moves from “the dam” to “the men” in order to focus on them and tell us the real story: “These men were preparing to build a dam that was almost as big as God” (Barber, *And* 127). The dam is part of their lives: the news, the vibrations, the humming of the compressed air, the electricity, the miners, engineers, the accidents, the funerals, the visit. They all form part of their lives:

Townpeople forgot Bernie Wilson’s real name. He was no longer himself, but “Bull”, the Bull of the River, a modern-day Minotaur in the labyrinth of the diversion tunnels. The language became part of the town, a fabric woven by the people to magnify their purpose, a warp of desert-colored, wind-washed, sun-soaked, water-stained threads with bold blues and glaring yellows, strengthened by a weft of steel threads shaved from hard edges of shovels, blades, sprockets, and nail tips. (Barber, *And* 154)

In that change of perspective and style, the epic of the dam, the pride and the guilt comes to stage and Barber skillfully plays with that leap from the distance. The change from a journalistic approach to the personal-fictional approach executes a complex perspective in one significant scale. Landscape, even if fabricated by men becomes part of their lives.<sup>220</sup> The novel as a whole is “macro-history made individually relevant by recognizing the myth-making propensities of people who attempts to facts which seem beyond them” (Bennion, *And* 1). It depicts the life and times of people involved in the

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<sup>220</sup> Tony Magnana states that this is common in the West and in Western literature: “As is the case in much of the West – and thus in western literature – the landscape itself is an inescapable part of everyday life” (349).

building of the Hoover Dam becoming a fact one of the desires uttered by one character, in fact this is Thelma talking about Esther and it is remarkable how this feeling is expressed through women rather than men: ““They need to hear from us now, the real people who live in their model city. They’ve got no sense of much but the river and how they’re conquering it. One-track bureaucratic minds”” (Barber, *And* 128).

Barber plays in her novel with complexity. Hoover Dam is both a source for pride and the metaphor of a sickness. Life is perplexing. Nothing is white or black. The characters in this novel both long for risk and security. The balance is not a matter of middle ground but a matter of the true nature of life: extremes are not the natural scheme, not even balance. Sometimes the characters long for adventure, sometimes they miss home: balancing, fluctuating, swaying in complexity. Williams stated once when talking about Stegner: “He understood that part of the tension of being human is found in our desire for, and love affair with, both risk and security” (*Introduction* xv). Risk and security. Nature and progress. Individual and community. Love. The Jensens still quarrel for love, they quarrel to love the river and the dam that stopped the river as they quarrel to love each other even if loving means healing and hurting at one time. At the end of the novel, even Alf’s vision of the river and the dam changes after realizing that he is still in love with his wife: “Nobody can stop that river. They can change its course, but nobody’s stupid enough to think they can stop it” (Barber, *And* 265). Life flows. Even if it is a grieved life, a tamed river, life flows. If Patricia Limerick defines the settling of the West as a process of drawing boundaries, both over the land and by manifesting cultural dominance, Barber parallels that idea with the spirituality of their characters, resembling their problems with landscape with their problems with faith. If conquering the West was a matter of drawing borders, conquering their hearts by faith seems to be a matter of drawing limits. Albanese says that “by

searching for identity and finding it, individuals metaphorically establish inner boundaries, discover through testing who they are not, and begin to affirm who they are” (5). Thus a correspondence between place and faith emerges. Barber tries to cross boundaries that she flimsily constructed. Flimsy and temporal like a city constructed to build a dam intended to stop the flowing of a river, a river that, finally, crosses boundaries with its ceaseless flowing. The poetic analogy is blatant. It also establishes an authentic image of Western experience. If Handley and Lewis point out that “western writing suggest that landscape is *the* original source of the authentic: it shapes experience, produces rugged western character, and ultimately directs representation” (*True* 13), the tension metaphorically described between the construction of the Hoover Dam, the taming of the river and the crisis of these two characters resembles the conversation that Handley and Lewis establish between “human cultural ‘artefacts’” and the wilderness (*True* 6).

In a way, Barber looks back in to the trunk of her memory to see if she is just a product of Southern Nevada and Mormonism or if she came out of all that with something that constitutes her identity. Stegner confessed to a similar feeling: “I may not know who I am but I know where I am from” (Simo ix). Barber tries to discover herself through different elements and memories. One of them is place. Boulder City stands for certainty, whether disturbing or not, and it is the frame in which she sets her childhood. Las Vegas means disruptive uncertainty and learning and it is the frame in which she locates her adolescence. The solid line that leads from one place to the other, the track left by the atomic bomb test or the wind blowing out of the desert is also relevant in following her progress on the map of her fiction.



#### 4.4.5. The Interior – Exterior Frame

In combination with Barber's definition of self through the interplay between staying and moving, roots and routes, that I derive from Campbell's and Gilroy's notions, Barber's presentation of interior and exterior locations in her fiction gives significance to a key movement that complicates the potential meaning inferred from her literature. In addition, the reader needs to take into consideration that many of these disruptive scenes in which the women described in *The School of Love* face turning situations occur in open spaces. Thus, Barber plays with what Riley explains about those novelists who contributed to the myth that women were afraid of outdoors, promoting the notion that "aggressive men sallied forth into the world of nature; passive women stayed indoors" (10). Riley affirms that "male novelist often used landscape as a symbol of a woman's entrapment – of her inability to stand up to forces larger than herself" (10). In Barber, those forces do not confront women with energy larger than themselves, instead, they are apparently regular opponents or circumstances. Still, they are unable to react. For instance, Martha in "The Glider" is in the open space of her farming fields; Anne is in the beach; and the woman driving in "Criminal Justice" is crossing states.

In "Ida's Sabbath", for example, the story takes place in a chapel during Sunday service after a stormy night in an apparently small town called Gardenville. Ida Rossiter's home is the second main setting in this story, a setting that blinds down, full of darkness and intimacy, an intimacy that seems dangerous rather than comforting. Just the opposite to the indoor room of the chapel which her ex-husband called "a sanctimonious booby hatch"<sup>221</sup> (Barber, *Parting* 44). In the past tense, all the sequence of events and memories works to

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<sup>221</sup> This short story is written in the past simple, so the reader feels a steadiness of time that makes it suffering, labyrinthic, unavoidable, sturdy, unbreakable, without an end, without a way out. That is when counting days, (1,039), makes sense.

give a sense of entrapment that seems to be only surpassed by the floating of music, thus moving Ida out of those indoor places which seem to entrap her.

The same game is found in “Dust to Dust” when the log cabin is a humble home of a pioneering family that, before, was a farm with a humble garden. Now it is a desert with a dust storm and a clay road and hills on the background. But the action takes place inside and the rooms are like shelter, but an ineffective shelter, a shelter where time is frozen. The narration, in fact, balances all the time between two symbols, the dust and the lily that Rosebeth has in a vase. One symbol is inside the house, the lily, the other is outside, the dust, and both exercise a magnetic influence in which the main character finds herself struggling to find a balance in the middle.

In “Mormon Levis” the interior-exterior performance is driven between the main character’s home and the city of Las Vegas. The first is described as a Mormon household in which two details give the tone of what this place represents: a picture of God that reminds Mattie of Him peeking her and the curfew. Besides, the house is at the edge of a world that seems to be isolated for her, thus full of possibilities: “She backs into the street that separates me from the desert: the rim of Las Vegas, the edge of the plate. My house is in the last subdivision in town. The desert is my front yard” (Barber, *Parting* 114). In the other extreme, Las Vegas is portrayed through names: The Tracks, the Bright Spot, Fremont Street, the Golden Nugget, the Horseshoe, Main Street, White Cross Drug, The Strip. All of them in capital letters, all of them bigger than Mattie. Even smaller things go in capital letters to enlarge their size and their relevance: Teddy Beer, Little Chapel of the West, Charleston, Anderson’s Diary, Ch-Ch-Chiquitas of Las Vegas High School, Cadillacs, Plymouths, Dodge, even the Mormon Levis. Everything is underlined, highlighted,

everything is swallowed by Mattie's eyes: vortex, razzle dazzle, bright, bulbs, gutter, bump over, big tires, night pouring, into the windows, shine, brighter, blinking, horns honking, prying eyes, speed up, bumper to bumper, velvet, nerve endings, volume, beating in my throat... All the words and expressions seem to be full of physical energy, full of life and impressions and colors and lights, thus making this exterior place as something different but equally submerging and overwhelming, like the sanctity and density of her Mormon household but in a totally different way. In any case, Mattie pursues also an escape from this exterior reality by the end of the story, when they run away from the city, when the shadows of the trees come into the action and the liberating force of the wind and the speed seems to sway her in an impotence force of levitation.

In "White On White" most of the action takes places in interior spaces where the presence of the light, the sun or the sky seem to contrast the continue symbolic reference to the color white which frames the whole story. Sara is a wife obsessed with whiteness and purity. She is influenced by her mother's fantastic vision of a world made out of ladies and knights. The indoors help to frame the ideal and her fragility and isolation. Only the beginning is set in the outdoors, when Sara is sitting on a bench of the park smelling a rosebud, but it is not a pleasant image.

The same tension inside-outside is also developed in "The Glider." The ranch which Martha owns establishes a ground for sensitivity to places that echoes the interior longings of this woman. The setting transcends the importance of place. It has an influence in the character's attitudes and constituency. The short story is placed on a ranch that the father passed on to Martha. Fences, grass, hills, plants, water, staples, wire, weed, cows, roads, sky, horizon, all play the game here to give a sense of Martha's reasonings, circumstances

and problems, implying that the ground is here both a challenge and a “jungle.” After the falling of the glider, the land, in a very important twist of the narrative, turns out to be unfamiliar and uncomfortable. It is also significant how Barber pictures the sky differently when Martha stares at it through the window and when it is observed from the open field.

Again, in “Trees” Barber writes a sort of ecocritical terror fiction with the assassination of trees as the main topic. The action is always framed by the interior-exterior dichotomy, since the main character wants those trees to be chopped because they are hindering the vision from the windows and making the house too dark and good for burglars. They chopped them and after the chopping she feels guilty. She feels the sadness of not having been able to tell them goodbye. The story is allegorical, a symbolic exercise to illustrate the idea that sometimes love is painful or that we are not aware of loving until we feel the loss of it. It comes through pain that love is discovered and it seems to be too late.

Two more stories in which this distinction plays a fundamental role are “Criminal Justice” and “Baby Birds.” Firstly, in “Criminal Justice,” the interior-exterior movement composes a circle that closes a whole paradigm in which the story finds its meaning. The narrator decides to help a friend and drive a car from Tucson to Salt Lake City to help him moving the cars of his Rental Agency. She drives first through Nevada, through Navajo Reservation, through Highway 89; then she gets to Utah, to small towns in Utah, Panguitch and finally Garfield. In her journey, she tries to enjoy “the panorama of red soil, skeletal sage and bare-brenched trees of early winter” (Barber, *School* 74), even though the main protagonist of the trip are the open, stretched roads and speed. She is detained in Utah for speeding. Finally, the car happens to be a stolen car. She is arrested, none of her calls being fruitful. The trip or the story started in Sheraton Conquistador, Room 237. So it began in a

room, in a close space; then, the open space seems to offer her a possibility of redeeming her pains and sufferings; but she finishes again indoors, in a close space, this time a cell. Secondly, in “Baby Birds,” the story is almost set in an apartment, a home. Almost all the action goes in the yard (what they call outside) and in the interior, almost all the time in the kitchen. In any case, Michael seems to come from somewhere, where he is infected by the influence of the outside. Instead, his mother seems to be stopped in that time and place, living a letting-go that takes her from the bathroom to the kitchen and then back to the bedroom.

In *Raw Edges* this development of the interplay between indoors and outdoors, interior and exterior spaces plays its most important and illustrative example. In an autobiography in which Barber recalls her failed marriage and the years in which she struggled to reinvent herself, Barber starts the story in an attic to extend it through a journey on bicycle across the United States that comes to an end without a perceptible closure.

The story begins, as I said, in an attic in Denver where Barber is still fighting with her personal ghosts. “Blues in the Attic” is the title of this first chapter dated in 2002. A sentence resonates all throughout the chapter: “In the middle of that fire, I was no philosopher” (Barber, *Raw* 5). After a second divorce, Barber is going through a period of crisis. Her first husband invites her to celebrate Memorial Day but he had also invited her girlfriend and her family. The sadness takes grip of her again. The blues gets played again. The space is framed and “the walls too close. The room too stuffy. There was no one’s cold or ear infection to worry about. No unruly sons to bust for breaking curfew, so why couldn’t I go back to sleep?” (Barber, *Raw* 15)

Her closeted life can be compared here to a claustrophobic room in which social space is categorized by culture and education. Her previous life was governed by boundaries, rules, duties, roles and beliefs and she was drawn into an open space where she felt the lack of those boundaries which define and concretize. The walls of the room symbolically stand for the boundaries which become barriers, the same “barriers I’d always erected around myself that kept me protected and safe, the way I did when I took banjo lessons from Jerry Garcia” (Barber, *Raw* 194).

She meets precisely Jerry Garcia<sup>222</sup> when she moves to San Francisco in the 1960s. In that experience, the definition of interiors and exteriors also plays its role. The context of those years and that place are described as that, a context, a background, a backfire, scenery being watched from a certain distance:

The missile crisis. Bay of Pigs. Malcolm X. Selma, Alabama. Meridian, Mississippi. “We Shall Overcome.” And, of course, Vietnam. Sexual freedom rallies in Berkeley. The burning of bras. Volunteer psychological drug tests at the VA Hospital in Palo Alto where David’s sister had been kept for twenty years, where we visited her on Sundays and where Ken Kesey, the Merry Prankster and future author of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, had been employed as janitor. (Barber, *Raw* 39)

She was in a “sea shell” (Barber, *Raw* 39) and she was moving (or bathing) to a Bay where “something tidal happening outside my safe shell” (Barber, *Raw* 40). Menlo Park seems to be evoked as a composition of facts, pictures, details, and the real place is the room, a room where she took the banjo classes, resembling her inability to communicate with Garcia and thus with all the context of San Francisco in the 1960s, mainly because of her upbringing and culture. Personal or cultural boundaries apparently take the shape of walls.

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<sup>222</sup>Jerome John “Jerry” Garcia (1942-1995) is well known as one of the best guitarist in history, as well as for being one of the founders and main leader of the American rock band Grateful Dead.

This situation changes at the same time that her marriage fails. Then, she is brought into an exterior world which is related to darkness and loss, but it is also the location of a natural space, open space, which will be first the new shelter for her anger and deception:

I roared through the house, a forest fire raging. My red-hot anger burned wide as a mile. I jammed my backpack with two water bottles and a package of Fig Newtons, screeched out the driveway and down the street, oblivious to everything peripheral. (Barber, *Raw* 117)

Progressively that source for calming her anger and despair will become a place to feel relieved and envision possibilities, establishing a pattern of inner movement towards landscape, imbalancing the equilibrium of forces towards the intensity of a positive engagement with nature:

A week later while Chris and Jeremy were off at school, I strapped Brad into his blue vinyl car seat that hung over the back of the passenger seat and drove south on the winding road at the base of Mount Olympus, the most imposing mountain rising out of the Salt Lake Valley. I felt surrounded by its divine majesty. This was Mount Olympus, home to the gods. (Barber, *Raw* 118-119)

This same progress can be seen in her trip, a trip that starts with an expectation, “we were ready to burn up the long, straight, two-lane road into the farmlands of eastern Colorado, those acres and acres of newly planted crops barely showing tips of green, and acres and acres barely seeded in this late spring” (Barber, *Raw* 30), in which nature plays the role of an idealistic sense of redemption, “lucky us on the open road in great outdoors” (Barber, *Raw* 31). But this expectation is blended with a latent echo of failure: “but they were all fenced off, once fence like the next one” (Barber, *Raw* 31). In any case, Barber is successful in taming her own relationship to exterior space in this symbolic place between walls and horizons, barriers and boundaries:

Everywhere, exhibitionistic splashes of red-orange foliage danced throughout the woods, as if shouting to ask us to stop and dance with the trees and bushes right then and there. Leaves trembled in the wake of our car. Ecstasy touched their edges and my reason. Love seemed tangible. Doable. Possible on such a day as this when autumn was shouting itself silly at every curve of the road. The fact that this bird with its eight-foot wingspan had broken some kind of barrier between humans and birds filled me with a kind of reverence. Jupiter's eagle had brought Psyche water from the river Styx, after all, and the Book of Revelations had spoken of a woman being given wings of an eagle. Eagles had a big history. I made a careless pact. (Barber, *Raw* 240)

This progress parallels Esther's engagement with the Colorado River in *And the Desert Shall Blossom*. And it is not by coincidence that water, again, is the substance in which this process can be seen. Especially when, after having her last sentimental failure with Spinner and feeling a great sense of loss, Barber starts her last journey, a sudden, circular, shorter, disoriented trip in which she bikes far but with no direction:

In the company of a continuous line of passing cars, I crossed a bridge between Minnesota and Wisconsin. I found a solitary place off the highway to lean my bicycle against a tree, a grass-bent path to follow, and a railroad track to walk along. It paralleled the river. The water, except for occasional sections of marsh, last year's split cattails, and bare-branched trees where eagles had already nested for the season, was most always in sight. When I couldn't see it, I could feel it. The river. The water. (Barber, *Raw* 245)

In this short but significant travel, the exterior space preserves some sort of physical aggressiveness. It is not a peaceful landscape but a dangerous scenario in which communion must be attained with commitment and determination. In this context, water conserves the symbolic meaning of fluidness that evokes her own pains but that also inspires the potential energy she is in search for:

... water, ocean, of how waves pulled away from the shore, then rushed toward it and curled and rolled and crashed and then pulled together again. Endless motion. Endless breaking. Endless knitting back together. Nothing but motion. It was always moving. Never static. Never definable. (Barber, *Raw* 124-125)



Precisely when returning from that short journey, the complexity of the tension between interior – exterior location aggrandizes its significance, because in both she finds repair and hurt, in both she places the ingredients to form her identity. While she is finding understanding in her outdoor experience, a painful and disrupting meaning, she is still longing for a sense of place, belonging, those boundaries that have to define without confining. When she is biking back to a home where “no one waited there” (Barber, *Raw* 246), she still longs for the certainties she is missing: “I wished I was inside that world of porch lights and houses rather than a traveler in the night, rolling along the highways, thinking she should arrive somewhere welcoming” (Barber, *Raw* 247). She is very conscious of the things going around, of her being outside when she wants to be inside, but, as we have seen, her interior space is equally painful. Thus, from the lost sense of home to the feeling of exterior as a redeeming possibility, “everything seems so right when you’re out of doors under the sky” (Barber, *Raw* 239), or “always the mountains for sustenance in hard times” (Barber, *Raw* 189), we x-rayed the whole process of dismantling her own identity and negotiating again who and how she is. And in that rebirth one important element is her Mormonism and this new vision is also performed in the trip across the States because accidentally she realizes that she is doing just the opposite journey that the Mormon pioneers did to get from New York to the promised land where they were to build the kingdom of God on earth, Zion:

Biking along the sparsely traveled road, I imagined I could still hear the sounds of wagon trains heading for the Territory of Utah, the State of Deseret with the oxen, the horses, the squeaking of the wheels turning through the ruts and the uneven ground on the way to Zion. I imagined my great-great-grandfather, Charles Wesley Hubbard, crossing Iowa with his first wife in 1847 in the first company of pioneers heading for Utah. Charles Wesley didn’t make it all the way to Utah with the company, however, because Brigham Young asked him to stay behind and build a flour mill at Winter Quarters for those who would follow. He and Brother Brigham might have had a

discussion about this problem on the very spot my bike was now crossing, stopping here to camp for the night, puzzling about how best to proceed with the migration. (Barber, *Raw* 132)

Through the stories<sup>223</sup> and the heritage of these forebears she has been formed culturally and sentimentally and revisiting these memories she learns a new lesson. She feels a connection that, in no way, seems to demand the obligations and limitations that she has been feeling before:

We'd battled the land as my forebears had battled the land. I'd battled with what God meant to me and my life. I'd battled myself, something, I was beginning to understand, that all travellers, pilgrims, pioneers must have had to do. As we crossed over the mighty Mississippi, elation pumped through my veins. *You did it. If you don't go any further than this, you made it to the Mississippi. Fantastic.* C.J. and I stopped in the middle of the bridge to give each other a high five. "Halfway. Yes." (Barber, *Raw* 202-203)

She feels a connection (especially through the story of her forebear Elbert Hubbard) who helps her to regain certain reconciliation with her past in all the importance and consequence that her Mormon upbringing has. Nevertheless, it is also landscape and nature that she learns to understand. As C.J. states in their final conversation: "I didn't realize how much you needed to be rage. To let things blow. You probably never got to do that in your entire life" (Barber, *Raw* 235). The experience has been mapping a new geography which is both physical and spiritual.

In two other different moments recollected in this memoir, Barber performs how she made attempts in understanding death and birth through two different experiences with animals and in open space. First, while she is trekking, she comes across a goat's carcass

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<sup>223</sup> "These were the stories I'd teathed on. Always the pioneers and their great sacrifices. The selfless pioneers. This was deep in my bones and my blood, the notion of sacrificing and pledging one's life to the Kingdom of God" (Barber, *Raw* 160). The natural apprehension of this bond offers a healthy and nourishing association with her cultural and spiritual community.

that she needs to confront to understand death after the painful loss of her. In the book, Barber significantly describes this experience with connotations closer to the worldly, the earthly, the physical and the material than to the abstract or spiritual (Barber, *Raw* 105). The second experience takes place when the collapsed beauty of a hawk forces her to take the corpse with her. She narrates how she wants to keep the wings with her in a compelling scene in which the violence is an echo of her palpitating disorientation and resistance:

David braked. I waited at the edge of the road for a pickup to speed by, then crossed the now quiet highway lined by a barbed-wire fence and sage being bent by wind.

It was a red-tail hawk, unmoving, no blood anywhere. It was still until the wind picked up one of the wings slightly, as if encouraging it to fly, beautiful in its silence, in its stillness.

“Come on, Phyllis.” David rolled down the window. “I’ve got a meeting at six.”

I couldn’t move, being so close to a bird of prey that was impotent and so like me, stopped on this highway, wings down, dreams broken, the wide sky called marriage that I’d believed in and that had held so much promise for me and my children, the wide sky failing me and the hawk. I’d been so sure something would change and that time would heal the wounds and that God would intervene and make everything all right. (Barber, *Raw* 172)

In conclusion, locations in Barber are a tool to express the characters’ tensions and conflicts, in a physical game that bounds them to their backgrounds in meaningful ways. It is both a description of her sense of identity, rooted in ideas which play with different levels of belonging and departing, and a literary device to improve the degree of communication of her fictional characters. In perspective, these assumptions offer potential conclusions to be applied within the extensive topics of Mormonism and Western American literature but, specifically when talking about Barber’s fiction and memoirs, the confrontation between exterior and interior spaces helps to understand her sense of identity as an intricate (almost impossible) balance between the need to belong as a source of substance and the desire for adventure as a source of experience.

#### **4.4.6. West: Mormons Are People from the West**

As I have tried to show through the introduction to the Mormon history but also in the general introduction to this dissertation and in Barber's literary work's analysis, Mormons offer a new but original perspective of Western experience. In a sense, as Albanese explains, most of the original religious groups which came from Europe look to the United States as a place to cross boundaries and harness the virgin land, a "land looked fresh and original – like the Garden of Eden before the fall of Adam and Eve" (224). This was a feeling that for Americans of European ancestors was not exclusively attached to religious fervor but it also influenced the way that those persons approach their cultural individuality. Mormons share this constituent idea of Americanness as, again Albanese, summarizes perfectly: "the content of Mormon revelation was, by implication, more 'American' than the religions of most Americans who were part of the mainstream" (228). Their relationships with Native Americans, the idea of Zion as the promised land or Mormon's ideal of God as a finite being who had been exalted, opening the road for Mormons "to rise one day in the spiritual realm to the celestial kingdom where they, too, should be 'as Gods'" (Albanese 228), all these characteristics gave to Mormon theology a favor of agency, enterprise and distinctiveness which was quite similar to the general idea of America supported by the pioneering of the West.

In any way, there is still a lack of place for the Mormons within Western Studies. A growing recognition of their contribution is trying to understand the space they need to occupy within the history of the American West, but it still remains a troublesome undertaking. Dean May, in an article paying homage to Leonard Arrington, complains about the attention that historians of the West pay to Mormonism as a different part of the

experience of the, different to what he calls the hartzian model who promotes liberal economical approach to the West. May, who mentions Richard White, Donald Worster and Patricia Limerick to establish the new definition of the approach to history of the West in the 1980s and 1990s, still says that in 1999 when he is publishing the article, “no history of the United States nor of the American West fully incorporates the Mormon experience and its relevance to understanding of the broader American Experience” (May 9)<sup>224</sup>. Levi Peterson comments on May’s words about the place of Mormons within Western history with the following statement:

There is some truth in Dean May’s assertion. But of course it is not absolutely true. Any course in general Western history includes the history of the Mormons. It is possible that historians and social critics don’t quite know how to fit modern Mormonism into the modern West. I am not sure Mormon observers know how to do that. (Bigelow 134)

Whether he interprets the word bias as we have been using it when talking about Terry Tempest Williams and Phyllis Barber herself, or in a more functional way, Peterson includes some possible reasonings to understand why those difficulties arise. His analysis remains useful to understand the challenge that awaits Mormon history and literature: “Bias shows in almost all historiography. The bias of Mormon historians supports their faith. That may have something to do with non-Mormons historians of the West wishing to ignore their existence” (Bigelow 134).

Barber, as many other Mormons before her, gives a different approach to the history of the American West. Hers is a description of Western landscape that portrays both natural landscape and urban setting. In that line, her approach to Mormon folklore contributes to

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<sup>224</sup> Even if May is conscious of the new approach proposed by White, Limerick or Worster, as he himself mentions in the article, he is still referring to some sort of mythical approach to the history of the West since he states that “the Mormons are not what Americans want to see when they think of the wild West, so they render them invisible” (May 9).

the history of the American West developing Mormon approach to the pioneering days, a different experience of the West that many other Mormon writers and scholars have underlined, but she also contributes to broaden the concept of the American West through her literature based on Las Vegas, conceiving the nature of the West as a urban place, as White explains in *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West*:

Although the popular image of the West was, and remains, one of scattered populations and isolation, the West in fact very quickly became an urban region whose cities held sway over vast hinterlands. By 1880 the West beyond the Great Plains was the most urbanized region in the country. (White, *It's* 391)<sup>225</sup>

Apart from the importance of places like the city of Las Vegas or Boulder City in Barber's fiction, her contribution must also be analyzed in terms of the visibility she tries to give to Mormons in the history of the American West. Mormon scholar Michael Austin claims in "How to Be a Mormo-American; Or, the Function of Mormon Literary Criticism at the Present Time", that Mormons are part of the history of the West and that they deserve a place in these days of diversity and multiculturalism. Barber agrees, adding that Mormons deserve a visible place in the history and culture of Western American literature as well. She makes this clear, for instance, through the character of Herbert in *And the Desert Shall Blossom*, by giving him the power of balance and words. "Herbert wanted to be the Boulder City spokesman for the Mormons" (Barber, *And* 142). Herbert voices Barber's concern about the Church she is member of, and a significant quotation shows

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<sup>225</sup> White makes reference as well to the ironic symbolism of Las Vegas as a city of the West, considering it a "bizarre creation of this new West" (*It's* 519). In fact, Barber's portrayal of the city goes as far as the 1950s but as I have try to show here it gives a depiction of the town that complicates its nature thus enlarging what White states when he says that "Las Vegas became the place where a contrived 'Old West' self-consciously met the New West of Hollywood and southern California leisure. Marketing itself as the last frontier and its downtown casinos as 'Glitter Gluch,' Las Vegas gradually transformed itself into the 'Ultimate West' of garish hotels aling its famed Strip. The Strip was the product of an economy that was as purely service-oriented and unproductive as anything imaginable. In it the older western fascination with gambling, chance, luck, and getting rich quick merged with the New West's picture of itself as a land of relaxation and leisure" (White, *It's* 519).

how the whole general story parallels Esther's experience and the leit-motiv of a new concept in the progress of the Church: "Isolation, as they had known in the nineteenth-century days in the Utah Territory, hadn't worked for them here in Nevada" (Barber, *And* 242). Herbert does not identify with ideas such as the "to be in the world but not of the world", the "peculiar people", "the only true Church." He goes out of the Church and observes the workers and he knows he belongs to that reality as well. A reasonable parallel to this idea could be that it is equally true that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints belongs to that reality of the dam and, by extension, to Western America.

As Scott Slovic explains in *Getting Over the Colour Green: Contemporary Environmental Literature of the Southwest*: "in recent decades we have also witnessed --- and increasingly welcomed in the canon --- the emergence of important indigenous literary voices from the Southwest, including authors who use Spanish, O'odham, Nahuatl, and other languages" (*Getting* xx). Barber's and that of the Mormons is a particular but distinctive experience of the West. Her fiction describes that experience and the close bonds and heritage which rooted Mormon tradition and culture to the arid place and discouraging landscape where their kingdom was once built.

Barber's fiction discovers the West behind its mythic disguise. In the introduction to *The Big Empty: Essays on Western Landscape as Narrative*, Leonard Engel and John Gourlie explain how the propensity to interpret the West in mythic terms has gone beyond notions of region to become "part of our national identity and will likely remain so despite recent debate and serious efforts of revisionist history to remove the West from its mythic role" (Engel xix-xx). Mormon experience of the West is merely a major constituent of the memory and history of this land. Barber's experience of the West is individual and original.

Shaped and determined by her Mormon upbringing, it is unique and personal. Mormons played an important role in the settling of the West and their experience of present-day Nevada is a particular approach to the conflicts provoked by the clash between their peculiar conception of life and secular culture. In this sense, Barber's characters expand the varied range of Western experiences that literature has documented throughout history. Nevertheless, as Handley and Lewis explain, the influence of landscape on shaping experiences, building character and thus constructing identity

is not uniquely western; ecologists, ecopsychologists, and geographers have long considered the influence of the natural environment on individual and social identity, just as cultural critics have pondered in turn the degree to which nature itself is an ideological construction. (Handley, *True* 13)

In her rendition of the city of Las Vegas and her chronicle of one of the projects that articulated United State's response to the Great Depression, Barber revivifies conversations about the history and development of the nation but constructing bridges that support the weight of moving towards universal meanings. For example, the implications proposed by Barber's development of these characters and their connection to landscape permeate the inherent human hesitations between extremes such as risk and security and progress and nature.

In summary, Barber could be placed in a spacious context of Mormon ecocritical literature, together with Terry Tempest Williams. They share a perspective that links gender issues, ecocriticism and a tradition of environmental concern that, as Riley states, can be traced from the early period of the Church and can be rooted upon their concept of stewardship: "especially after the Mormons reached Utah in 1847, they proclaimed they could return the earth to an Edenic state only through wise usage, rather than improvident



waste, of natural resources” (65-66). In any case, this is not enough to understand her literature when concerning place. It would be opprobrious to define Barber as a western writer when this label is tentative or a “diminution” (Stegner, *Stegner* xxv). Barber opens a different approach to places which have been always in the minds and memories of westerners and reflects on the, per se, peculiar experience of the Mormons in the West. That is not enough, once again, to summarize Barber’s literary work from an ecocritical perspective. Even though, she opens a new approach to Western iconic places such as Las Vegas, she also provides a much more complex analysis of the interaction between landscape and fictional characters in literature, reaching to conclusions which transcend the limits of regional concern.

Barber’s fiction contributes thus in a paradoxical way with the global dimension of the West which Neil Campbell proposes as a way to unveil the frameworks which have helped to construct the West into a discourse. I say paradoxical because her work is the work of an insider talking about in-things but her approach covers the tension of looking forward and inward and outward that derives in an intersection in which the local and global issues are shaped. Campbell explains that

However, the West has always had a global dimension as a geographical, cultural, and economic crossroads defined by complex connectivity, multidimensionality, and imagination, even if these haven often been elided in favour of a more inward-looking and emotive vision. To view the cultures of the West more globally alters this point of vision, “putting pressure on the conceptual frameworks by which we have traditionally grasped the social world.” If, therefore, the culture of the West is viewed globally, it can be detached from its isolation as purely American... (Campbell, *Rhizomatic* 3-4)

Barber deals with a local but peculiar West and she does it with a voice that longs for wider associations. In the context of the West, Barber’s understanding of identity when

regarding place comes to terms with Campbell's conception of the West as a map of connectivity and a place of global dimensions or Nabhan's use of the term "zone of tension". In her fiction, Barber refrains to stop in a specific place and she moves, proposing complex networks to define her geography of self and confessing the pains and distresses of playing between these two dimensions. Her literature approaches static definitions of place to include a dialogue between identifying with place or region and a need to move away, to take distance, to explore which, instead of being interpreted as an opposition, is communicated as the reverse, the other side of the need to belong, but in connection to it. Both motivations are related to place in a meaningful but conflictive marriage of contraries that invoke the idea about rejecting extremes or the movement from the particular to the universal that, at the beginning of this dissertation, I proposed as a significant framework in which Barber's literature executes its complex meaning.

#### **4.5. Art: Phyllis Barber on Music and Freedom**

*Music is a higher revelation than all wisdom or philosophy*  
*Ludwing van Beethoven*

##### **4.5.1. Introduction: a Hunger for Knowledge**

In this last section I pay attention to Phyllis Barber's work from a technical point of view. It is my intention to analyze and frame her work considering her style and her developing of genres. Thus I analyze Barber's autobiographies from a genre analysis which considers not only the rhetorical devices but also the content and the ideological and moral disposition of her books. Additionally, the term art encompasses here a criterion in which culture and music are natural elements of her fiction, reproducing many of the topics which I have developed before, such as visibility or the struggle between community and the individual.

Specifically, I pay attention to the fundamental role that music plays both in the construction of the characters and in the making of her narrative. Barber, being a professional pianist herself, intertwines music and writing to enrich the final work of art. Consequently, in this section I will scan her entire production to try to illustrate how she puts music to good use in her literature. Agreeing with different authors from different places and periods who expressed the same opinion before him, Darrell Spencer says "I can't sing and I can't dance, so I write" (Bigelow 173), denoting the importance of music in literary composition. Barber sings and dances but she also writes and the three actions interact in ways producing a much more complex system of knowledge and

communication. In conclusion, art, in this section, is terminologically employed to connote the characters' craving for knowledge, experience and significant communication; besides, art displays my arguments about the circumstances and paradigms in which these characters articulate their creative expertises to perform that requested culture which satisfies their desires for communication, experience and knowledge.

Music is a big influence on Barber's fiction both as content and as technique. But also in spirit, as inspiration. In a way, the musical taste of her fiction can also be understood as a performing of that fluidity, hysteria which authors such as Cixous linked to feminine writing, the flying: "Flying is a woman's gesture – flying in language and making it fly." (*Laugh* 343).

As Barber recalls in "Sketches from the Keyboard," the piano, music and a hunger for culture have always been by her side. Her first memory about music, that she recollects in that story, is listening to Prokofiev's "Peter and the Wolf" with her mother. Her talents, especially for music and playing the piano, will be part of her search for culture as a means of empowerment and freedom. That hunger for culture will be a founding feature in shaping her identity. In fact, through music she will inherit a great part of her cultural body, at least that belonging to Mormonism: "that much of my introduction to faith came through music" (Barber, *Mormonism* 17), and she explains how she can still find God, or the feeling that takes you towards God in the songs that she sang when she was a child. Culture is the abstraction of the characters' longings and desires. It is a fundamental feature for going deeper into their minds and convictions. Culture means both her training and the possibilities of freedom, and, in that sense, it also represents the changing invocations that art, music and writing, will provide through her growing up. In *Raw Edges*, for instance,

her memories resemble a close attachment to music that stems significant echoes of wider meaning: “people had always told me that my piano playing spoke to their hearts as if my fingers had a voice” (Barber, *Raw* 224). Apart from being the embodiment of spiritual connection, music also means too many different things throughout her memoir, as it will do later and it did before in her fiction. “The infinite language of music” (Barber, *Raw* 2) helps her to feel peace, comfort and resilience:

But I was tired. Those deep holes weren't easy. They bruised my insides. Still, my eyes kept staring at the hands that could soothe me – the hands that had played exquisite music on the piano, that had calmed babies and lovers, that had written many stories. I still had hands. (Barber, *Raw* 11)

Nevertheless, music functions also as a bridge from one side to the other, as a pulsion for mixing the boundaries, the extremes. It operates as a channel into disruption, into adventure, into darkness and, at the same time, music exhibits a capacity to recover her community. It helps her feel again belonging, being part of a tradition that is share with other members of her community. This is the same competency that she will find in the act of writing. After a moment of rapture when she had a fight with her husband in *Raw Edges: A Memoir*, she decides that she needs to elaborate her feelings with a different option, writing.<sup>226</sup> She wonders about this dichotomy of shelter and experience, after a kind of vision in which a voice compelled her to forget about fitting to a spectrum as a source of security:

*To be or not to be an adventurer who dares step out on her own? To be or not to be an obedient lamb who follows the rules, no questions asked? Sheep are safe in their flock. Maybe sheep are smart. But I've been attached to clichés and second-hand faith. I've been lazy, riding on other people's coattails. Maybe I'm addicted to belonging and bowing to community requirements so I can belong. And yet, does*

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<sup>226</sup> Because she confesses that “music isn't enjoyable anymore. My perfectionism is strangling me. I'll start with something simple. Something unweighted. I'll start writing” (Barber, *Raw* 120).

*being an adventurer mean being out in the ether all by myself?* (Barber, *Raw* 119-120)

In that dichotomy between the adventurer and the addicted to belonging, music and writing are channels of connection and balance. In the one side, her experience of the 1960s and the city of San Francisco is framed by her banjo classes that she took from Jerry Garcia. She feels an attraction to him because of a mystery: “Who was this mysterious man called Garcia, I wondered, and suddenly I knew I was a stranger in a strange land where something foreign, something I didn’t understand, was happening” (Barber, *Raw* 43). And part of that mystery belongs to Jerry Garcia’s relationship to music: “He didn’t belong in this small room behind a curtain at the back of a music store in Menlo Park. He was a man consumed by this instrument, by its speed and possibility, even though we played the game of teacher and student” (Barber, *Raw* 43). She feels foreign in a place which is so strange for her, even a greater shock than when being a kid she had to move to Las Vegas:

I was a shellfish being asked to step out of myself and swim into the bigger world even though I was a hometown girl from Las Vegas, which was, in 1964, a small town. I’d had cosmopolitan beginnings at a classical dance studio in Las Vegas, playing piano for ballerinas and showgirls from The Strip. I’d watched Sally Rand, the famous fan dancer, warm up at the *barre*. I’d had high school friends whose parents were pit bosses, casino managers, dealers, even a president of one of the hotels. But none of this could compare to the Bay Area where I was caught by the forces of tides and sunspots and occasional meteors. (Barber, *Raw* 40)

Still there is a chance to leap over that difference with music. In any case, that attempt fails as she will later confess when she regrets “my inability to reach across the chasms and the way I’d turned my back on Jerry Garcia and rushed away from worldliness and the fear of what his life was adding up to and left him sitting there on that chair by himself” (Barber, *Raw* 45). But the potency is there, and writing will take music’s place in that attempt to cross boundaries and borders.

At the same time, music also connects her to Church and to God: “that my soul was made of music and that music was large and vast and that it reflected the infinite and that Christ stood still in the middle of music with outstretched hands” (Barber, *Raw* 263). Her memories of confidence and belonging when being a kid are always linked to music and performing in Church as we already seen in *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*, and in *Raw Edges* it is amplified with a beautiful recollection of an experience which blends music, faith and motherhood:

I attended a church talent show one evening in March, having been asked to play a piano solo and accompany a singer of arias. As I sat on a wooden bench in the chapel, listening to a violinist play a Vivaldi sonata, the baby in utero kicked like a wild man, almost as if responding to this particular music, almost as if anxious to get out and romance the world with his own violin. When the piece was over, the kicking stopped. I wondered what might be in store for this child.<sup>227</sup> (Barber, *Raw* 102)

In conclusion, music is always present in Barber’s memoirs but also in her fiction. Many of the characters outlined in her stories play the piano and music becomes a device through which those characters are able to communicate their feelings. In Barber’s fiction, music is like blushing, crying, smiling or wincing. Barber’s literature uses music as part of each character’s personality. For her, rhythm and sound constitute part of our lives and identities and are so inextricably attached to us that they act as our voice and our heart. In conclusion, Barber uses music as a natural metaphor to illustrate human failure or success.

In Carson McCullers’s *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), the reader meets music-lover Mick Kelly who is unable to hate the Germans because he was moved by listening to Beethoven for the first time. The main character in Dito Montiel’s *A Guide to Recognizing*

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<sup>227</sup> She is talking about her son Jeremy Barber, who, in fact, will be later a musician.

*Your Saints* (2001) dreams about being a member of a music group as a way of escaping from his oppressive background. In Willy Vlautin's *The Motel Life*, (2007) the two brothers driving away from fatality find relief thanks to Willie Nelson's songs. In Barber, some characters will have their own Willie Nelson, while others will dream of and rely on music to make their lives easier or they will link their memories and experiences to a soundtrack.

The best example is Alec Templeton, the blind pianist in *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*, with whom young Phyllis falls in love through her attraction to the pianist. The reader comes to feel how music stands for sensitivity, experience, energy, freedom, life, love. And all these features build the temple that she labels "culture." Music, stories, dancing, all of them are her "breaths for culture" (Barber, *How* 153), something that she feels deeply when she meets cultured people like the blind pianist or Leonard Bernstein. These "breaths for culture" represent all her longings and efforts to be free, to belong and to achieve happiness. In striving to attain "culture", the young Phyllis clashes with many different components in her life, either her parents, her friends or her Church. Barber portrays this conflictive challenge to acquire knowledge and freedom through culture and art in some of her fictional characters, like Esther Jensen or others that appear in her short stories.

#### **4.5.2. Postmodernism and Autobiography: Fragmenting Sincerity**

Before analyzing in depth how music influences Barber's fiction, I think compulsory to examine Barber's *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir* and *Raw Edges: A Memoir* from a technical point of view, attending to their condition of autobiography. Approaching them through the point of view of genre proves helpful to discern the cultural assumptions and



meanings derived from the reading of these books. By derivation, the analysis of Barber's autobiographical work from a technical point of view helps to illustrate the complexity of the "I" person in her literary production, thus, advancing the intricacy and influence of music and art both in the formation of her characters and in her singular experience as a writer. Music is ubiquitous in her fiction and life, so it will be an important element in her literary recollections. In fact, music, both when talking about style and content, is a pivotal element to materialize the ideological and moral components I have been emphasizing in Barber's literature.

Traditionally, the autobiography has been defined as a straightforward account of the life one has lived, with a definite beginning and a description of events that have occurred during the lifetime. A survey of critical autobiographical theory, however, shows that autobiography is much more than that, and is in fact very similar to the personal essay, despite the obvious difference in length. (Holladay 84)

Valerie Holladay's ideas are barely applicable to Barber but a proper redefinition of autobiography facilitates my conception of this genre as undefined and ductile in Barber. Here, autobiography is not closer to essay, but closer to fiction. As Peterson says "writing an autobiography is a much creative act as writing a novel" (Bigelow 137). In Barber, the components of any autobiographical product, what James Olney distributes in *auto*, *bios*, and *graphy*, that is, the equation between the language and the memory through the filter of truth and the game of representation and subject played by the writer, become a slippery composition, or as Boardman and Woods say "a useful fiction" (15). Additionally, Barber is closer to Steve Sondrup's idea that "in autobiography, memory is entirely sufficient because the essence of the genre is not the reconstruction of external reality but the forging of a metaphor of self that communicates insights and values often defying direct exposition" (*Literary* 79). I see Barber closer to this statement because she denotes a conscious focal point on herself but always playing with context, environment and

secondary characters as mirrors of her own coming-of-age and development of identity. Barber is aware of the blurring distance between auto and truth, knowing that deliberately telling the truth derives into a personal truth, a one-direction version: "... and the past brought to the present is always something new" (*Raw* 4-5).

If Bird announces in "Mormon Postmodernism: Worlds without End in Young's *Salvador* and Card's *Lost Boys*" the movement of Mormon literature from epistemological emphasis to ontological in a direction that he calls postmodern, meaning that Mormon writers today wonder about "the nature of reality and the possibility of multiple realities and plural worlds" (55-56), the same can be said about the crossing-boundaries spirit that Holladay sees in authors of autobiographical texts who make "an attempt to reach out toward an understanding of one's life and those who are part of it" (84). Holladay considers that what she calls "autobiographical personal essay" is a "fairly recent development" in Mormon circles (85) but it is true, as I tried to explain in the introduction to Mormon literature, that Mormons always share a tendency to keep record of their experiences and paths. Holladay's theory aims at highlighting a much more critical attempt in authors who dare see back and inside themselves, a critical effort that reverbs in the conventional nature and structure of autobiography, developing into a considerable self analysis that also involved a conscious research into the surrounding social context, a spirit that conditions the writer's bravery to compel himself to be sincere and vulnerable: "the goal of autobiographical writing becomes 'truth-seeking', rather than 'truth-telling'" (Holladay 89). To this aim, Holladay also contemplates the resources of fiction:

The autobiographical personal essay invites writers to use fictional techniques to enhance their experiences when the bare facts, even if they could be remembered accurately, would not lead the reader to live the experience as the essayist did. For me, the essay calls for every skill the writer possesses – careful crafting of events and

their settings, rich characterization, tight plotting, realistic dialogue – as well as courage and honesty. (Holladay 89)

Barber's approach to autobiographical expression, rather than conjuring the elements of a personal essay, that she does somehow in the sense that she calls for a personal analysis that reinforces the idea of seeking rather than that of stating, is special in the sense that she goes closer to fiction, re-arranging elements of fictional expression to reinforce the intensity and power of her memories. In Barber those fictional skills are not preposterously used but naturally.

As an example, in the middle of her first autobiography, Barber places a set of photographs that increases the textual and the hypertextual progress of the story. Melody Graulich states in "Prepositional Spaces: Family Photographs, History, and Storytelling in Memoirs by Contemporary Western Writers" that

All self-knowledge is limited, flawed, but perhaps the knowledge yielded by photographs is most suspect, for while photographs present the illusion of an objective reality, of a moment that "really" happened, their meaning is ultimately captioned by the stories with which we frame them. And the relationship between story and photo is a chicken-and-egg proposition: the photo is as likely to engender the story as the camera is likely to capture a memorable moment. Memory is as much about what we have forgotten as it is about what we remember. We use photographs to construct memory, to discover what we have not looked at but we can now see, in new contexts. (Graulich 387-388)

With captions that go from the cold journalistic description to the fairly personal statement, these photographs favor the complex interpretation of stories to come after the set of photographs and the reinterpretation of the stories already consumed. The same utilization is made of stamps in her second autobiography, *Raw Edges*. While being in the attic, where the walls are barriers and she feels lost in the closeness of the room, she comes across an album of the old stamps that she used to collect because she had "always loved

beautifully engraved stamps” (Barber, *Raw* 97) and because she “marvelled at the huge amount of history each page evoked – the nation”” (Barber, *Raw* 97) and her own. But that is not the only meaning of those stamps because they are part of the narrative, but also part of the reading as they interact with the reader expanding meaning all throughout the book. Stamps could be a symbol of many things, of letters sent or never sent or things to say and things said. It could be longing for travelling as well. But it also stands for memories. There is a paradox in here. And that could be metaphorically symbolized with the raw edges of the stamps because they cut fingers and they cut the rest of the landscape that remains for you to fill either with memories or with dreams, an exercise on sincerity that relies more on reality than on fantasy. Those stamps are framed, limited, bordered, but they point both to what they frame and what they left outside the frame: “A commemorative stamp was one picture from history, not a moving picture show. A memory was something grabbed from the river. When held in the hand, it wasn’t part of the flow anymore” (Barber, *Raw* 101). Stamps are like time to stop and analyze but this is dangerous because they can stick static, immobile, producing a meaning that needs to be observed in fluid, in movement, and this works as a prismatic representation of self-observation. Barber herself inflates this metaphor with echoes of psychological interpretation:

You start thinking about your beginnings, those things that shaped you, those moments commemorated in those old white-bordered snapshots that made you believe you were a certain way: the shyness in the photograph with your dog, Rocky; the full unruly lips stretched tight across your teeth covered with braces; the awkwardness of your over-sensitive, skinny body that showed no signs of maturation; your near-sightedness corrected by the cosmic cat-eyeglasses that told the world you were stylish and hip. You wonder about those stories you’ve told yourself so many times. You wonder how your life became your particular life. Why didn’t you make a few different turns along the way? Why did you respond the way you did?

Maybe I need to start before romance and marriage, maybe go back to the beginning (Barber, *Raw* 158)

By the end of the book, she realizes that those pictures are playing a different role. They work as evidence of how she kept nurturing facts and memories which needed to be reshaped, retold, revised: “I’ve been enamored with my sadness and my grief, with my expulsion from the Garden” (Barber, *Raw* 257). Once the lesson is taken, those stamps provide a completely different service:

Wait a minute. I’m getting a flash about those one-frame pictures that finger my mind: a dead son, an emotionally absent father, an unfaithful husband... I’ve cut those wispy pieces of film from the reel, framed them, and hung them on my wall. Even though I’ve got tons of footage to choose from, I’ve got this uncanny attraction to the sad shots. I’m a bull-dog editor with an eye for despair. Toss in the guilt, and I’ve got pictures to prove how short life has fallen – how bad I am, how insufficient David is, how disappointing we all are. (Barber, *Raw* 257)

The connection is made through love, because love flows and remains as a current that gathers together all those fragments, “a permanent web stretched from rib to rib” (Barber, *Raw* 258). Therefore, it gives sense to those parts, pieces of film, photographs, stamps when they are put together. And this is because: “The truth is, there is such thing as love” (Barber, *Raw* 257).

In these two examples taken from each of her autobiographies, the intervention of these secondary elements (pictures and stamps) goes from the mere intermission from the reading to a new intimation within the narrative. An intimation that again shows how Barber’s approach to autobiography is made from a “candid” or “confessional” stance (Barber, *Pros* 1) where the performance of her identity relies on an invitation to share her inner turmoils and participate of her redeeming articulation of the creative act of confession from the candor of a search to balance personal experiences that range from failure to achievement: “though there is an element of personal revelation in both words—‘confessional’ and ‘candid’—the word ‘confession’ more fully implies one’s wish to be

forgiven or to make amends” (Barber, *Pros* 1). In consequence, Barber’s approach to autobiography comes closer to some of the theories proposed by Holliday, but also, as I will try to show now, to what Bird labels as postmodern in Mormon literature.

What Bird calls characteristically postmodern in Mormon culture, the affirmation and “the intrusion and influence of” the supernatural and secular worlds, the one upon the other “by travelling among worlds, crossing over into other cultures and other realities” (56), in Barber, translates in a trip among dimensions, genres and goals to illustrate that Barber’s search of the unknown is directed towards herself but open, enabling her to cross a wider boundary that takes connectedness and understanding into a realm of communication that transcends any limitation proposed by autobiographical theory and literary margins. If Holladay states that in her research of autobiographical acts she discovered that this genre allows writers to redeem their past (88) thus provoking the power of this kind of literature, in Barber that redemption is stipulated by the search of it not by its consecution. Olney says that “in effect, the narrative is never finished, nor ever can be, within the covers of a book” (25). This stress fits in Barber. Barber’s self as represented in her autobiographies is unfinished and in-process, coming to terms with Olney’s theory: “by its very nature, the self is (like the autobiography that records and creates it) open-ended and incomplete: it is always in process or, more precisely, is itself a process” (Olney 25).

Narrative is, then, never finished. Remembrance is never a finished action and it is an artificial rereading of facts, as Georges Gusdorf, who, in fact, had a very conventional concept of autobiography as a genre “devoted exclusively to the defence and glorification of a man, a career, a political cause, or a skillful strategy presents no problems: it is limited almost entirely to the public sector of existence” (36), confirms when he states that

autobiography is “a second reading of experience, and it is truer than the first because it adds to experience itself consciousness of it” (Gusdorf 38).<sup>228</sup> What Olney defines as the condition of invention of the whole autobiography proves that this genre is not an essential recollection of facts, but a consciously composition and interpretation of those facts that obviously contemplate truth in more ways than what Holladay proposes:

The *bios* of an autobiography, we may say, is what the “I” makes of it; yet as recent critics have observed, so far as the finished work is concerned, neither the *autos* nor the *bios* is there in the beginning, a completed entity, a defined, known self or history to be had for the taking. Here is where the act of writing – the third element of autobiography – assumes its true importance: it is through that act that the self and the life, complexly intertwined and entangled, take on a certain form, assume a particular shape and image, and endlessly reflect that image back and forth between themselves as between two mirrors. (Olney 22)

In Barber the “I” is implied and stated as a testimony of the subjectivity of her interpretation. It is the obvious first person “informing the whole and making its presence felt at every critical point” (Olney 21) that the reader finds “behind every work of literature” (Olney 21) but this “I” is doubled as a construction in which the writer and her or himself as a character concur in one single subject, a complex character of multiple dimensions that breaks what Gusdorf means when he says that autobiography “requires a man to take a distance with regard to himself in order to reconstitute himself in the focus of his special unity and identity across time” (35). Here identity seems a given, a point of start rather than an object. In Barber, that unity of time and identity is broken into a meaningful complexity in which the significance is derived from a complex double figure in between

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<sup>228</sup> Julia Watson rejects the term autobiography in her article “Bringing Mary MacLane Back Home: Western Autobiographical Writing and the Anxiety of Place” because she considers that historically this term has been the recipient of a series of misinterpretation of what this genre could cope with. Specifically, she points to Georges Gusdorf as the main example of how canonical autobiographical criticism has sanctioned a definition of autobiography as “a Western humanist practice of retrospective narration that is essentially individualist, focused on a normative white male subject as expressing the highest cultural values of society” (Watson 219-220). Watson accordingly rejects this “totalizing” definition of autobiography as recent development of the genre has shown how diverse and original the production of it can be, thus she rejects this term because she considers that it is still potentially energized by these conventions, and she stands for other terms such as “life narrative” or “autobiographical writing”.

the writer and the author. Illustrative here is when, in *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*, the dichotomy engendered in the tension between Phyllis Barber as author and Phyllis Nelson as a character illustrates what Holladay explains as “when we write about our lives, we create a new order to the pattern of our experiences; we create a new person as well” (88). The same idea that, in her autobiographical analysis, Tara Penry uses to analyze Kittredge’s sentimental rhetoric in *Hole in the Sky* through a use of Sidonie Smith’s theories: “writer-Kittredge *stages* a self that is at once embodied/connected/guilty and disembodied/judicious” (Penry 348). Penry explains how Kittredge uses a mature self as writer who assumes a critical voice of ethical analysis and forgiveness when considering the acts of the young self, a conversation that I infer in Barber, even though this ethical judgement is placed on Phyllis Nelson by a delicate but penetrating rendition which exercises fiction as an elaboration of the autobiographical analysis. The distance between the subject writing about past facts and the subject experiencing those events was anticipated by Gusdorf: “the passage from immediate experience to consciousness in memory, which effects a sort of repetition of that experience, also serves to modify its significance” (38). But even if Gusdorf envisioned all these ideas, he was mistaken when seeing autobiography as a matter of unity, completion, preservation and entirety, expressions that he uses continuously and that are not obviously veritable if autobiography is approached from unconventional angles. Gusdorf conceives autobiography as a genre directionally pointing backwards, while Barber’s approach to autobiography poses a dynamic energy which produces a literature embedded with future times and with uncompleted meanings. Whether it talks about past events or not, the unity splits into directions which move both backwards and forward and fragment the narration and multiply the timely dimension of the book. In *Raw Edges: A Memoir*, for example, the bike trip explains the fragmentation: “The endless thinking on the bicycle was never



experienced in well-ordered chronology or form. Rather, it spun out of the vast reservoir of fragments in my head while my legs relentlessly spun the pedals” (Barber, *Raw* 2). The fragmentation is this time sourced in experience, so it is translated like that into literature. In any case, it is not a fragmentation but a web where time is an embroidered substance impossible to be captured. There are too many dimensions and chronological levels, all stepping into the main character, a woman who seems to substantiate the burden over herself. As Boardman and Woods explain:

Apparently, writing about oneself was not a simple endeavour of recalling or researching the facts and then recording them with the handy tool of language. For instance, autobiography is based on what is remembered, and memory is shaped by culture and community, which help determine what is important enough to remember and how it is remembered. Cultural values and habits may encourage us to remember events chronologically, for example; some communities may value personal memories while others dismiss them as merely idiosyncratic. Memory is also influenced by the repetition of family stories, by the unconscious, sometimes by mental trauma or physical damage. Experience, like memory, becomes accessible and acquires significance through language. An autobiographer cannot provide, on the page, a window into her mind and soul – only a representation of self. (Boardman 15)

Boardman and Wood’s ideas for autobiography are complicated when applied within combining elements of cultural and literary source. Thus Bird expands these ideas from a postmodernist frame and in a Mormon context to state that:

Postmodernism encourages the juxtaposition of realities and worlds in a way that seems propitious for Mormon literature. Postmodernism allows for the combining of diverse elements – the natural and the supernatural, the human and the divine, the reality of one culture and that of another – in the same text in a way that didn’t seem possible in modernism. (Bird 62)

This is the spirit that, consciously or unconsciously, Barber displays in her autobiographical texts, allowing not only for disruption and composite contexts but for a complexity of her search for self that gives a perfect rendition of the entanglement of such

an endeavor. Barber's autobiographical effort condenses a representation of identity that relies on these complexities, in a self which is entangled by different representations and performances in progress, under construction; an identity constructed by stories which belong to Barber herself but which are also evoking a community. Identity is never achieved in Barber as a complete wholeness because that is an apparently impossible goal. Boardman and Woods propose a concept of "identity as self-contained unit that can be efficiently wrapped in language" (17). An identity that has been abandoned and, in consequence, we need to consider who we are by evidence of our relational nature, the performance of our self (visibility) and our connection to the background, the land<sup>229</sup>. Maybe it is not a matter of postmodernism but of feminism as Boardman and Woods state, but it is, in any case, a matter of marriage, connection, relation, friendship, balance, process and understanding:

In addition, as feminist critics of autobiography have pointed out, women have been at a marked disadvantage vis-à-vis the traditional notion of autobiography: even if a woman had the opportunity and the nerve to write a cradle-to-grave account of her life, and to do it in a "masculine" way, that life would be unlikely to follow the linear pattern (from obscurity to success to public consequence and service) of the great man's life story. (Boardman 12)

#### **4.5.3. Music: The Many Meanings of Sound**

Barber relies on music as an effective device, a mighty instrument to undress and examine her characters. Many different meanings or feelings are, thus, powerfully communicated through the symbolic and expressive application of music. Barber manages

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<sup>229</sup> As Brian Evenson states "once can give preestablished rules in one's life, and one can live according to a certain moral code and still have quite a bit of openness in a text. With the Mormon emphasis on choice, making choices, I would think the Mormon writer would feel compelled to write an open text rather than a closed one" (Bigelow 35).

to give sound the power to express these many different feelings, as may be seen by taking a broad look at her short stories.

For example, in “Tangles”, from the collection *The School of Love*, music means freedom and escape. This story resists with no clear setting, with a dreamy nature that helps the characters to move from Vienna to England, from China to a circus, through possibly not even going out of the room. The reader travels from an American distinctive scene, the main character leaving home with her mom standing in the doorway, brother playing in the yard and the silver Pontiac honking, to the Viennese mask ball. And this movement is fabricated with a musical background: from Johnny Mathis singing “That’s All” in the hi-fi stereo to the classical music livening up the mask ball.

Alice has a piano. Not a harpsichord or an electric organ, but a piano that sits in her living room, all big and black on three legs. It has pedals, her piano with white keys and black keys and cracks between. It is her friend and consort. With her teddy bears beside her, she sits on the bench perspiring, her legs apart, her feet pedalling and pedalling until her piano starts to roll away as if were a bicycle. The wooden floor creaks and trembles with the weight. And then they come to the door, and the big black piano is wider than the frame. But as the crescendos grow louder, the door frames don’t matter as she pedals her way out of the house, driving her piano through bricks and panelled windows. They drive down the street, the small casters rattling over the scattered rocks. Alice singing, “Hold Me, piano. Be mine, bears.(Barber, *School* 24)

In “White On White”, from the same collection, music is a prize: “Sara has never seen such a prize. Her canescent cat walks across the keyboard, stares into the white cracks, and its eyes contract” (Barber, *School* 40). This story is very illustrative of Barber’s technical skills, specially when concerning her musical education and flaws. Written in third person but slightly different from the previous ones, Barber takes a step forward instead of backwards and the main character takes over the voice of the narrator and imposes her own voice with the use of colloquial expressions.

Music works as a clue to understanding a character like Miriam in the story entitled “Love Story for Miriam”, included also in *The School of Love*. Miriam is presented to the reader while she is playing the piano at the retirement home. Her talent for music makes more powerful and understandable the story blocked on her past, hence helping us to attain that love story for her.

Music can also stand for confidence. Such is the case of Esther Jensen in *And the Desert Shall Blossom* when she states that she is “no whale lady when she sang” (Barber, *And* 124) but also that of Ida in “Ida’s Sabbath.” Ida feels confident in front of Morris, the music graduate who has gone to the University of Utah: “He might know about music theory, but he doesn’t know the spirit like I do. He detests ‘the Holy City’ and tells me not to use the vibrato” (Barber, *Parting* 44).

In this story, Barber relies again on common symbols: music, clothing, colors, the steeple, all of them play a very important role in the structure of the story. The story spins over the main character, Ida, who is, as usually, described and developed through her watching of people around and her reflections, especially remembering her men. Then, Barber relies again on visual images, detailed scenes: nipples on the refrigerator, Peaches Queen float in the parade, her bra slipping, linen on a brown bag, Milly’s clothing, Raylene on Dairy Crème’s parking lot but the main element in here is the quick rhythm with few dialogues, short sentences, less metaphors, adjectives. And that quick rhythm helps to give the notion that actions are regarded as adjectival for characters, like glimpses, like flashes, like lightning in the storm, a style that seems to follow both Ida’s beating heart and her hands over the piano because “she was out of order, lost at sea. Jesus savior, pilot me”

(Barber, *Parting* 49) resounds as a parallel to the lyric of a hymn she is playing. Music is thus not only an important part to understand the character but also a structural key element in the narrative. In fact, the story closes with a full sheet of blank paper with only the last paragraph on top of it. Whether this is contingent or a conscious process of editing, the fact is that it works as a symbolic space where music floats, a white symbol of the expectation that the reader preserves by the end of the story.

In “Dust to Dust”, another short story from *Parting the Veil: Stories from a Mormon Imagination*, music signifies comfort: “When all else fails, I listen to music”, he said, “It’s God’s gentle breath, you know. Today, it’s a Viennese waltz” (Barber, *Parting* 58). Kenneth’s loss and the uncertainty about her future and that of her family is relieved by an enigmatic visitation which carries back to her home the magical sounds breaking the silence of marooning.

In “Devil’s Horse” Jonathan accepts his God because he sees some kind of connection when the prophet happens to know the song that he has been humming all the road and finally the story finishes with them both in the Mississippi River. Jonathan wants to be baptized atop of his horse. Though it has a very good and direct beginning which closes perfectly with the word Nauvoo, this story fails to resolve the gnarled superposition of narrative itineraries. The narration loses rhythm and coherence through a development of the story that snaps and clings to characters less sturdy and veritable than before. In any case, the song connecting and resounding in Jonathan’s head evokes a tradition that grants congruity to the plot.

In “Spirit Babies” music plays its part from a very different, innovative and particular way. Music in this story plays an important role, because metalitarily speaking, it gives a new turn of screw of how Barber uses different possibilities of musical energy and influence in her literature. In this story, the music goes into the fiction through the muzak, the music Barber talks about while Delta Ray is in the supermarket<sup>230</sup>. This use in this story is very descriptive. Here music acts over the main character. It is playing a role. Muzak manipulates people psychologically through music. Here the chosen song is from The Beatles and they are talking about mother Mary helping to forget troubles, so the reader takes the message as a relieving invitation for Delta Ray, who hums and forgets about VerJean and Sandy’s low talk and takes a box of fettucine from the shelf. The whole lyric is also relevant because of what the Beatles said in that song: “let it be”, wait for people to understand, look for release in this life. And it is mother Mary who comes to them, whispering words of wisdom. That is what Delta Ray says, but I find significant the moment in which the lyric says “for though they may be parted there is still a chance that they will see.” Playing with the message makes the participation of this song far more complex. The reader is being invited to interpret Barber’s implications and a range of questions dropped by the intervention of this song: Is Barber implying that mother Mary and motherhood are playing specific roles to avoid facing real life? That Delta Ray challenges it anyway, almost unconsciously? That real life challenges that mythical, unreal sense of living only for mothering? Researchers of The Beatles say that the Mary in the song was Mary McCartney but a different understanding of the song invites to interpret its meaning as an invitation to hold to your faith, to stop questioning, let it be and then everything will be fine. Mother Mary McCartney used to say let it be to Paul McCartney so it is said to be a song of comfort for him, but if we interpret it like Virgin Mary, and we can

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<sup>230</sup> Muzak is scientifically engineered sound, functional music rather than entertainment. It affects those who hear it but does not require a conscious listening effort. Muzak is understood as a simple term for background music but the name belongs to an American corporation.

because the use of it on the muzak means that it is a scientifically manipulated cover and the reader is thus free to play with interpretation, different meanings come to mind when understood within Barber's story. Whether it is Paul talking about her mother coming to him in a dream or about Virgin Mary, Mary Jean or pot, any interpretation is fine here and all of them complicate the possible readings of Delta Ray.

"The Fiddler and the Wolf," a short story from *Parting the Veil: Stories from a Mormon Imagination*, resembles another one written by Nobel Prize winner Henryk Sienkewitz, "The Organist from Ponikla". In the two stories, music is both life and a weapon. For Old Dowdy Kingsley, the fiddler in Barber's story, his old fiddle, called "Old Warbler," is an old friend and the only thing in his life besides God and Estrella, the woman with whom he shared his life. But when he is surrounded by wolves while walking through the forest, he plays the fiddle to charm them and suddenly something miraculous happens:

Sound that he'd never heard before --- almost as if it came from the aurora borealis and places beyond the stars. Maybe the vibration of his last note had started a vibration up there. He and the wolf searched the sky, their mouths open, until silence returned and draped over them like a cloak. (Barber, *Parting* 72)

In this story, written in the third person and in the past tense, Barber takes a step back and observes, sings, plays, enjoys and sings again at the end. Music is something powerful and divine: "music calms the savage beast." This old saying summarizes the plot, but the divine intervention here is articulated through the fiddle, underlying the relevance that Barber gives to music both in the routine of daily life and in those transcendental episodes which comprise the body of our memory. Equally, this short story is representative of Barber's personal style. The very first paragraph is illustrative: musical, like a fairy tale, relaxing, not earnest, funny, it finishes with "the one sound that never failed her" (Barber, *Parting*

65), which seems a line attempted to kids. Even the title resembles a moral tale for kids but right in the next paragraph Barber rises up the seriousness of the text even though Old Dowdy Kingsley is talking about cows having wisdom. The style of the narration is skinned into Old Dowdy Kingsley's character and when he is trying to secure himself in McCune's the rhythm is so flimsy that the words seem to build upon the action with his pace: easy-going, innocent, out of reality in a sense. There is no meaningful psychological development in the main character, this short story seems rather an exercise on music, on how music can be an instrument to communicate divine intermissions or the illusion of it<sup>231</sup>. But the moral benefit of the miracle which has been attached to Estrella is very personal in Old Dowdy Kingsley who learns that music is understood by animals and that Hannah, his cow, could listen to his music as well, and then she could whisper to him the secrets she holds.

Turning to Barber's novel, *And the Desert Shall Blossom*, we find a different meaning embodied in the influence of music on characters. To Esther and Alf, music is the soundtrack for their only moments of happiness or hope, moments of peace in the battle, like night in the trenches: "When they sang, everything else --- their troubles and old wounds --- disappeared. Beautiful music" (Barber, *And* 63).

In this novel, music is also a powerful and enchanting energy that brings the characters closer, a miraculous hand that removes their masks and reveals their faces:

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<sup>231</sup> In my analysis of the stories collected in *Parting the Veil: Stories from a Mormon Imagination* I already explained how I understand Barber's explicit description of the transcendental moments in her stories. In this story, I imply that the divine intermission can be interpreted as "an illusion of it" because there is an easy rational explanation for the end of the story: the vibration of the last note resounding in the mountains, rebounding from the snow-weighed branches of the trees.



Alf had seen music transform Esther many times into something alive and vibrant. Without music, she was uncertain, melancholy, and too focused on the difficulty of everything for everybody. Music seemed like the kind of sunshine that warmed Esther when she was cold, instead of the kind burned her skin and lungs the way the desert sun did. Thank God for music, Alf thought. (Barber, *And* 63-64)

Music in *And the Desert Shall Blossom* is not so much a way to escape as a way to regain oneself, to recover innocence and energy, to get rid of burdens that make the characters so conscious of pain and the obstacles to finding happiness: “I can make people get next to their emotions with music. That’s one thing I can do even if I have a hard time holding it all together myself” (Barber, *And* 149). For Esther music seems to be a source of confidence, the last place where she is free and where she feels herself visible for the admiration of the rest of the people. That is why it is so important to analyze why at the end of the book she refuses to sing in the final inauguration of the dam. And, in that moment, again music is all around, like the music of the water, and it helps Alf to understand Esther as something volatile, complex, fluid and weak. It even helps to compare both women: “She sang great popular music, Serena did. She knew how to jam the latest love songs with combos in smoking rooms. Esther, on the other hand, was a dramatist. A tragedia” (Barber, *And* 279).

Esther only has one moment of total happiness, even though it ends in a crazed dance. This is when she performs “Habanera” in the Boulder City Theater, a place that becomes a shelter throughout the novel. There she flees, she watches movies and flies out, away from her own reality: “Thanks to the Boulder Theater, Esther had made it through 1932” (Barber, *And* 185). In there she finds a shelter in which Conway Mitchell is a faded character who looks more like an instrument because she thinks that he sees her as she wants to be seen: “She smiled at this odd friend of hers, one of the few living humans who could read her as she wanted to be read: an artistic woman, essentially a song to be sung

rather than an object to be understood or ordered” (Barber, *And* 206). Nevertheless, the reader finds a glimpse of Esther’s need when we see that she relies on movies as a relieving device to forget about the growing affection of her real life: “The movies. The cool. The dark. No one to worry about. A way to numb life out so it wouldn’t hurt. Forty cents for salvation. Cool. And sometimes Con Mitchell’s hand to hold in the dark” (Barber, *And* 187). The reader is able to feel the fragility and the lack of her husband, the burden of circumstances represented as coolness against heat and the remembrance of faith, “forty cents for salvation” as an echo that claims that what she needs, rather than an outlet to stop fearing death and the hereafter, is some help to deal with the present time and life.

The importance of music for Esther becomes clear when, while interned at Sparks Mental Hospital, she whispers: “Give me a cool, dark place where there’s no fire and where everyone smiles at me and says I am pretty and I can sing to break their hearts and make them feel like they want to live, even with a broken heart” (Barber, *And* 235). But singing has been present throughout the story as a source of peace which accompanied her, and half of this redemptory energy comes from the fact that singing is linked to Church and linked to some sort of ability that communicates or triggers spiritual feelings: “But since that momentary surge in family worship, Esther felt empty. She needed some kind of fellowship and a chance to sing again” (Barber, *And* 82). In fact, singing is also some sort of background music that accompanies the memories of her marriage:

Esther felt confusion when she hugged him, flustered by the pull toward and away from him at the same time. Inside, there was a young girl who once sang at the Elberta Theater. This girl still looked at Alf as though he were handsomely new and full of promises she could believe, though Esther, the seasoned veteran, knew better than to trust this creature who slid in and out of her affections like the white of an egg. (Barber, *And* 83)

Finally, in our study of how music intervenes in Barber's fiction and memoirs, we need to consider her first autobiography *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*. In this autobiography, music plays a fundamental role since the recollection of Barber's childhood and teenage days runs in parallel to her involvement in the world of art. In one of the excerpts, "Bird of Paradise", music means freedom, mystery, energy: "Instantly, I felt my pulse and the drum beating together" (Barber, *How* 21). Music can also mean dreaming:

Slow, steady, stalking feet of rhythm walked through my blood, strode into my arms and my legs and my body. Firelit eyes glowed in the dark, watching, waiting for Liliuokalaminoa and the Princess Phyllis in her coral-loved flowers. (Barber, *How* 27)

The young Phyllis dreams and the food for her dreaming is a music which makes her feel happier and empowered. But in that same excerpt, music stands for a totally opposite feeling when it becomes something so powerful that it can frighten:

I scooted closer to my father for protection. The gymnasium was the inside of a drum, and my heart was beating wildly. She seemed a stranger to me, too, but then the mood changed, and she softened from an angry mountain to a floating seabird. (Barber, *How* 30)

In consequence, Barber achieves a powerful and rich portrayal of the intensity and significance of the relationship between people and music. Under the motley canopy of Barber's work, the reader faces the multiple interplay of art and life which gives relevance to the meaning of sounds and melody in our daily routine. Music as a mirror of human feelings or any other of the functions that it assumes within the framework of Barber's fiction comes naturally, not as though Barber's determination were to justify or reclaim the significance of music. In any event, as I will show later, music is also a technical resource,

but before, I need to talk about the most important topic that Barber develops in her literature when combining music and content: visibility.

#### **4.5.4. Visibility: Seeking Applause and Recognition**

Apart from the influence of music on the different characters in Barber's fiction, culture plays a significant role as a vehicle to express the conflict between confidence and visibility<sup>232</sup>, pride and talent, freedom and family. In *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*, for instance, young Phyllis' insistence on gaining knowledge and experience through culture will clash with her Mormon education and household, in the same way that it is controversial to be a Mormon in Las Vegas or just like confronting the roles of womanhood and motherhood promoted by her Mormon training. The most important meaning that Barber wants to communicate through the recollection of her girlhood and teenage years in *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir* differs from any other meaning expressed in the rest of her fiction.

When considering this idea of motherhood or when analysing her relationship with her mother, culture becomes a paradox. On the one hand, culture works in her autobiography as a tight bond between young Phyllis and her mother Thora, since both share this desire for art and culture. In fact, it becomes obvious that her mother is somehow trying to live vicariously through young Phyllis achievements and talents. Young Phyllis states that, in the future, what she will remember about music is her mother's failure to feel confident and succeed at singing (Barber, *How* 55). Thus, she establishes a solid, emotive bond with her mother through their shared concern about culture, particularly music. Young Phyllis

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<sup>232</sup> In here, visibility is not understand with the sexual connotations that Irigaray gave to the term in "Another 'Cause'-Castration" when she considers the rule of visibility (Irigaray, *Another* 407) from a Freudian and Lacanian point of view to understood representations of female and male sexuality.

becomes aware of her talents thanks to her mother's insistence that she plays the piano. The hunger to attain culture emerges from within the family circle, and not driven by motivation from outsiders. Her mother, then, will always be present when dealing with music because it is she who encourages her to continue to practice the piano and because young Phyllis is sensitive to her mother's silent tragedy and subsequent failure. In any case, this memory of her mother is significant because the one memory that she will always have about her mother is one of failure. By binding her craving for culture to her own mother's failure to be able to choose, their bond grows even more powerful and significant.

Her first teacher, Mrs. Ramsey, taught her that "the silence is as important as the sound" (Barber, *How* 63). Mrs. Ramsey is presented to the reader as an experience beyond musical achievement because young Phyllis goes roller-skating to her house and confesses that it is the first time that she goes to somebody's home. With these two occurrences Barber reveals that young Phyllis' musical education is also a coming-of-age, a lesson for life. Mrs. King, another music teacher, will teach her a different lesson. It will be her first experience with guilt: "I did have a piano teacher, after all. I should be grateful for Mrs. King. I should be grateful for every effort my mother made to teach me music and culture, but somehow, something was wrong" (Barber, *How* 70). She tricks her mother into getting rid of that teacher and she feels guilty. Later, Mr. Slowkowska, her first male teacher, causes in her the outburst of awareness of her talent and this provokes the first clash between young Phyllis and her mother:

Somehow I knew these people in church who loved me and treated me as their prodigy --- the best in the west, no question about it --- had never met Mr. Slowkowska. They'd never looked into his finely fractioned eyes that had stared down many a score, torn into them, rendered them helpless. (Barber, *How* 81)

And here the paradox surfaces: her mother, who was her support at the beginning, now tries to control her experience of culture and music. Consequently, when her growing hunger for culture exceeds the limits of her household, her relationship with her mother is going to suffer. Mr. Slowkowska and her newly discovered talent for music is the train that she wants to board, but it goes in the opposite direction to the train her mother wants her to take. Young Phyllis likes the challenge, the adventure, the risk, all combined with her eagerness to be special, different, visible. She feels brave, but frightened by this world outside of the one where she is loved and in which she feels comfortable, like the desert compared to Boulder City. Here she clashes with her mother, even though hers is going to be her first and most important memory about music and culture. When she tells her that she wants to go to Mr. Slowkowska's because he is the best teacher in Las Vegas, her mother tells her: "But you're already good enough. What are you trying to be?" (Barber, *How* 79) Mother initiated her, but now she wants to reach higher, and her mother does not understand.

In *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*, young Phyllis' family constantly accuses her of craving for praise. Talent is a gift from God and it is very important to remain humble. As pointed out in the introduction to the history of Mormon literature, apostles such as Boyd K. Packer emphasized that talented Mormon musicians should understand that their skills to perform music were a gift from God and that they were responsible for that attribute:

For the most part, we do without because the conductor wants to win the acclaim of the world. He does not play to the Lord, but to other musicians. The composer and the arranger want to please the world. The painter wants to be in style. And so our resources of art and music grow ever so gradually. And we find that there have marched through this grand parade of mortality men and women who were sublimely gifted, but who spent all, or most, in the world and for the world. And I repeat that

they may well one day come to learn that “many men struggle to reach the top of the ladder, only to find that it is leaning against the wrong wall.” (Packer10)

The young Phyllis clashes with her parents because she regards her talent to play the piano as her own. This attribute supports her self-esteem. She wants to be proud of herself.

In “At the Talent Show”, the clash between young Phyllis and her parents is driven by this concern with visibility. This entire section of the autobiography is presented as a play in three acts, each one standing for a different feeling or challenge that must be overcome to learn a lesson about the place that her talent for music should occupy within her identity. The first act is a lesson in pride. She feels proud but, because her father warns her, she has to fight against that feeling. The second act is about dealing with success. She is a normal girl who is successful on stage. She discovers applause, an ovation, and to feel loved. But this has nothing to do with her “selfish” awareness of her talent for playing the piano in the first act. The third act is the main part of this lesson that takes place when she discusses with her father about her growing pride. She sees in him the flattery that she has been warned about. Talent is something that God gave her. It is not hers, but his. All throughout this short story the reader is faced with the disturbing feelings of a child who discovers her own skills. This kind of self-esteem can be mistaken for arrogance and the presence of irony as a weapon of self-defense. It is the disrupting attempt to understand pride, flattery and humility that symbolizes the always difficult relationship between parent and child. When Sister Floyd tells her about Carnegie Hall, we see that music means two things for young Phyllis. Firstly, it means confidence in herself, a possession that makes her feel valuable and special. She believes that she can beat anything. Secondly, it means fear. She is afraid of becoming Frost, the beaten Mormon who is pathetically trying to recover a place in his community. For young Phyllis music means opportunity, an opportunity that,

in any case, gathers risk and expectation. Music is one of the desirable trains analyzed earlier. This is the one she wants to take, the one she has been waiting for, but it is not the train her parents want her to board<sup>233</sup>. In “At the Talent Show”, the young Phyllis does not quite understand the limits of pride. Brother Higginson’s performance is funny. She even enjoys it. Sister Floyd is also successful even if “she started singing an octave lower” (Barber, *How* 42). Even her father seems to be flattered when everybody loves him for his singing, disguised as a Hawaiian dancer. And she is successful as well when she performs with her friends. She becomes “Phyllis Phenomenal”, a very different girl, far removed from the one worried about perfection, pride, love. She is just a plain girl, laughing, enjoying this time, unaware of the making-up and the growing-up. Success is always related to enjoyment and entertainment, rather than to talent or skillfulness. Then, what is talent? What is it that leads to success, to applause? She is taking notice all during the show, even though what she really needs is support. The main lesson that she learns from this experience is the existence of a thin line that differentiates support and praise.

In summary, after young Phyllis becomes aware of her talent for music and her hunger for knowledge and experience, art and culture become a potential way of transcending herself and her surroundings. In any case, her family sees her burgeoning piano talent as both a gift and a bane. Mother and father counsel her about and against pride and the desire to become exceptional, in spite of their own yearnings, especially in the case of the mother, to see just that. Consequently, trouble arises when young Phyllis exceeds the limits of culture that she shared with her mother. When she recognizes music and culture as a goal, as the path to follow or the train to board, when this coincides with what she wants for her

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<sup>233</sup> “Always right, father, mother, always right to stop trains in their tracks, train chugging to somewhere, stop them quickly, suddenly, unavoidably, to remind them to be humble and not chug with too much bravado, not to make too much of any accomplishment lest the Lord take it away, lest the Lord frown, lest, lest, lest” (Barber, *How* 40).



own life, this determination collides with her family's expectations. She wants music for herself, not to allure others. She wants to control her own talent, which becomes a part of her overall battle against the limits placed on her own determination and resolution:

Nothing seemed right: my mother wanting music to fill her ears against her mother's words about Aunt Lois's talent; my father wanting audience, laughter, and good times; the violinist's accompanist wanting black when I wore red; me not knowing what to want, trying to please everybody until I was a blown shell of egg, too wispy to stay in any kind of place. My self was falling away from me, lost in everyone's ideas about culture. (Barber, *How* 83)

Art and culture for her do not mean any of the proposed applications. They do not even mean being on stage and winning the audience's applause. They do not mean trying to be famous or recognized. Instead, they rather mean freedom, confidence, travel, experience, challenge, control, emancipation. She starts playing the piano and discovers that having a skill really means possessing power:

I'd been away. I'd seen new places and things. And I rolled over on my back, spread both arms out like a majestic angel would if she had arms, took the deepest breath I could find, and tried to climb back into the music I'd just experienced. I wanted to hold that music in my hand or my head or wherever would hold it for me just a little while longer. (Barber, *How* 86)

In this quotation, Barber summarizes what music and culture mean for her. This is the place where she belongs, where she wants to belong. Music and piano are the keys to something more than simply performing skillfully. It has to do with experience, mystery. Mother continues to be supportive because she is not aware of the change in Phyllis: "Anything to keep me playing the piano and fulfilling my mother's dreams. But she didn't understand my dreams, those wisps and fragments of things foreign" (Barber, *How* 88).

Her attempts to be cultured become progressively less comprehensible to her mother as they depart from the desire to play the piano, to go deeper into Phyllis' hunger for discovery and experience. Her mother will not understand her insistence on becoming a member of the Rhythmettes because it is merely a challenge that Phyllis imposes on herself. For her mother, this stubborn desire looks as though she is only interested in making herself visible to the boys at school. In a way, it is. Being a Rhythmette does mean visibility at school: "I watched them walk gracefully around the school with their long flowing hair and manicured fingernails" (Barber, *How* 130). But soon she is going to get bored with being in the public eye.

For her, dancing, when understood as a new challenge is just another way of getting cultured. It means culture, not so much because it is something artful and skillful, and not even because she is going to have the chance to get close to Leonard Bernstein<sup>234</sup>. Once again, being a Rhythmette is a challenge, an experience. In fact, being a Rhythmette has nothing to do with her hunger for high art and knowledge, which is obvious when she feels different from the rest of the girls because she realizes that she is the only one who knows who Bernstein is. She does not fit in with the rest. She talks to Karen and Karen says: "You're acting different, that's all" (Barber, *How* 149). And her answer is the following:

Maybe I am different. Maybe I'm more like the people in this philharmonic than I am like a Rhythmette. Maybe I want to be music. Maybe I want to go somewhere besides Sill's Drive-In. You know?" (Barber, *How* 149-150)

She wants to belong to Bernstein and what he stands for in music: "I imagined him stroking my hand and saying it was an artist's hand, and that he wanted me to play 'Malagueña' with the New York Philharmonica" (Barber, *How* 151). But, in the book,

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<sup>234</sup> Barber describes Bernstein as "music, the fire, the soul, the passion of music" (*How* 148).

when the famous musician visits Las Vegas and the Rhythmettes are asked to welcome him, Bernstein did not even look at her when they arrive. She got to be visible for the boys, but not for Bernstein. Nonetheless, becoming a member of the Rhythmettes was another challenge that she had to meet, and she did. That is culture for her: facing life fearlessly and placating the hunger for culture. Culture for young Phyllis does not really mean reading books, watching movies, attending concerts, but flying on them all, catching trains that take the shape of books, films or scores, to go further than she could have ever imagined.

*Raw Edges: A Memoir*, her second autobiographical book, closes the circle of her personal approximation to her family. In this book, music appears as a connection to her mother, the language that both share to get to the deepest meaning of her relationship. In fact, as she did in *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*, in *Raw Edges* again the source of all her positive memories about her mother, a positive connection with which she tries to elaborate a reconciliation of memory and bonding, is communicated or performed through music, especially that constant memory of her mother singing *Aida*, when she could see her mother not as a roaring “lioness bound and determined to have her child ‘Choose The Right’” (Barber, *Raw* 13) but as a dramatic character who silences a dream of “longing to come into the voice she knew she possessed if only she had more confidence” (Barber, *Raw* 12).

In fact, by the end of her memoir, Barber confesses that part of her identity needs to be accomplished through a reconciliation with her parents, since that story, that stamp, that photograph is blurred by constant explosions of positive and negative overtones:

I was my father’s daughter. I was also my mother’s daughter. I needed to marry these two people, mother and father, inside myself – the assured, stern, stable giver of life

who believed her beliefs were the law and the generous-minded, impulsive, creative daydreamer who danced at the edge of cliffs and pretended not to. I also needed to marry the person sitting in that chair in front of that congregation, the one who'd been slogging through the jungles with a machete, the one who'd seen many things and experienced much. (Barber, *Raw* 263)

And that reconciliation sways between an image of her father as “my anchor, my guide, my stay” (Barber, *Raw* 14), the man “who loved to dance polkas in our living room” (Barber, *Raw* 13) but also as a “a man with contradictory faces” (Barber, *Raw* 13) and her mother between the singer that could be and the roaring lioness for the Church. In one side, we find dancing and singing, in the other, there is Church. The reconciliation comes from an approximation to different levels of acceptance of herself and her character and her relationship to the Church. While her reconciliation to her father comes from the awareness of both being “*glass-window people who couldn't keep anything hidden*” (Barber, *Raw* 15), “*paper people*” (Barber, *Raw* 15) who walk through this life with the vulnerability substantiated in a love for little things, the reconciliation with her mother comes from the recovering of a personal creation of a new “*Sunshine Girl*” (Barber, *Raw* 85).

Thus one of the most important elements in Barber's fiction concerning culture as a source of knowledge, experience and well-being which is performed by a search and enjoyment of art is that of visibility. This visibility must be understood as the recognition of subjectivity and the generator of esteem and resolution, not as a sheer impulse towards obsessive self-focus or banality. In fact, Barber, as a writer, illustrates how she has been engaged in a fiery struggle to discriminate the emotions provided by success and achievement: “But I'd been better at dissecting the underside of compliments or the people who seemed to avoid me after a reading of my work or a solo piano performance – those worst case scenarios most likely manufactured by anxiety” (Barber, *Raw* 101).

#### 4.5.5. Words: The Proper Way to Communicate Her Vision

Her involvement with words is portrayed in *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir* and it is present as a latent and nascent inclination that she will eventually develop. She has a special sensitivity for art as an instrument for communication, for expressing longings and desires, for searching and discovering, both as a tool for pleasure and understanding. Young Phyllis' admiration for her grandfather's gift of story-telling and his experienced mastery of the mysteries of the outside world is a first step towards her future move from sound to words. But the importance of language also plays a second important role whenever stories are so important to build certain sense of community and belonging, because, as Lavina Fielding Anderson says, "the way we arrange words is determined by and in turn determines the way we arrange our reality" (*Grammar* 215). Words and language contribute to build discourse and discourse is a historic and social construction that embodies certain structural determination based mainly on binary oppositions. As Dorice Williams Elliot says "in church discourse the male term is privileged" (203) when referring to certain language usage that helps to promote an implied hierarchy which ascertains differences within the community, exercising a rhetoric that has fundamental artificial goals: "This 'I/'you' relationship sets up a binary opposition – truth/error, presence/absence, mind/matter, master/slave, man/woman, brother/sister – in which one half of the pair is privileged" (Elliott 202-203). I already expressed this concern when approximating Barber's fiction from a gender point of view when I stated that her intention is to play with the stolen playfulness of these pairs so as to reflect on manipulative exertions. Words, then, have not only the power to communicate her feelings but also the possibility of unveiling a certain game that derives in complex levels of meaning which

surpass the frame of fiction. These discourses, as I stated when talking about gender, entail a certain distribution of attributes that generates stereotypes and determines roles:

mothers are gentle, tender, kind, and cheerful; they sing and tell stories; they are “such a joy to look at,” and are associated with “meadows of clover” as well as flowers. Fathers, on the other hand, are noble, brave, and honest; they lead the family “with wisdom’s light,” they watch and protect, guide and direct, and, of course, they come home at the end of the day. (Elliott 206)

Barber rejects extremes, and her analysis of dichotomies is expressed by her ironic statement: “if one is inclined to put life into neatly labeled boxes”, a philosophy that she metaphorically confesses a few lines after this one, when, not to talk about melancholia again but to talk about senile dementia, she refuses to use what she calls “compartmental answers” (*Body* 66). A philosophy that she confirms in *Raw Edges*, when she almost repeats the same sentences: “if you’re inclined to compartmentalize” (Barber, *Raw* 124) and “if you’re inclined to tidy diagnoses” (Barber, *Raw* 124). Applied to *And the Desert Shall Blossom*, these ideas derive in a wider approach to Esther’s sickness, an approach that rejects easy classification, avoiding medical conclusions to her problems and thus conceiving a complex network of causes and consequences that implies the whole game of characters, actions, backgrounds, assumptions, ambitions and dreams, an approach that substances in “subtlety and complexity” (Barber, *Body* 72). In that line, her memoir *Raw Edges* is a landmark performance of this theoretical attitude. But this works as a symbol of her search, a research on how to break dichotomies and the suffering of that search: fragment/overall, living/writing, being/moving, one/all, distance/connection and she closes the introduction with the following statement: “While this search may be self-absorbed, even selfish task, I think it’s also a dipping into the river of humanity where everyone bathes” (Barber, *Raw* 2), a confession that gives us clues to understand the perspective of this work.

In the chapter “Stories”, Barber narrates various anecdotes routinely told by family and community members. The stories reflect the diversity of their experiences through the folklore and gossip that they share among themselves. This particular section recalls the storytelling and folklore that is so important to Mormon culture. As John Bennion explains, Mormons rely on these stories to build their own shared communal identity. Barber herself uses a great deal of information garnered from different archives of Mormon folklore in her collection *Parting the Veil: Stories from a Mormon Imagination*, and thus giving consistency to her personal memories and conceptions of faith and religion.

This chapter is relevant because it provides a good example of her pursuit of culture. It also previews her later involvement with the act of writing. It is a pivotal chapter in which Barber reflects on fiction in an exercise of metaliterary reflection where the stories that the characters tell seem to reveal more about them than any absolute statement or confession they could have made. And it is so because those truths are partial, incomplete, impure: “One story built upon another, a house of stories upon stories, floor after floor, stacks of stories, and who could ever tell where the truth was in all that flurry of stories?” (Barber, *How* 122) Stories untold, stories that are made into histories, but now they are discovered from beneath a table, hidden to hear and to stem from them second meanings, new stories and new truths that always depend on the one who is telling them but also on the one who is being told the story. In “Stories”, the reader witnesses her attraction to mystery, to the subtle power of words and meaning.

When she hears her people telling stories, she listens to the story, but she also observes, studies, feels all their movements and expressions and emotions. She enjoys the

gesticulating as much as the talking: “The words of his story, the whispering I heard, Grace’s words, all were liquid in my head” (Barber, *How* 126). She looks deeper and her innocent sensitivity collides with the adult perspective:

Aunt Raity always looked sad, as if she lived in a bleached seashell with only the echo of the living ocean. Something about her had crawled away and left her to feud for herself. She seemed permanently faded except for the vivid moisture in her hazel eyes when a tender memory was evoked. Even her laughter on Christmas night was often muddied by what sounded like tears in the throat. The relatives said she was just like her mother. (Barber, *How* 109)

In fact, these stories that she heard on Christmas Day will be enriched by her own imagination. Her identity is also constructed through these stories which establish a stronger bond to those who are telling them. As Boardman and Woods explain “through the work of writers and theorists alike, we find an almost unanimous endorsement of stories as the way that individuals and communities construct personal and cultural identity” (11). Apart from this, these stories also work as a foreground for Barber’s subsequent need to tell them, to rewrite them, to entangle in the game of words. They are the point of departure for her subsequent involvement in the “dangerous” world of fiction.

Through the stories she hears, she learns different lessons, as had happened before with music. The main difference is that now she does not have Mr. Slowkowska to teach her how to read a score. In this case, it is she who has to determine the lessons to be taken from the stories she hears. Often, she remains under the table, like in “Under the Quilt Stories”. In this story, she discovers a hidden nature in her mother from a meaningful perspective: looking from beneath, from under the table, snooping, catching, hiding, being so curiously intelligent and sensitive that she comes to be in the place and the circumstances of a kid but being able to discover the hidden information behind the words and gestures of the adults



telling those stories. Although the attraction for words, stories, listening, comprehending, knowing, discovering is there, she loves the same the talking and the gesticulating, she loves the same the words, the content and the act of performing. A subsequent prolific encounter between words and meaning can be slightly anticipated in here. Besides, those stories promote a sudden and unconventional bond with her mother. This bond awakens subdued emotions and it leaves meanings understood from years ahead, quite close to what Kim Barnes and Mary Clearman Blew say in the introduction to *Circle of Women: An Anthology of Contemporary Western Women Writers*:

As children, we could easily have believed that our mothers had no stories. What we discovered as we grew older was that the women had kept their stories secret. Sometimes they were only whispered between generations, sometimes not even that. And so our task as writers, as daughters, as mothers ourselves, became a search for a more complete tradition than the one that had been handed down to us through family history, popular culture, or even the literature written in our region. Ferreting out the secrets that had been withheld, speculating, listening to the alternative voices that have been growing in strength over the past twenty years in the West, we began to understand that our lives were not anomalies but rather part of a vast web of common experience. (Barnes x-xi)

One of the lessons young Phyllis learns is that stories belong to everybody. When she hears her Aunt Grace, who is a non-believer, tell her mother, Thora, “maybe you have a story to tell? It’s the only safe thing we know how to do together” (Barber, *How* 115), she concludes that words have to unify rather than separate. This is something she learned without anyone telling her what to retain from the stories she listens to.

In summary, “Stories” is a complex composition of echoes informing of the power and benefit of literary effort: six different stories within the main text, a text that then enlarges the whole book and even stretches to give understanding to Barber’s literary career at large:

I was wishing we could go back inside the story and that the story would go on and on and never end because when it ended, we were all the same people sitting in the same squared-off, tiny living room with the tall metal gas heater crowding the space. We were something different inside a story; we had possibilities other than the ones in this yellow plastered room. And I wondered if some of the other relatives were wishing the story would end, just for once, with as big a bang as it started. (Barber, *How* 104)

She also learns a lesson about sincerity that she will be later applying to her own fiction, how stories entail the idea of telling the truth, even if disguised. “Oh, Say, Can You See?” is an obvious reference to how she is looking back to face the truth. Barber turns again to first person and takes a very personal stance. Personal because the tone of the voice is so complex and rich that makes all this recollection a powerful picture of a time that needs more than one interpretation. First paragraphs are full of Is to make it clear this is an individual memory. The reader perceives a powerful braveness and openness in the voice of the narrator. In fact, the narration crawls upon a perspective which goes back in time without detaching from present time. That is why, by the end of the story, Barber confesses that whenever she recovers these memories, she makes it alone in the dark, both implying that it is something that she has deep inside, and that she tries to avoid looking back. Nonetheless, there is always a time and a place when you need to look back and see what you have been trying to leave away under the pillow in your bed. The story is structured upon the verb “see.” The title is “Oh, Say, Can You See?” which is the first line in the lyrics of the United States national anthem, *The Star-Spangled Banner*, but the question seems to be more important. That line here also works as a bare question and the source of all this recollection. “See” is seeing grandma singing in front of Roosevelt; “see” is seeing the shapes of the big cloud; “see” is seeing over the edge of the dam held by Uncle Jack; “see” is seeing Ike and her father saying: “you’re lucky to live in America.” “See” is seeing through the eyes of that girl and seeing back now. “See” is reseeing. “See” is seeing again the dam and the cloud, the uniforms of Uncle Jack and daddy. “See” is questioning,

interpreting, facing personal history, recollections. We are tied to our past and when you rearrange the pillow to look for more fluff and nothing is there to obstruct your sight, you see then and you see what you saw, all you saw then is different from what you see now. That double dimension, that double standpoint, that double window is the power of this story. In the story, seemingly unimportant statements communicate more information about the characters and the whole story than any statement made by Barber, who usually does not exercise any explicit moral. This is what I call a lesson on sincerity. Together with her learning of stories and how those words that shape people seem to open a reading beyond the surface, this story anticipates Barber's posterior involvement in literary creation as a way of discovering rather than as an unaffected device to escape from reality.

Stories become a refuge from reality: "But everytime I was inside a story, there was no confusion, only the clarity of a tale spun and the sound of the spinning wheel" (Barber, *How* 126). Stories, as happened before with music, become a way to fly and travel. This sense of being a thing that she herself controls and that nobody can manipulate makes us understand why, in the future, this is going to be her chosen vehicle for expressing herself. This is the main reason why she feels so attracted to words in stories: the listening, learning, comprehending, seeing, and discovering. Writing is rendered a reliable procedure to make shapes, to order the pieces of the puzzle and see the picture they make. Writing is presented as the appropriate way to communicate a vision and facilitate understanding. Writing is declared a more solid manifestation than just "the vibration of a chord" (Barber, *Rewriting* 1). Herbert personifies this capacity to employ words in *And the Desert Shall Blossom*: "He'd record things, scratch them onto paper and mold them into something worthwhile. Events would be satisfying that way, because they'd have shape --- beginnings, middles, and ends" (Barber, *And* 219).

Herbert is a mild character who suffers the inaudible rejection of his community because he has different attributes. He is stoic, quiet, tender and sensitive. He is not tough, rough or virile enough to fit in the workshop. Herbert wants to work in the dam so as to fit but not only to be a man like the others, to belong. He wants to work in there so as to earn the money to go to college and get better opportunities. He is all the time compared to Jack in a negative way by Alf because he belongs to his mother and to the Church rather than to his father, the Pass and the workers: "He was undaunted because he had dreams. He not only dreamed of college, a place to escape the cycle of defeat he'd witnessed in his father, but dreamed of a flowing pen in his hand" (Barber, *And* 155-156).

All the same, Barber affords him the mastery and harmony of words. And when on paper, his disappointment for a world which rejects his belonging to it seems more satisfying. By being written, the world becomes a place with boundaries, something that he can control. The power of words is like a system of understanding, an instrument to grasp one's own disillusionment and frustrations and turn them around:

Herbert followed the account of the dam's progress day by day, talking to engineers and gaudy dancers alike in the mess hall as well as after hours in his father's vegetable department. He wanted to know what was happening, how it was happening: this project was important to him, and he had a feeling that someday the information he gathered might be important to someone else. Progress or delay on the project was Herbert's personal success or failure. (Barber, *And* 125)

Herbert finds confidence in the power of words. Herbert does not have a place, even though he is a sensitive guy who looks right to the eyes and that is why he is the responsible one for the chronicle, the one that handles the authority of words. That way he regains a sense of belonging elaborated through his own sense of authority and

responsibility: “He was the king of the desert; he could fly; he had wings, and he almost let go to test the feeling that he was not ordinary mortal anymore” (Barber, *And* 125). And from here comes a sense of freedom, liberty, agency, but this is possible in his invisibility to the rest (the same invisibility that somehow sickens his mother and his father) because he has the determinacy and the power to follow those broken paths that they both could not follow and he has the words to array a sense of power which is hidden when he is seen from the outside.

Barber’s scientific and journalistic style leap throughout the book finds in Herbert a link to that other dimension of her story. In fact, she never abandons her poetic style even though she relies on figures and perspective to recall the construction of the dam: “The cement. One hundred fifty carloads of aggregate and twenty-five carloads of Portland cement were needed on an average day after pouring commenced” (Barber, *And* 213). Chapter thirteen opens with a recollection of the dam’s development but the music is inherent to the sentence building. The cold statements of the historical approach are broken by the musical construction of the sentence where cement, in two beats, forms the central harmony of a song that finishes with “commenced” and which is intertwined with a melody based on the rhythmic line of the drums of carloads and the peaking of the guitar aggregate and average. The historical approach of this first sentence goes into a gradual intersection of fictional characters woven in this detailed journalistic and accurate description. Barber parallels once and again worker’s double moral: work hard even if it is unfair because they were part of a scheme, the companies own scheme and the grand vision of a construction that, sometimes, look bigger than the individual stories composing the legendary nature of the enterprise. Barber slightly, subrepticiously, inserts statements about workers being killed: “One man fractured his back, another punctured a lung” (Barber, *And* 215). She

does it with the same musical flow that belongs to a river which is harnessed by cold numbers. Those numbers hold a moral charge when they are seen in retrospection and can be weighed with the picture of each individual worker by the side. The evocation is not equal to the real fact, basically because it has been developed through the memorialized fiction that Herbert himself aspires to use as a device, the same exercise that Barber herself is meaning to execute. There are shovels, hands and regrets, regrets that now weight the same as the shovel and are being used for the same:

One day, the bolts and braces on a form full of slump gave away, this time to the shot side of the dam. Three pipefitters were matching pipe below, laughing in the shade of the slot, when suddenly ten yards of concrete bathed them and stiffened them and finished them. But it didn't bury them. No one was left to spend eternity entombed in cement. They were dug out with shovels, hands, and regrets. (Barber, *And* 213)

Again, the rhythmic section of Barber's orchestra pours the heart of her writing with a set of synchopatic beats such as them, them, them, cement and regrets. The same small tragedies if you see the construction of the dam from macro history that reveal a micro history in which Herbert poetically suffers when not even death can stop the growing life of the dam:

Herbert wanted to go to Jack, say something, do anything to redeem his brother, who looked confused. He wanted to go to the dead man too, but then the flag in Jack's hand snapped to move Herbert's truck toward the valve house. There were so many trucks. So much traffic. (Barber, *And* 218)

Both this fictional character's liaison with words and Barber's own recollection of her youthful attraction to the stories told and performed by her people preview her later involvement in writing. Through Herbert she is able to show us how culture and writing or playing the piano become two sides of the same coin, two sides of this *silver dollar*. Through Herbert she also exercises her conjunction of history and story, her literary leap

from macro-history to micro-history, her determined step forward from the written glory and epic and coldness of heights and weights to the untold glory and epic and hotness of the workers. Because it is Herbert the one responsible for keeping memory of it, he is also the one who sees how history and fiction are woven, how they are participating in a screenplay with their own lives as the content of the story, as when Herbert Hoover comes to visit the place:

A few days earlier he would have stared from the sidelines and smiled gently, a conscientious citizen, a man who loved America and its leader. But today, even carrying a broom, he stuck out his right hand as Hoover stepped over the curb – a commoner once again, an orphaned Quaker boy from Iowa who once picked potato bugs to buy fireworks (a penny for every hundred), a man who once delivered newspapers just like Herbert Jensen. (Barber, *And* 174)

In *Raw Edges: A Memoir* writing, and the power implemented by writing, is an almost silenced, beating force which sometimes surfaces within the main plot of the story. In sudden periods of harmony, Barber resolves her confident disclosure of literary achievements with a vascular trepidation. References to her first publications or her involvement in founding and organizing Park City reunion for writers are slipped into the narrative line with certain shame, with promptness and distance, as if Barber was to communicate that all this happened in spite of what else was happening, all the events that appear in the front spot of the story. Thus, determination and credit stem from those brief moments, “I’m a writer now. I was part of the writing community. I felt alive” (Barber, *Raw* 154), but they are deafened or darkened by those other feelings which take grip of the action throughout the book. In any case, the perspective is different. I perceive some kind of closure. From the little kid hiding beneath a table to the experienced writer memorializing her adult years of pain and loss, there is a long way in which writing

covered as many periods and phases as varied were the connotations that Barber described in her fiction when talking about the power of writing and music.

#### **4.5.6. Style: How Music and Writing Come to Terms**

The influence of music on writing has been extensively researched by different scholars who have focused on diverse authors and music styles. Langston Hughes tried to apply the musical rhythms of jazz music in his poetry and Jack Kerouac attempted to follow the syncopated beats of be-bop in his fiction, just to name two examples from North American literature. The thin boundary between music and writing is a bridge which many writers, musicians and songwriters have crossed. If, in a thematic point of view, Barber's disposal of musical references is varied, her formal style exhibits rhythmic patterns and tropes indebted to melodic schemes: "I'm a musician who believes music speaks more clearly than all other mediums. Sometimes, my speaking needs to be singing. Sometimes I need to hear the beauty of a melody line or the wall of an honesty-felt song" (Barber, *Body* 72).

In Barber's fiction rhythm plays a fundamental role. In her short stories, the rhythm of her narrative is the basis of her communicative vigor: "because I have been a musician since a very young age, I tune into rhythms and speech patterns quickly" (Barber, *Phyllis* 1). From a technical point of view, Barber's literature can be easily characterized by four different elements which compound a general overview of her devices. Barber bases her literary technique in visual detailing and in the use of the synecdoche and the disruption of the meaning of words into a plurality which complicates denotation. Inner monologue, mostly delivered through inquiring urgency is the third feature. Finally, music is the main element of Barber's literary style. As she herself explains in "On Rewriting and Playing the



Piano”, different properties of performance are applicable to the craftsmanship of writing. She discusses the procedure of revising and refining the work of art as being close to exercising the fingers and the discipline to read a score. In her desire for perfection by revising the work and correcting the narrative on paper, the same way a musician practices his or her skills on an instrument, I find an explanation for her elaborated, tenacious, poetic, polish style. Barber’s literary style is lyrical, symbolic and quite rhythmic in order to produce the desired effect of the words on the reader. She tries to transcribe the poignancy of a melody through the delicacy of her words. The rhythm of her short stories will be drawn, like the ups and downs of a melody, through the length of the lines, the suitable selection of words and the placement of the paragraphs. Her sentences are molded in length and weight as if they were bricks to be used in the construction of an accurate, solid castle. The castle is the plot and the plaster holding these bricks together is a flowing, almost invisible rhythm which, in turn, resembles the pianist’s fingers running over the keyboard. Barber’s aim is to hide her strategy, but an exercised eye discovers this imbricated system of bricks and plaster.

In “White on White,” the word “white” is placed strategically to express the rhythm of the melody. Again, the relationships of all the characters are configurated through short dialogues rather than physical closeness. Again, Barber paces different parts with highly metaphorical remembrances and dreams which informed the character. These paragraphs set the mood to this oblivious environment, giving the sense of unreality, making even stronger Sara’s entrapment, possible way-outs and her own attitude towards this situation, which, in fact, is relatively trivial: a failed marriage based upon idealistic concepts and the pledging of wife to husband following cultural and social imposing roles. Don, the husband, enjoys triviality, the *statu-quo* but Sara is unable to behave if it is not through these dreamy,

fantastic escapings which Barber draws perfectly through her inner world. To enforce the disparity of these worlds, Barber's playing of words through musical exercise becomes functional. She plays with words to distinguish both characters. Sara is slit, slip, trim, lingerie (all built through the letter "i", soft, sweet, slim, shifting, almost profiled, invisible, like white) and Don is toss, knot, scarf (circled, square, strong, male, powerful, obvious, visible and real). But the color white also discloses the oblivion of emotions of the main characters, how she tries to hide through whiteness on whiteness. Barber constructs powerful metaphors over the symbol of whiteness, and she does it in a hierarchical structure to draw Sara's development. Barber displays a wide arrange of imagery compelling only the use of white. All the initial metaphors are constructed with sky, sun, light, snow, but at the end they all are related to death and rage with such beautiful examples such as white as "knuckles clenched" and "the cheeks of a dead person".

In "Bread for Gunnar", in one small example Barber plays with the spelling and the sound of words: "Swedish words in a sweet high voice" (*Parting* 82). In this example, alliteration articulates the rhythmic accent, the beat that translates the basic pulse of the narrative. In fact, Anna's attachment to Gunnar seems to be a fortune of down and upbeats. In "Mormon Levis", sentences imitate the music that Barber mentions to contextualize the story: Johnny Mathis, Led Zeppelin. A sentence at the beginning of the story, "Daddy Long Legs. Leggy Legs. Legs made for walking and dancing the whole night through" (Barber, *Parting* 113), seems the chorus from a Chuck Berry hit. It forefronts the backdrop of the story. A longer and more expressive example is found in "Trees." The style and tone of the first and last paragraphs are different: introduction and conclusion. They are slower, crying, different from the sound of guilt translated to words through the sound of saws. In that story, the poetic backbone of the story is constructed through the sound of the saws, their

musical sound is translated into words very skillfully. Barber includes a sentence that she later confesses she attempted to make melodious: “I thought they were members of some musical ensemble when they first arrived, coming to play music for me” (*School* 55). With words, she tries to whistle that music: “The trees towered over us until one of the saws gashed the middle of one so deeply that it fell to its knees, one knee left, one knee filled with history, rings, sap, juice, one naked knee of a tree” (Barber, *School* 55). The beginning is introduced by the trumpet “trees” and the chant ends with the same trumpet again. After the entrance, the following words are connected, “towered over us” can be read as a lonely picking of a guitar string. This sound is cut off by the appearance of the drum: “gashed.” The flatness of the “sh” sound interrupted by the short verb finished with the sharp edge of the past tense ending imitates the tender beat of a jazzy cymbal. Next, the melody begins with the voice of the trees whining their sad tune: “to its knees, one knee left, one knee filled” and the guitar enters again to strum a sequence of chords: “history, rings, sap, juice.” The end comes suddenly with the trees and the trumpet sounding out harmoniously. In my ear, the ensemble played that song, but it is only an example of how Barber tries to apply the harmony and melody of music to the order and cadence of writing. The rhythm is in the length of the lines, the placement of the paragraphs, the pairing of words that dance in irony, the sound of the words that sing the song that Barber places in the mouth of her characters. In “Spirit Babies,” written in the third person and in the past tense, the narrator seems to be a witness, always peering from a window or a corner. Barber puts the stress in making the reader feel the gaps, the spaces. Every time a paragraph begins with the name of the main character, Delta Ray, there seems to be some kind of gap which was filled with silence, time or self-reflections: “Delta Ray Bradford untwisted the orange-covered...” (Barber, *Parting* 6) There we see the solitude and the space, the gap, the frozen time between the closed door and her repetition: “Dream a little dream of me” (Barber, *Parting*

7). Barber presents to us the profile through a musical, volatile, poetic description of her moving in the kitchen, getting ready lunch to take away. Details pace the motion quite slowly so normal life moves slowly. But then Barber skillfully changes the rhythm of her narration to make us feel the trepidation of the action, almost in one long sentence, paced within commas, so the peering reader feels the pacing along. Barber gives quick perspectives, she pauses in details, she makes it quicker again. She relies on colours as adjectives. It looks like a too simple way of depicting but it has to do with Delta Ray and also with the situation. It looks like flashing. Barber always determines her visual imagery from the character's mental attitude, so her narration delivers always from the unconscious sadness, loss, longings, hurts of the characters.

In "The Glider," Barber plays with description, making it this time highly physical, focusing on bones, faces, movements of the male characters so as to make stronger Martha's needings, and thus making her smaller when she is placed and see through the strong, physical figures of the males in contrast with her own lanky body which seems to be invisible or unimportant. Again dialogue triggers the narration, but the unsaid echoes all throughout the story. It is powerful and skillful how the narration follows the movements and unconscious up-downs of the character, like when Barber's style takes a syncopated rhythm to follow Martha's beating, picturing her dazzle reaction after the glider's crash (Barber, *School* 34). It is also stunning how the narration's rhythm seems to step out of Martha's movements at the end of the story so as to express Martha's inconsistent, overexcited wanderings and the piteous, overunderstanding matching of the narrator and the reader. Again the story finishes with an anticlimatic, descriptive short paragraph which places the female character alone, disarmed in the exploded final closing of the plot:

She traced the outline of the leather helmet around the man's face. The clock, the pinched squeak of the rocking chair, the violin climbing to dizzying heights, and Martha's measured breath were the only sounds she heard. (Barber, *School* 37)

In Barber, both content and style have their relevance. Her lyrical style, full of metaphors and in constant search of the rhythm and melody that words can construct, helps the reader to understand the inner conflicts of the characters, their attitudes and, consequently, the meaning that Barber wants to communicate. In no way does Barber's style disturb or dull her vision. Emotionally, Barber's texts distillate a melodious orchestra that have an easy-to-see style, basically personal but generally postmodern in her arrange of different voices, her constant bridging from present to past and viceversa or an energy fixed into a rhythm that balances the actions and the inner passions of the characters. Barber's style is recognizable for her use of short paragraphs, the rhyming of words, the resource to questions, the visual details, the short but significant dialogues, the colorful referential symbolism, the inner labyrinthic journeys of her characters or the poetic images. But most of these techniques are requested by the potential influx of the set of feelings which move their characters rather than the actions, even if it is mystery or bitterness, love or resent, hope or desperation. In any case, there is one unobvious, hidden technique that reveals better her musical origin: the use of a referential symbol. If music is a matter of theme and variation, and repetition is a key element to give consistency to a piece of music, in Barber, this rudimentary understanding of music can be seen translated into a technical structure which brings closer the nature of her fiction and her musical upbringing. A word, an object, a movement or a sign occasionally cluster the center of the story, as if it is born from the inspiration of a note that came to the ear of the musician dragged by the wind. In short, Barber usually relies on a repeating symbol, an object, a word or a feeling as the pivotal axe to move the story. Then, the symbol-theme is repeated throughout the story as if it was giving consistency to the story-piece. Thus, in "Windows," eyes are the pivotal center of a

system of nervous threads that unify both the characters and the plot: the watery eyes of Herbert define both himself and his parents, thus becoming the dreamy perspective through which the reader faces the story until the eyes of the bull, equally watery, are the ones which close the short story. In the first chapter's of *And the Desert Shall Blossom* is heat, but we always have the desert and the rose. This is the beat. This is the music. But this rhetoric of symbol as a pivotal nucleus of her stories is something that she also utilizes in her short stories. Thus, in "A Brief History of Seagulls: A Trilogy with Notes", in the first part, Barber uses a waving style. The story is built over a cyclic rhythm that always starts with Lucy Pettingill watching the cricket walking over her curtains and the moves until we get again to the same point (Barber, *Parting* 89-91). Then she finally fights the cricket so the story quickens and finishes with a miracle inside the main miracle which is in fact a frame or a context. Again, Barber relies on a symbol, this time the curtains, which facilitates the threading of the story but which is also a key to understand the characters. Another example of that repeating symbol is heat in both her novel but also in short stories such as "Silver Dollars". Mary is provided with the narrative voice so the reader is able to examine her immaturity, imperfection, flaws and mistakes. The writer chooses the scenery, the lapses, places the characters, makes the elipses, but the perspective is drawn through the limited vision of Mary. Barber uses very short paragraphs communicating Mary's inner thoughts. The style is detailed, poetic, slow, focused on visual images and Barber pivots her narrative upon a symbolic iteration: silver. She then describes the magnitude of the characteristics or the importance of the facts through the constant and overwhelming repetition of key details related to physical feelings like the brightness of the shiny silver or the anxiety of the suffocating sun. In "The Glider," Barber relies on basic symbols which draw the description of characters and the character's own interactions. This time the main symbol, a multifacetal symbol, is the glider. Here we have one of the strongest examples of

Barber's detailed, visual style, and it is even more powerful because this time is not so lyrical or evocative and it rather bases all its strength upon Barber's description of little details. In "Radio KENO" we see again the use of a symbol as the pivotal center of the structure. Back to symbols as the center of the structure: this time, a mural. In "The Whip" it is a whip. In "Dust to Dust" is a flower. In "Silver Dollars", a coin. She herself states that:

I have been much influenced by music – its forms, especially. I have realized that I am a formalist / structuralist late in my writing life, and that would be directly related to the different forms of music that have become second nature for me. For example, there are themes and variations, such as sonata and impressionism. I sometimes even write as if my words are music." (Barber, *Phyllis* 1)

Barber confesses that one of her favorite stories in *The School of Love* is "Anne at the Shore", which she calls "a totally impressionistic piece of writing" (Barber, *Phyllis* 1). This story is ethereal, lyrical, fragmentary and mysterious. This story expands its meaning through the airy expression of the poetic images which are constructed with the language of music through poetic figures such as repetition and hyperbole. The first two paragraphs of the story present Anne in an intangible perspective, building the rhythm upon the timing of three words: toes, water and wings that, at the same time build a metaphorical meaning that finds its reason by the end of the story:

The day is at half point. Anne walks along the sand, the water curling over her toes. She makes prints – her five toes, the ball, arch, and heel of each foot.

The air is crowded. Anne can hear the beating of wings in the air, thousand of wings – small birds, birds of prey, birds that no longer live, possibly angels. Wings beating the air, chopping it into pieces. She would count the wings if the sea would ever be quiet, but water will have its way. Water filling her eyes; water rising in the air. Anne breathes water mixed with wind that whips her hair around her oval face. (Barber, *School* 105)

The first paragraph is composed mostly by monosyllabic sounds which give a fragmented rhythm, expecting, strong, from “day” to “foot” the movement of the visual performance is driven through an impulsive musical expression. Then, in the second paragraph, through a free use of alliteration that also shapes and connects the two paragraphs (see the slight game that plays “day” with “foot” and “air” with “face” and then the four together), the timing is lengthened, the beats are tender, airy as if the wings and the spray of water were polishing the language. The musical rhythm is constructed through the specific use of gerund, “beating”, “chopping,” extending the aerial image of the wings, but this is abruptly cut when Anne breathes: “water mixed with wind that whips her hair around her oval face” (Barber, *School* 105), again the monosyllabic words ending this introductory image with a musical verbalization of a meaningful image.

Formal apparatus is crucial in her novel as well. Dreams in *And the Desert Shall Blossom* exemplify escaping: “But when she slept, she could dream, and then she could fly out of the water, even above the water” (Barber, *And* 225). The references differ in the graduation of pain and expectation which blends inside that dream which plays with the imagery of water in different ways, all of them representing the paradox of water as both a source of freedom and a possibility of drowning. Barber, especially when Esther, the main subject of the dreams described in this novel, is interned in a mental hospital, perfectly describes her process of melancholy through the conjunction of two different styles. One more sophisticated, visually inspiring, with a constant rhythm full of cadential phrasing that establishes a pattern in which dreamy speech and much more real speech are clearly differed. That cadence is later exercised through the use of the subject in specific and strategic places such as when she constructs the aftermath of their cold goodbye at the



hospital: “Alf straightened his tie again and held out his hand. A formal departure. Succint. Clean. And Esther walked back into the ward” (Barber, *And* 238).

Barber places the whole paragraph with six sentences standing over the pronoun “she”, a “she” that seems weak in a way, a “she” that crumbles at the end of the chapter because it does not fit into an us. The rhythm is formed by short sentences, like steps or breath.

This formal derivation of emotional representations is also executed in *And the Desert Shall Blossom* when Barber transforms the heat into sweat to make it easier to feel the agobiating heat through perspiration and impossible cool air: “as perspiration ran from the bottom of Young’s ears down a muscle in his neck, Alf...” (*And* 36) This visual style relies on a compelling control of the rhythm. She controls the rhythm, the humor, the tone, the twists, the visions, but she does not involve. In the novel, for example, Ragtown at the beginning is presented through a series or sequence of little details, those objects with cold descriptive adjectives that illustrate the passing of the car and the peering of impressionable eyes, a synecdoche. In her short stories, she also demonstrates a palpable skill with rhythm, as when in “Almost Magnificence” she covers a wider spectrum of time in just a few sentences which follow each other without stopping the stream of time and narrative. Highly poetical, in this story, Barber plays with the sound of grammatically vulgar or common expressions (“for her for a while. After all...”) to elevate and change the weight and meaning of words and expressions. In any case, the words not said are more powerful than the words said which fluctuate with a sense of a veil that is hurtlingly open to see the true behind the smallest and humblest stories. She closes the story with a final paragraph set isolated. Thus it draws a powerful image to summarize the whole attempt to narrate a story that could only be so powerfully and meaningfully expressed in terms of a metaphor

such as the repeated image of the sawdust doll which makes the real feelings and emotions significant. Her management of rhythm is also particularly remarkable in another short story such as "Argument" in which she talks about a double and confronted conversation between the members of a couple. In any case, this is a single interpretation. The jump could be interpreted as something different from a change of voices. Fiery monologues: the words are chosen for working as slaps or weapons. They pace a rhythm that tries to beat like the chopping of food, the chopping of a knife, like the hurt mind full of sudden harsh glimpses or flashes. There is a change in style from both halves. The first starts with short sentences, the second with longer. This is apparently an strategy to imply two different characters, but they have something in common: the strategic use of "I'll" in the central paragraph with the possessive "your" to contrast. This gives the tone of the dispute, put the members aside and shows the center of the problem, all of it done with a skillfull sense of mirroring technique.

Dialogue is equally basic in Barber's formal elaboration. Barber could be appreciated as a skillful writer in the rendition of dialogues, especially in verbal clarity and rhythm for non-transcendental conversations. Her taming of the dramatic tension is emotionally perceived in an evocative prose which relies on well-paced dialogues. A different kind of dialogue is also characteristic in Barber's fiction: the inner monologue which structures the whole second dimension of her texts full of a flow of hidden evolution surviving behind the main line of the story. These introspections act as devices which help her to enjoy one of her favorites exercises, that of the control of rhythm, because she plays with jumps, ellipsis and especially velocity. For example, in the novel, Alf is introduced while reflecting as he watches the horizon. His inner reflections establish unconscious statements and questions which hover over the text for the rest of the novel.

Being a professional pianist herself, Barber's writing shows the influence of music in two different dimensions: that of content and that of style. Through an analysis of her style, I have been able to show how music is posited as a communicative device which not only elaborates a personal rendition of Barber's concept of rhythm and tone, but explicitly offers a varied illustration of emotional description. Barber's technical flaw for revision and accomodation is visible in a lyrical style which aims at developing a narrative composed both of literary ornamentation and conversational efficiency. Besides, music is also arranged as an auxiliar category which aids to pronounce characters' inner feelings, specific actions and the consequences that those feelings and actions have for the completion of Barber's literature. Whether Barber's technical style is a reflection of her personal involvement into the discipline of music or a conscious attempt to dispose of the rhythmical properties of language, the bottom line remains that her elaborated style launches a general tone in which her narrative achieves the delicate sound of spirituality and earthly approach which characterizes the content of her literature.

The analysis of her formal style and the influence of music in her literature delivers a perfect end to this study of Phyllis Barber's fiction and autobiographical writing. Music is abstract and fluid and writing material and solid. Another dichotomy that Barber was successful to fracture and, later repair to communicate with poignancy and persuasion the topics of complexity and paradox that I have been repeating in the four sections of this dissertation.

Nonetheless, following this extensive analysis, now I provide a set of conclusions which aim at offering some order and coherence to all the ideas that I have been proposing

through the four different approaches selected to attain my literary analysis of Barber's fictions and memoirs.

## 5. GENERAL CONCLUSION: *PARTING THE VEILS*

*I may never have been a writer had I not needed to go to the page to figure out the contradictions. (Phyllis Barber)*

In this dissertation, I have analyzed Phyllis Barber's fiction within the context of Mormon and Western American literature and history. That analysis is presented in four different sections which contemplate the importance of *gender*, *place*, *religion* and *art* in Barber's writing. The main focus is on *gender* and *place*, since *religion*, even though it is included here as a single and fundamental part of this study, can be said to expand its meaning when it is considered in contrast to and in interplay with the other three sections. The fourth one is *art* which is mostly concerned with Barber's literary technique and style. In addition, each of these four sections attempts to defend the idea presented in the introduction to this study: that Barber makes the particular, universal and how her successful move into the universal relies on a complex understanding of paradox which facilitates the communicative attributes of literature.

Barber, as I already stated at the beginning of this work, uses literature as a search for identity, a tool for the definition of oneself, a tool for enquiry and discovery: "Writing, for me, is a way of figuring things out. When I write, I can more clearly see my blind spots and blind alleys" (*Phyllis* 1). Barber's literature is essentially a "literature with a soul" (*Writing* XIII) which intends "to wrangle with the tough places in yourself and your subject" (*Writing* XIII). In "Writing: An Act of Responsibility", the article I just quoted from, Barber establishes a dialogue with her creative consciousness, a dialogue that, in itself, demonstrates her emphasis on conversation and travel; a dialogue which becomes an enactment of her idea of crossing, her reference to bridging, her ability to break borders.

Barber's literature is a performance of this idea, a consequence of this dialogue. Jack Harrell writes that "good literature may use religious, social, and political categories as setting, or it may use them to introduce conflict, but good literature ultimately transcends those systems" (91). Barber's stories defy categories and boundaries. They depart from Nevada and the Mormon ward to travel far away but always leaving behind a trace which could be used as a stream of connectedness that magnifies the efficacy of literary conversational potency. While Levi S. Peterson confesses his tendency to portray "Mormonism in sin and turmoil" (Bigelow 136), Barber's focus on morality, authority and role-formation opens a sincere approach in which both she and her characters have to face some kind of moral challenge. In any case, the result of merging the four elements that structure this dissertation has provided no conclusive identity which I could induce from Barber's literary production, but rather a self-explanatory deduction of the complexity of our own concepts of self. Barber's literature is a search for self that seems to reach no resolution. It leaves the reader with the apparent sensation that the goal was to look for rather than to find out:

Your essential gesture may include a sense of compassion for all ways of being. It may be a questioning of the establishment or an attachment to the idea of democracy that all humans are created equal and are growing to something finer than exists on this earth. You're aware, however, that this sensibility has been forged by your religion, your culture, your economic roots, your parents who had parents before them who may have been shaky citizens, proud pioneers, or denizens of the deep. And sometimes you suspect you don't have anything called a self. You have that niggling feeling at the back of your mind that "I" is a grain of sand, a letter of the alphabet, a pronoun, an entity meant to surrender to the will of God, and to follow the Essential Essence so much wiser than that of the puny self. That thought stays with you and is part of that wild bird seed mix that comes out in your writing. (Barber, *Writing* xxii)

The searching for that identity may be only half the mission, the other half being that the result of that search confirms that the fictional effort comports a procedural construction of

such an identity, a geography of the self which can be mapped through a fictional effort in which Barber's search for her own representation dwells at a crossroad where meaning is only delivered by the impulse to move and reflect. Frank Bergon states that our sense of ourselves can be determined by the places we live in and the religious beliefs we share with others, but sometimes "our sense of identity can alter, distort, in fact create environments and religious cosmologies to fit our sense of self" (*Basques* 64). Thus, Barber's geographical travel goes from her inner moral education to her physical experience to locate and embrace of the complexity of identity. Her postmodern dislocation of language, content and perspective helps her develop, for example, a description of sex roles that gathers the limiting roles of the Mormon code of purity and the secular set of values that prevail in the Las Vegas cultural context to disclose a unique strain: that of being an object of desire for the male eye in different ways. The awareness of this duality, developed in a progression that articulates a girl's search for identity, helps the writer offer a broader approach to Mormonism:

As I have tried to present stories from Mormonism to a wider audience, to be an every-member-missionary like my parents always hoped I would be, to help the culture at large see the beauty, complexity, profundity, and engagement of Mormonism, rather than the usual scandalous misperceptions, I wonder if maybe the prospects for carving out a niche in a larger cultural frame are uncompromising. (Barber, *Precarious* 125)

Her stories offer a sophisticated and disrupting approach, not only to Mormonism but also to the experience of the West from a postmodern perspective. This distinctive angle helps stretch her compulsion to look for the different pieces which finally conform a sense of oneness. A postmodern anxiety displaying the complicated multiplicity of our identities frames this perspective. The essential definition of her self in determined categories such as those that structure this dissertation, faith, gender, place and art, prove to be a useful arena

in which to debate the language and tradition which support the fundamental invention of such categories which Barber could not fit into. Her complex equation for self-definition adheres to a new fiction of identity, both individual and collective, in which Barber tries to reinvent herself<sup>235</sup>. In a different context, Paul Gilroy develops a theory of identity linked to movement, to routes rather than roots, to diaspora and travelling rather than dwelling. He works with African Americans and he tries to dismantle essentialist constructions of identity which rely too much on the determination of place and nationality (Gilroy 304). But his theory of diaspora offers an intricacy, a fluidity which undermines boundaries and geography to try to see identity as something that he summarizes as “always particular” (Gilroy 303). But such particularity is paradoxical since it is based on relation, affinity, on moving, on contact, on rhizomatic intertwining. Barber’s identity is equally a concoction of place, fit, stable, rooted identity and travel, risk, able, routed identity. In the four sections that structure this dissertation I illustrate how Barber overcomes this process and detail the conclusions and outcomes generated by it.

### *Religion*

The structure of the analysis begins with *religion* because, as I have explained, Mormonism and faith are in constant interplay with the other three sections. An initial analysis of religion permits the subsequent explanation of its influence on issues of *place* or *gender*. Barber, a Mormon who was raised in a Mormon community and within Mormon culture, is always aware of this heritage and tradition:

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<sup>235</sup> These statements echo Werner Sollors’ ideas about the invention of ethnicity. As Sollors, I also feel that it is compulsory to highlight the fact that there is no intention to propose that either ethnicity or the categories I am using for my analysis are fallible and subjects of derivation: “to evoke a conspiratorial interpretation of a manipulative inventor who single-handedly makes ethnics out of unsuspecting subjects, but to suggest widely shared, though intensely debated, collective fictions that are continually reinvented” (Sollors xi).



I've been shaped by the communal character of Mormonism. But in order for me to grow, in order for me not to be static, I must question. That is the way of my being. I don't do it for any other purpose than that I must question in order to discover new values, even to transcend old ways of comprehending on the unrelenting path of God. (Barber, *Precarious* 128)

She is aware of her having been shaped as a Mormon, but she does not stop here. She departs from this point to wander in different directions on a personal search, but also as a strategy to expand the world of her fiction. In this sense, her approach to religion is committed, but unrestrained. In her fiction, the different facets of religious experience are observed: power, misery, disappointment, roots and rootlessness, warmth, ardour, cold, distance, communion, endurance, failure, hope, despair, love, fury, wisdom, meaning, doubt, mystery. All this diversity of feelings and experiences will be rendered in her fiction. Religion is a canopy, a shelter, a refuge, but it is also a prison, a border, a chain. From here she departs to find, both in her person and in her literature, a sense of risk and discovery that is in the very center of any true attempt at achieving a rendition of self. Especially when talking about literature, as Wayne Booth states:

And my point is that we cannot find that purpose without taking the risk entailed by it. The risks of building a critical culture are the same risks that are run by allowing free agency of any kind: Some people will make mistakes. Certain art works may prove ultimately harmful to someone. Toes will be stepped on. Controversy will develop. (Booth, *Religion* 33)

Barber and some of her characters try to find their own way in the middle. They are aware of what Terry Tempest Williams underlines when she points out that Stegner “reminds us that we have obligations with both... the power of the individual and the individual's place inside community” (*Introduction* xvii). Barber faces this tension without any sign of rejection, choosing instead to seek a balance. When Adrienne Rich proclaims that the human condition means “this interpenetration of pain and pleasure, frustration and

fulfilment” (35), that description of the middle way correlates to Barber’s ideology of avoiding extremes, seeking balance, embracing greyness. In some ways, the source of this idea springs from Barber’s composite bond with all the different elements of her identity: motherhood, womanhood, place, faith, plus the certainty and the uncertainty<sup>236</sup> hovering over them. All these notions and categories only represent half of the significance derived from Barber’s personal attempt to decipher her identity. The need to elaborate a complex arrangement of different elements to compose a self which is also approached from a dialectic angle echoes the same spirit that Williams invokes when she talks about being a member of “a border tribe among my own people” (*Refuge* 286). It is an invocation that associates this spirit with the risk Booth talks about; the judging of one’s own judgement that Bruce W. Jorgensen metaphorically prophesies; the temptation, in short, to ask and to avoid the fear to look. Again, Stegner comes to mind when James Alexander Trombley affirms that:

The opening of an interpretive, dialectic space between movement and stasis, the mythic and the real, heritage and desire, singularity and plurality, between “I” and “we,” enables the writer to conjugate oppositional attributes – what the writer refers to as “bridge-building” – in an attempt to go beyond the limitations of either pole in his search for truth.” (Trombley 30)

Eugene England acknowledges all these attributes in Barber’s fiction. In his article “Good Literature for Chosen People”, England underlines how he perceives in Barber’s fiction the tricky balance between extremes and how her desperate attempt to believe it possible makes Barber’s fiction’s drift towards universality and connection:

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<sup>236</sup> Because both are nurturing for her understanding. One is an endogenous giver of energy (within Mormon culture, community, shelter, stability, belonging) and the other is an exogenous giver of energy (without Mormon culture, adventure, discovery, knowledge, risk, experience). Both are necessary and both prove to be difficult to balance. They are the center of our lives.

... her attempts to walk away from her chosenness, her narrow, merely inherited Mormon faith, towards a faith in God that she makes and chooses for herself. It also tells how she continues to feel a stitch in her side that pulls her back to undeniable Mormon miracles and truth, a stitch put there by God, who stitches her both to her own people and to all people. (England, *Good* 86-87)

In summary, Barber is aware of her connection and closeness to her Mormon culture but she tries to find a particular and personal way to come closer to God. In this sense, she confesses her determination to use the act of writing as a strategy to search for self-identity and as a procedure to portray Mormonism disentangled from the common dissensions and delusions, both from a spiritual and cultural point of view:

As I have tried to present stories from Mormonism to a wider audience, to be an every-member-a-missionary like my parents always hoped I would be, to help culture at large see the beauty, complexity, profundity, and engagement of Mormonism, rather than usual scandalous misperceptions, I wonder if maybe the prospects of carrying out a niche in a larger cultural frame are unpromising. (Barber, *Precarious* 125)

Her engagement with Mormon culture is not only a matter of attitude, but also a matter of inspiration and content. Here lies one of the main obstacles to enjoying and understanding Barber's fiction for those of us who are outsiders to Mormon culture. Neither by placing her characters in a Mormon community and culture of which outsiders may ignore the very essence and singularity, nor by elaborating a lyrical style based on symbols and metaphors born and sourced from Mormon folklore and tradition, does Barber make an effort to be didactic, or to reveal her intention. She leaves that effort to the reader. She opens doors, thus making room for different explanations, but it is the reader who has to walk through one of those doors. Her fictional work is useful for seeing inside Mormon culture from an outsider perspective, but it demands effort and openness from the readers. Her closeness to Mormonism is her receptivity to mystery, hesitation and questioning. Hers is a love for the ineffable, the divine, the connection to other human beings and to the center, whatever the

name, of a spirituality that produces relevant meaning. This inspiration which avoids giving a specific name to a notion of belief is a voice that she uses in the later period of writing. In “Body Blue: Excerpts from a Novoir” and *Raw Edges*, or in non-fictional pieces of journalism such as “Dancing with the Sacred,” she delimits this feeling with very detailed assumptions:

Possibly, my voice has been corrupted by my love of dancing with everything – people, ideas, sunshine, and sacred cows. Or maybe it has to do with being a human. Maybe insatiable curiosity has been the corrupting agent or maybe it’s the fact of loving to read any and every thing. Or could it be a fatal attraction to mysticism or my fascination with Taoism, Buddhism, Judaism, and the beliefs and practices of native peoples? (Barber, *Dancing* 30)

Nevertheless, this “corrupting agent” did not pop out of a hidden and unsuspected, unmotivated or unprovoked corner of her own mind one night. This “corrupting agent” was latent in her earlier work. It was like a bird hovering over her lines, a constant beat that echoed in the passions and anguish of her characters. Her fiction reveals undefined, tumultuous and uneven engagement with(in) and without Mormon culture which allows her to part the veil:

By traveling among worlds, crossing over into other cultures and other realities, Mormon postmodernism affirms the intrusion and influence of one world upon another. A modernist wall, a sense of epistemological limitation has come down, and in its place only a postmodern veil separates the human from the divine and this life from the afterlife. This veil is easily parted, allowing for revelation, manifestations of goodness and of evil, and glimpses into multiple realities. (Bird 56)

In *Parting the Veil: Stories from a Mormon Imagination*, Barber executes this idea of the veil parting with a personal treatment of the divine. Her treatment of the miracle in a collection of short stories intended as an instrument to offer a positive approach to Mormon culture and folklore proves to be frank and unfastened, allowing interpretations

which could negate the divine nature of those events. Thus, in “A Brief History of Seagulls: A Trilogy with Notes”, three stories regarding a miracle and the seagulls that helped the pioneers, Barber describes the transition from the fact to the miracle and then to the fact again, revealing how people forget about the miracle (or the fact). The miracle is something more than the fact in itself. It could be an expectation more than a legend, like with Sheila and Max, but, over the years, it becomes a story that loses all its force or even becomes a problem. In “Dust to Dust”, for example, a title that makes reference to the *Book of Common Prayer* and the “ashes to ashes, dust to dust” (Book of Genesis 3:19) which is often prayed at funerals, death is present as the family is threatened by possible peril due to the death of the husband. A mysterious visitor erupts into the story to offer a lily, a flower used in ceremony of the dead. The flower remains alive while the visitor is there but dies when he leaves. The miracle operates as a personal perception of the circumstances, not as, an ideological apology of divine intromission. Woven in the Mormon belief that marriage lasts beyond this life, the mysterious visitor enacts a lesson of love which transcends the broken line between and life and death<sup>237</sup>.

In a way, Bird’s concept of the veil parting is insufficient. Barber parts the veil in still another sense. In *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*, she confesses her need of that veil parting; but that veil parts not to “allow revelation” but to reveal the complex nature of

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<sup>237</sup> Marriage, and consequently families, is, in fact, a very important component in Barber’s fiction when dealing with faith and Mormon culture. Marriage and the roles represented through this institution, together with the sexual tension induced by the sanctity of the institution are topics which Barber delivers in her fiction. In her novel and in her memories, but also in *Parting the Veil: Stories from a Mormon Imagination*, marriages struggle and families are born, go adrift, dismember and survive. Members are displaced but, sometimes, she closes her stories with a symbolic hug, different kinds of hugs. Sometimes characters hug each other, sometimes the whole family hug together, hugs delivered in a letter, hugs over a horse, hugging a secret, hugging a lily, hugs of desperation, of resignation, sometimes of relief, sometimes hugs of resistance but always uplifting lost or sick of love. Love, for that matter, produces an energy that moves from dream to reality, from family to world or from Mormonism to non-Mormonism.

her relationship to her loved ones, a complex set of connections that help to part a third veil, the veil between the reader and the writer:

And I looked at the canopy over my head: the quilt and the quilters' hands. And I imagined beyond that canopy, beyond the ceiling, beyond the roof of this house. I saw a crowd of women quilting in the sky, talking about us, telling stories about our sins and misgivings. They shook their heads and puckered their lips in prayer that we'd all remain faithful to the end and see beyond our mortality into the wide skies of God. Maybe there was a big hand reaching out to me if only I could reach far enough with my faith to catch the little finger. That hand was poking through the veil into the real world, reaching out to me like my mother's hand was reaching underneath the quilt to pat me on the head and say, "It's time to go now, Phyllis." (Barber, *How* 120-121)

So I would add to Bird's statement that Barber's fiction parts another more mundane veil, a veil of connectedness, not only between members of her family but also between cultures, literatures, readers and words. In these days of globalization, through her postmodern but personal approach to the traditional *bildungsroman* in *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir* as well as through her attempt to balance extremes in the rest of her fiction, Barber moves from the particular to the universal to offer bridges as a means both to overcome her spiritual challenges and to open up a communication between reader and writer. I use the term bridge on purpose because England places this same term at the center of Mormon theology. Those bridges help to establish a whole network of roads and bypasses which can be related to literatures and cultures that seem to be opposite one another:

For Mormons, that uncreated "intelligence" is the ground of human relations to a similar, ultimately uncreated self within God and is what ultimately makes us free – but also potentially terribly alone unless we make bridges, of love to other selves, such as spouses, neighbors, all humans, and God. And that emphasis on our eternal self can make us destructively selfish if we fail to build such bridges. (Bradford, *Four* 178-179)

## *Gender*

My research on the role of *gender* issues in Barber's literary production illustrates that her female characters are valuable insights into the minds of women not only in contemporary Mormon culture but also throughout the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Their conflicts and misfortunes are surely familiar to women from different contexts and cultures as well.

In *The School of Love*, Barber creates what I labelled as "women on the edge", women who come into the story at critical moments of their lives and their decisions take inevitable consequences. Chloe in "Radio KENO" is one of the best examples. She tries to go back in time and see if she finds in an old and lost love story some source of information to look ahead. This idea parallels Madeleine's search in "Love for Miriam," who was looking for some kind of bond of recovery in her familial saga. In fact, these two stories establish a pattern in Barber's collection. The shared element in all the stories provides a key to how she traces the way from the past to the present. In "The Glider", Martha also looks back to her dead father. In "White on White", Sara wants to seize the lost ideal of her marriage. In "Oh, Say, Can You See", the narrator is unable to avoid looking back when she goes to sleep. In "Trees" there is a sense of guilt right after taking a decision. And in "Criminal Justice", the woman drives the car through Utah trying to forget what she left back in Arizona. This transfer of the burden of past actions to the present action communicates the feeling of inability that these women suffer, as if the past exercises authority over the present to determine their steps and reactions.

Almost all the characters in this collection are females, allowing Barber to delve into the real and fantastic worlds of those women and permitting the reader to see into their hearts. Fantasy and reality are mixed in these short stories, as are the familiar and the unfamiliar, the sacred and the profane, madness and insanity. All these elements blend together to build a huge artefact of complex chronology in which love reveals the dangerous power of both its presence and absence. All these women, from the blossoming Alice to the aging Miriam, from the burgeoning Mary to the reconstructing Anne, all of them frame through their acts performances of self-love, of the search for love and the sickness of love.

In “Criminal Justice”, the main character portrays all the features detected in the collection. The story starts with a puzzling, unbalanced presentation of a woman who seems excited in an important moment of her life. In a promising starting point, the main character seems to be opening her heart to look both backwards and forward, filled with doubts as she searches: “the blacks and whites of my childhood are grey now...” (Barber, *School* 73) She is playing with images of herself, with models, with interpretations of herself: the woman quilting, the women rocking babies and the woman speeding. All these images cling detained and they look unreal while she is trying to rewrite herself: “a poetic interpretation of life with the chance to colour or reinterpret, to replay, to recast any given scene. But then there is a flesh of unnatural light” (Barber, *School* 77).

This woman’s conflict revolves around the idea of innocence. Through the story, she confesses that she needs her innocence back. But, in the story, innocence resounds with different meanings. First, she claims her innocence when she is arrested: “I’m back in a movie again except, of course, for the reality of my innocence” (Barber, *School* 80). Second, innocence is what makes her feel guilty somehow. She made a decision and now



she is paying the price. In a secondary lecture, innocence steps to illustrate all the conforming and sedating circumstances that she tried to break when she took the decision to act on her marriage: "I wrote a screaming note to Daniel, but he needs to hear screams. He doesn't hear anything" (Barber, *School* 80).

The male figure represented by Officer Littlefield gives even more relevance to this experience when she shows that she still sees him as a saviour, a knight. There is sex here, but he is also the one that arrests her, the symbol of authority. In the end, her world falls apart. She stops running. She has a vision, she sees a light, freedom. She longs for Officer Littlefield to come back. Her relying on a man once again launches another unsuccessful closing scene which reinforces the idea of impossibility when these female characters try to exercise their determination.

"Baby Birds" is written in grey ink. Greyness. Grey is when you frown, when you remain silent, when you are sad, when you try to hurt yourself. Grey is the color of ashes, a sad color. But grey is also the middle between black and white and that is a difficult place to reach. It is not something that can be resolved by using a formula from a science book. The main character needs to be complex, messed up, difficult to apprehend; she needs to show all her real pain to the child, to love him as a person, not as a son. And the only hope that I see in this story resides in the son rather than the mother. If anybody is going to pass the exam in this school of love, it will be him.

That impossibility to successfully perform their moral decisions seems tragically palpable in "Anne at the Shore," archetypal poetry of rebirth in which a woman's search for herself seems to be resolved in a totally negative end. The short story begins with one day missing.

The feeling is that this woman really missed something that missing day. The story is written in the third person present, but both the lines of time and perspective seem to blur. The title drives the reader's attention towards Anne and to the fact that she is in a specific place. Characters are merely outlined, drawn as in the shaky sketch of a child. As not wholly formed characters, they give a sense of lost characters that lack something; they seem vulnerable, as though they are looking for their own complete shape. Highly poetical, the story is like a tide of words, images and symbols, words said and unsaid. Wings, birds, suns, waters, sands, colours, all combine to produce a visual image where time is merely a swaying vessel. Dreams could be interpreted as the hint to understand the missing day but it is not clear because it is intertwined with real and imagined fabric. In this scenario, Anne tries to shape herself, to love and trust herself, but the scene closes on her exhausted gesture, as she drapes her arms around her creation and "the wings will float overhead, riding on air current" (Barber, *School* 113). I agree with Swenson who says that:

What happens in the story is less important than the feeling it provokes --- a timeless evocation of need and longing. When Anne has even less to lose than the man with the bag, we feel that she will be washed away to nothingness. Instead, Barber ends with a concrete, potent image that is both moving and satisfying." (Swenson 1)

In "Tangles" the story's bedrock is on two different levels. One of them is Alice's relationship to her father and her sexual awakening which is threatened by the presence of different men. The second is the dreamy portrayal of her inner sexual tension and innocence through fairy-tale images. In "White on White", Sara, the main character, is constructed and changed through her interaction with different characters. She is shaped through the eyes and reactions of the people around her: the Anthony's "I know", her husband's "try harder", the wilted Sara of her mother, the rejection of the man in a hat or Madeline's insistence on the white dress. Sara is always watching herself in the mirror,

confronting being a lady, and allowing all her repressed sexuality to blossom. White is for purity and is linked to her marriage: “white sheets they sanctified their holy calling of marriage” (Barber, *School* 43). But her husband is tired of white yet she still fights to attract his attention and the slit on the white dress is only an attempt to do so. Then white is “tight,” white is “sanitized bathrooms” and the lady tries to ride a white horse, and that white horse is Anthony. She reacts, she takes revenge but it is not going to be successful.

In “Spirit Babies”, Barber examines the internal conflict in Delta Ray when she feels the need to give birth because this is her role as a righteous Mormon woman. Barber develops her analysis from a sympathetic, sensitive perspective, close to her character’s feelings. It is difficult not to feel a close intimacy to Delta Ray. Providing the womb for the benefit of the kingdom of Zion could be equivalent to what Rich calls the second meaning of “motherhood”, that which reduces motherhood to an institution and “aims at ensuring that the potential – and all women – shall remain under male control” (13). But here, Delta Ray displays an empathetic admission of motherhood. Thus, Barber ponders over the topic from a critical approach which generates divergent undertones of complexity.

“Ida’s Sabbath” illustrates the conflict between loyalty to the Church and the desire to transgress the culture’s code of righteousness. Ida’s husband has left home and she is lost. She is unable to manage in this new, disruptive situation. She cannot balance her desires, her anger, her sadness and the restraints of her moral and cultural codes. Even though this short story is constructed on Mormon culture and context, the disorientation suffered by Ida can be transferred to any woman (or man) who sees how her (or his) life is shaken by a violent twist which alters its meaning and purpose.

Practically all the different perspectives and contexts in which Barber places her female characters are developed in *And the Desert Shall Blossom*. The cultural stress on the induction of mothering roles, the stereotyped expectations applied to Mormon wifedom, the failure of a marriage constrained by gender roles and cultural assumptions, the institutionalization of motherhood – all these topics converge in one single character, Esther Jensen, the main female character in Barber’s only novel *And the Desert Shall Blossom*, who knows how she has to behave: “She could perform when she had an audience. She could rise to a public occasion just as her mother had always done. Remember her lines, remember how to be a responsive mother” (Barber, *And* 19).

Esther is a woman overwhelmed by the burden of a past that leaks into her mood like a poisonous stream that she cannot dam: “... and it cut cleanly into Esther’s senses, another memory” (Barber, *And* 85). Memories cut like slices; she looks back when her husband looks forward, but either of them is able to look at the present. She also longs for a sense of home which includes a family that is being dismembered and a marriage that is fading: “No, you can’t take this away from us. It’s all I’ve ever wanted. A house. Some roots. All of us together in the church, and some harmony for a change. Please. Alf” (Barber, *And* 81).

A woman that puts all the blame on herself: “*you resent your own baby and never find enough good in your husband*” (Barber, *And* 89). Whether this is the consequence of Christian values, or is generated by inherited gender attributes is dialogue that is established throughout the book. These feelings are understood as the lack of that concept of home she longs for, a home which also includes love: “Now that we’re in home, I will

love you,' she whispered to Inez. 'I promise. I won't let the poison take me away. You'll be my tether'" (Barber, *And* 90).

The poison is the feeling that nothing will ever work so the question of why it is necessary to keep on trying takes hold of her determination. The poison is a tendency to feel the failure and her lost dreams and to accept defeat forever, without doing anything to destroy it. She promises to fight, but only within her role as a caring mother and a lovely wife. Even God appears to be part of this poison because he keeps her far away from her husband. She links the poison to the weather and the heat, but the poison is inside. Everybody needs a scheme, plans, limits. These can be provided by a community or a family. For Esther, these sources are crippled. That poison is also a black hole into which she slips due to a magnetic compulsion, even though she does not want to: "She tried not to worry, but it was as natural as breathing to her" (Barber, *And* 103). And again we see how she puts the blame on herself when she considers that if she falls into that black hole, it is because of her failure to recognize the source of those expectations which are becoming high standards for her: "she wanted everything to be perfect and mustn't fall into that hole again where everything was black and where failure was larger than anything else" (Barber, *And* 104).

In *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*, Barber deals mainly with the conflicts of a young girl and her training and education as a Mormon in two very special and particular places, Las Vegas and Boulder City. Barber's memoir is a strong contribution not only to Mormon culture and to Western letters, but to the body of American literature when the purpose is to document the formation of the American self and consciousness (Cole 1). However, those conflicts and dilemmas are applicable to any young girl anywhere, though

for the young Phyllis Nelson they will be qualified by her being a Mormon. Laura L. Bush explained this idea in her book, *Faithful Transgressions in the American West: Six Twentieth Century Mormon Women's Autobiographical Act*:

In her memoir, Barber constructs herself as a young person confronted with common girlhood dilemmas about sexuality, gender performance, and small-town culture. Each dilemma, seems exacerbated by her religious training at home and at church. (Bush, *Faithful* 173-174)

In her work, the representation of body as land, where hurt takes the shape of scars and wounds are uncovered through words, is also a very important element. In fact, equally eloquent in its revelation of the consequences of cultural and social roles is the concept of body that Barber uses both as a metaphor and as a tangible example of the feelings she is describing. Barber deals with a restricted concept of the body as a temple of purity and loyalty. Nonetheless, the idea of body as a belonging that has been usurped from women and which they cannot use freely goes beyond the simple portrayal of some of Mormonism's cultural restrictions. Young Phyllis in *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir* is forced into becoming an attractive object for the male eye of males in two different ways. First, she is expected to be the virtuous and pure Mormon girl who waits until the appropriate Mormon man chooses her to marry in the Mormon temple. Second, equally formative and controlling is the manner in which secular culture instructs women to seek the attention and favor of men. For young Phyllis in the autobiography, owning her body is a source of empowerment which leads to confrontation between the limitations dictated by Mormonism and by western society. Throughout the book, Barber describes her own experiences of sexual training as administered by the different auxiliary official organizations of the Church. In those sketches, Barber explains how she was trained to see her body as a rose that must remain untouched in order to be attractive for the man who

was to come in the future. The conflict becomes clearer once Barber is a grown woman who tries to take her own decisions. When she models furs to earn money for her freshman year at Brigham Young University, the reader experiences this young girl's dual conflict:

I wasn't Thora and Herman Nelson's daughter. She wouldn't be doing this. I must not be a very good Mormon because I was wearing a bikini under this fur coat and was about to show it to everyone. I wasn't anybody I'd ever known." (Barber, *How* 186)

She undergoes the suffering caused by a dichotomy which makes life more complex for a Mormon girl living in Las Vegas, but she keeps on challenging it. She tries to balance those extremes, the secular and the faithful spheres of her life, by going upon to that stage to model. Even though she knew what the real purpose of standing in front of those men in a bikini was, she had control over her body. Her awareness of the entire experience amplifies the idea of body as a metaphor for the potential of the female body, the power that Rich explains in her idea of "the repossession by women of our bodies" (285), which, she suggests, is controlled by sexual education and role training. Barber's female characters fight to attain power over their own bodies. In order to do so they take hold of the decision to have and rear children, a role that limits them to the private sphere of the home, removing them from social visibility or success. But, as Sonja Farnsworth has tried to demonstrate, this definition of roles, from motherhood to priesthood, can be seen not only in the particular, the Mormon Church, but also in the universal, the secular world. Mormons suffer the consequences of that idea: "Women have motherhood and men have priesthood" which, as Farnsworth states, becomes "an affirmation that because women have motherhood, priesthood is for men only" (299). But Farnsworth adds that there is evidence that transcends the Mormon context to show how these ideas can also be seen in the secular world:

If it is disappointing to see how the rhetoric of Mormonism matches secular rhetoric and shows no evidence of divine insight, it is far worse to observe that both in and out of the church the needs of mothers have long been patronized. Motherhood has been exalted, expanded, exaggerated, and misrepresented, not to improve its situation but to argue that women must remain under male control. (Farnsworth 305)<sup>238</sup>

Barber, in short, links this idea to western culture through the allure of Las Vegas. Thus, in this work the four divisions are somehow related. Gender and place are related in the same way that Williams relates body and place:

We speak of rage. Of women and landscape. How our bodies and the body of the earth have been mined.  
“It has everything to do with intimacy,” I said. “Men define intimacy through their bodies. It is physical. They define intimacy with the land in the same way.”  
“Many men have forgotten what they are connected to,” my friend added. “Subjugation of women and nature may be a loss of intimacy within themselves.”  
(Williams, *Refuge* 10)

Finally, I also pay attention to the generation of male roles, because gendered roles also constrain their expectations. David Knowlton states: “In some central ways, Mormonism is a religion obsessed with masculinity” (24). If Mormon standards are too demanding for female characters like Esther, they are also very onerous for her husband, Alf, who again has to face a huge number of cultural imperatives which determine his role within the community and within the family. Howard W. Hunter urges men “to do all in your power to allow your wife to remain in the home, caring for the children while you provide for the family the best you can” (52) and, in this connection, Alf is surpassed by the circumstances that conflict with his own specific duties. In that sense, Alf’s concerns are not only driven by religious troubles but also by universal tones of economic concern: “no more wondering

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<sup>238</sup> Farnsworth concludes her article by saying that “there will be much to gain if Mormons realize that this union is really a ‘secular’ marriage, a ‘marriage of convenience,’ and that motherhood and priesthood are an ‘odd couple nurturing a passel of illegitimate theological ideas” (311). So, once again, she resorts to Smith’s original vision of womanhood to undermine the understood conclusion that priesthood and motherhood are equal and fairly distributed to show that they are not a complementary division. I wanted to underline how she places emphasis on the secular to parallel Barber own links between some of the particular tensions she privately develops and the universal connections she derives from them.



about a job and the next dime” (Barber, *And* 62). Again, the difference is the opposite ways the couple respond to that situation. The end is happy because they get back together, but the scars and the consequences for both are sarcastically unequal and paradoxical. If they are even in any way, it is in the pain of their personal losses.

If there is no factual happy ending in her short stories or in her novel, there is at least one general and virtual happy ending in Barber’s literary work: balancing the extremes. Both modelling in a casino and remaining righteous for a temple marriage may conceal an identical attempt to constrain women’s control over their bodies, and then over their lives. To challenge both is to balance poles (and roles). Barber translates this into her fiction when she places those women outside the home sphere while also trying to get rid of the “imperial vision of home” (White, *It’s* 315) as if home were a burden that limits their scope. Barber expresses and describes this situation, both in the times of the pioneering enterprise, in the 1950s and today, but always establishing a medley that constructs significant meaning. Barber’s identity as a woman is insufficient if it is as a Mormon or as a Nevadan because her assumption that identity is multiple reinforces what Laurel Thatcher Ulrich says in “Border Crossings”: “to claim multiple identities is to assert the insufficiency of any one label, including Mormonism” (5). In any case, Barber does not really claim “multiple identities” but a holistic identity that is made up of multiple parts.

### *Place*

Barnes and Blew highlight the importance of landscape for women writing in the West. In their opinion, by using gender and the physical environment, women writing in the West can comment on different issues relevant for them “politically, ethnically, sexually” (xi).

Barber's fiction and memoirs are set in recognizable landscapes, the Colorado Plateau and the city of Las Vegas. *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir* is set mainly in Las Vegas, but Barber places some of her stories in that city too. "Silver Dollars," a short story in her collection *The School of Love*, or "Mormon Levis," are two examples. Boulder City and Boulder or Hoover Dam are the backdrop to the story of Esther and Alf Jensen in *And the Desert Shall Blossom*. These locations are also the setting for stories like "Oh, Say, Can You See?," first published as a piece of fiction but later included in *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*. In other stories, like "The Glider", "Criminal Justice" or "Radio KENO," all three of them collected in *The School of Love*, a deep analysis of landscape and environment is useful. Finally, *Raw Edges* maps the geographic pilgrimage of both her ordeals and her good experiences during a biking trip across the United States on a personal quest for happiness and self-definition.

Setting, in Barber, acquires a significance that goes beyond the physical. In her fiction and autobiographies, Las Vegas operates as a spur to moral challenge for the characters. In the personal realm, the city also displays the complexity of her understanding of the writing process.

Barber's fiction does not fuel the conception of Las Vegas as a "dream city." Her approach to this repeatedly filmed and fictionalized city is quite different from how Tom Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson or John O'Brien describe it in their novels and short stories. As Mike Tronnes states, there is a "hidden world beyond the popular image" (xiii), a life behind Fremont Street and The Strip. As Mario Puzo, who depends on the same biased pattern of other outsiders in *Inside Las Vegas*, observes: "Vegas boasts more churches per

capita than any city in the world” (24). In this city of churches darkened by the flamboyant casinos, Barber sets her stories of a “hidden” Las Vegas of yards, kids playing in the streets, churches, post offices, parking lots, schools and Mormon wards. When she places her characters on Fremont Street, Barber makes the casino lights blind them in order to show the contrast between the glitter and the innocent eyes of the common people who live behind the amazing glamor of the main boulevards. Thus Barber’s fiction is a good way to discover the other face of this mythical and enigmatic city that embodies the main ingredients that engendered the American Dream. It also helps to uncover the construction of an antagonistic discourse which further reveals strategies of authoritative definition.

Her short story, “Mormon Levis”, is a good example that illustrates all these ideas. The conflicts arising inside young Mattie, who goes out to spend Saturday night with her best friends, are shaped and augmented by the panorama of Fremont Street. Nevertheless, Barber illuminates this different side of Las Vegas by emphasizing that Mattie lives on a “street that separates me from the desert: the rim of Las Vegas, the edge of the plate. My house is in the last subdivision in town. The desert is my front yard” (*Parting* 114).

This quote leads to another important location in Barber’s fiction that merits a detailed analysis: the desert, the line you have to follow to go from Las Vegas, an oasis that demarcates the emptiness of desert, to Boulder City. The desert, however, is not just a place of emptiness in Barber’s fiction; it works as a powerful symbol. Especially interesting is the way the desert mirrors Phyllis Nelson’s feelings at the end of *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*.

The Colorado River, the healing river, the source of peace and spiritual connectedness<sup>239</sup>, the prefab town of Boulder City and the “playhouse” of Boulder or Hoover Dam will all be very important settings in Barber’s fictional landscape. The taming of the Colorado River, the construction of the dam or the life inside the “straight lines” and “solid concrete” of Boulder City become silent, secondary characters who act as confessors for the main characters made of flesh and blood. In “the replica after replica of white cottage” (Barber, *And* 85) scenario of Boulder City, Esther Jensen’s melancholy finds a perfect labyrinth in which to wander her expectations away.

In fact, Levi Peterson summarizes the origin of *And the Desert Shall Blossom* by indicating that it “is also western. If anything, it is more western than Mormon” (*Stopping* 56). It is Western from an obvious point of view since the novel partially dedicates its focus to tell the chronicle of one of the most important technological endeavors of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that took place in the West during the days of the Great Depression. Nevertheless, John Bennion is of the opinion that in *And the Desert Shall Blossom*:

the story is much more than a vehicle for communicating Barber’s research into the taming of the Colorado River; it also explores the psychological effects of western Mormonism, an ideology which paradoxically embraces both the ethereal and the earthly. (Bennion, *And* 1)

As I aimed at disclosing in this essay, *And the Desert Shall Blossom* is more than just a historical chronicle of the building of Hoover Dam. Bennion is right when he talks about the importance of the psychological development of the characters, but, this development is elaborated and dramatized through the actions of the characters in relation to those locations and the particular characteristics of the place. The river acts as a symbolic device

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<sup>239</sup> Terry Tempest Williams: “I wanted to float down the Colorado River” (Williams, *Refuge* 23) to find peace and reflect on something. And: “I can imagine the chemotherapy to be a river running through me, flushing the cancer cells out” (Williams, *Refuge* 39). The Colorado River works as a source of healing for her mother.

to illuminate the psychological conflict of a marriage that determines different attitudes towards the harnessing of the river. Those different attitudes explain specific actions, but they also uncover the inner tensions that these two characters, Alf and Esther, have been coping with during twenty years of marriage. Peterson summarizes what I try to explain here:

The natural and social forces set in motion by the conflict between a recalcitrant river and the human beings who intended to dam it energize Alf. Those same forces all but annihilate Esther. It is as if Alf represents the human will to dominate nature and Esther the human cost of dominating rather than cooperating with it. (Peterson, *Stopping* 56)

Glenda Riley says these attitudes can be translated into a more general division that establishes universal relations. Alf's and Esther's different attitudes towards the harnessing of the river intensify when they are transported to a wider context symbolized by the whole project. It then becomes almost unavoidable to establish general conclusions about man's natural tendency to take control of natural forces for his own benefit and how this estimation can have fatal consequences for humankind. As Meinig says, "[M]an's power to affect the earth has increased, his reworking of nature may appear to be less an adjustment and more so fundamental an alteration that one may see the landscape as artifact" (2). In that sense, Esther is a symbolic character who becomes useful to see how Barber transforms the particular into the universal. Her reaction to the harnessing of the Colorado River, as I have analyzed in this dissertation, illustrates Meinig's and Riley's theories.

Place, in Barber, is complex and manifold. Her sense of place is constituted by different dimensions, different angles and a complex awareness of travel and distance, departure and staying, as an incarnation of a sense of place which completes a geography of the self. Place in Barber is physical, and the characteristics of the setting determine her fictional

characters' reactions. But landscape can also be interpreted in different terms sympathetic to the idea that YoungBear-Tibbetts proposes when she talks about a landscape "layered with multiple levels of meanings and interpretations" (151). This sense of a complex and paradoxical landscape that hurts and heals at the same time is developed in the routines and tribulations of Barber's characters. It is part of Esther's quest for love and sanity. In her quest, landscape becomes an important element in the development of identity when the perception of place is used to raise questions about individual needs of belonging and definition. As Meinig suggests: "[W]e are concerned not with the elements but with the essence, with the organizing ideas we use to make sense out of what we see" (1). Meinig talks about how the responsibility to define landscape falls in the beholder rather than in the characteristics of the space.

In other words, when A. Carl Bredahl tries to formulate his own definition of what the word landscape stands for, rather than using the "absolute" (303) meaning proposed by Webster's Dictionary, he relies on Leslie Marmo Silko's personal definition in the essay, "Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination:" "Viewers are as much a part of the landscape as the boulders they stand on" (Bredahl 304). Neil Campbell explains that "there is no authentic single 'homeplace' in which one's roots are planted, for identity is 'spatial' and fluid, formed by the 'routes' it travels and the contacts it makes rather than as 'a one-way transmission belt; an umbilical cord, which connects us to our culture of origin'" (*Rhizomatic* 27). Yet, as we have seen in Barber, the longing and the need to belong is substantial to human feelings, even though it is also substantial to move, to leave and to come back and forge an identity in that movement, but always with "a stitch in my side" (Barber, *Precarious* 120), always with "a stamp"<sup>240</sup>, always with a place to remember that

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<sup>240</sup> In *Raw Edges: A Memoir*, stamps are a very important symbol which I analyzed in the fourth section from Phyllis Barber's Writing. See pages from 501 to 503.

becomes a longing, a perfect inflection of the pain and hurt that is desire, love and happiness.

### *Art*

This study ends with a section entitled *Art*. Here, firstly, the hunger for knowledge and experience distinguishable especially in Barber's autobiography and also in many of her female characters, is analyzed. A hunger for culture, and the eventual transformation of that culture into art, operates as a metaphor of the paradoxical nature of human beings who long both for security and risk, for knowledge and mystery, to belong and to escape. Williams says that: "Part of the tension of being humans is found in our desire for, and love affair with, both risk and security. What do we risk in our quest for security? What do we secure in a life of risk?" (*Introduction xv*)

Secondly, the way in which music becomes a technical item in Barber's narrative is discussed. She is a professional pianist and, for her, the process of writing and to read and perform a score are similar practices (Barber, *Rewriting* 3). The connection between music and writing has been widely researched. Different scholars have dedicated their attention to the influence of music on authors such as Proust or Baudelaire; the influence of jazz on authors from different periods and schools, from Langston Hughes to Jack Kerouac, is fairly well known. In Barber's writing I see the precision of a pianist's fingers, the meticulousness of a professional musician and the rhythm of a classical arrangement. In addition, music is used as a fictional device, as a clue to understanding her characters and their feelings.

Finally, in this section an analysis of Barber's narrative style is provided, always in connection to meaning. I also discuss her approach to genre, basically autobiography. Her approximation to the conventional assumptions of the genre is personal and it channels some of the conclusions which I reached after reading her literary production at large. *Raw Edges*, her last published work, exhibits a persuasive redefinition of the genre from a point of view that is committed to the attributes defined in Barber's literature after a critical analysis. The tension triggered by the strife between the certainty of a settled conceit of life and the poignant uncertainty of risk and indefiniteness is reproduced in a voice that relies on a painful though relieving responsibility towards paradox, chaos and recognition.

Barber's main literary attribute is her declared commitment to literature and the art of writing. In her fiction, there is an attempt to get involved in writing from an honest and undisguised perspective. She discloses her inner feelings and places her characters in an intimacy that the reader may even find embarrassing. In her autobiographies the brew of real life and fiction is confessed and presented from a brave standpoint that gives a potential energy to her fictional realm pouring out the real events as a way of detaching them from the impurity of subjectivity and paradoxically subjecting them to obtain a new perspective:

The truth is that no one can capture an entire life. For everything selected from a life, a thousand other things are left out. For everything told, there's the question of interpretation. Maybe there's no such thing as the whole truth and nothing but the truth. When we shape the past in the present, the past becomes something new. When we pin a butterfly to the corkboard, we no longer have the flittiness, airiness, the magnificence of what a butterfly is. (Barber, *Body* 72)

Her confession regarding the importance of telling the truth, which makes her natural tendency to embrace complexity comprehensible, is also a good example of her universal



validity beyond the limited context of such a personal and peculiar culture as Mormonism<sup>241</sup>. Barber's feelings about the impossibility and human impotence to seize reality, the omnipresent and overpowering potency of subjectivity are described through a metaphor that finds a parallel in an old Basque folk song by a songwriter who never heard of Barber and whom Barber never heard of either before writing those lines: Barber's metaphor about the butterfly pinned to the corkboard is like Mikel Laboa's bird that when caught, is no longer a bird<sup>242</sup>.

Barber's attributes go beyond a limited analysis of her fiction to propose a different approach to Mormon literature, a broader approach that opens new ways in thematic and stylistic dimensions for contemporary Mormon writers. Besides, the conclusions derived from ensuing discussions after the analysis of these new perspectives provide equally useful ways to improve Western literature by advocating the consideration of its universality over and above its particularity. This mirrors the present day concern about the validity of fictional communication.

This brings us back, once again, to the initial idea presented at the beginning of this study: Barber makes the particular, universal. Barber's fiction brings us closer to Mormon culture, but it does so in such a way that the reader is enveloped in the warmth and honesty of a sincere and open approximation. An exercise in sincerity which tries to create a

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<sup>241</sup> This echoes Darrell Spencer's comments regarding the works of Heidegger, Derrida or Barthes: "Think how it might affect a writer to have running through his veins Heidegger's idea that truth is untruth, that the work of the work of art is to enact the eternal strife between concealing and unconcealing, that when the artist lights up a space, that lighting itself darkens the edges" (Bigelow 179).

<sup>242</sup> Mikel Laboa's song is titled "Txoria Txori" and the lyrics are: "Hegoak ebaki banizkio / nerea izango zen, / ez zuen aldegingo. / Bainan, honela / ez zen gehiago txoria izango / eta nik... / txoria nuen maite." (<http://eu.musikazblai.com>). Translated into English they are: "If I cut its wings / it would be mine / it wouldn't go away / But, that way / it wouldn't be a bird any longer / and I... / I loved the bird." (my translation)

balanced compound paradigm in which communication and courage lead to an unreserved understanding of literature.

Barber shares with fellow Mormon writer, Terry Tempest Williams, an interest in *place* and *religion*. Williams, who has recently acquired considerable visibility in Western American criticism due to her literary concern with ecology and the beauty and significance of the desert, explains that she writes “through my biases of gender, geography, and culture.”<sup>243</sup> She adds that her ideas were shaped by her connection to the Great Basin and the Colorado Plateau “filtered” through her Mormon culture. Similarly, Barber, in her article “The Mormon Woman as a Writer”, indicates that, as a grown woman, she became aware of having been shaped by the same sources as Williams: her Church membership and growing up in Las Vegas. Barber, however, adds additional elements to her growth: the knowledge of other cultures and religions, the knowledge of humanist psychology, political science, archaeology and sociology, and the study of literature and music (*Mormon* 117). Besides, Williams states that “in Mormon culture, authority is respected, obedience is revered, and independent thinking is not” (*Refuge* 285); nevertheless, she concludes that she feels the need “to question everything, even if it means losing my faith, even if it means becoming a member of a border tribe among my own people” (Williams, *Refuge* 286). Barber, on the other hand, shows a certain reliance on the source of her conflicts: even if it means confirming her faith, even if it means becoming a member of her own people. These closeness and sincerity made it seem to me appropriate and beneficial to approach Mormon literature through the analysis of Barber’s books. Her hunger for knowledge and experience, her willingness to listen and see and learn and her frank allegiance and truthfulness open up a fertile panorama that enables us to approach

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<sup>243</sup> This quotation is taken from Margaret Regan’s interview with Williams. See: [www.tucsonweekly.com](http://www.tucsonweekly.com)

Barber's fiction even from our distant perspective as readers who are outsiders to Mormon culture. Barber explicitly accepts the notion of universality I am citing here when she says: "Memoir fascinates me because I believe the deeper that one can dig into one's personal story, the more resonance and universality there is with the stories of others. It's tap root stuff" (*Phyllis* 1). This is a feeling and an impulse that resonates in other Mormon writers who seem to share the same concerns that Barber deals with in her literature, like Williams who confesses that "I would hope that there's universality to these stories that transcends the Mormon community" (Austin, *Voice* 182).

In Barber's literary work, paradox is not an empty term. The unbalanced paradox between extremes, the "paradoxical ability that we have to hold opposing views in our mind at once" (*Voice* 25) as Austin says about Williams, is the proper expression to summarize this impulse to find a middle ground between extremes. Austin says that Williams concluded that she would love to see "the whole notion of opposition dissolved" (*Voice* 40), but before building a brand new conceptual stand from the erasure of an oppositional conceptualization of life, it is necessary to show how those extremes, some of them as universal as the tricky balance between the individual and the community, some so peculiar as the derivations of the paralleling of motherhood and priesthood, interfere and define and then play with the consequences of experiencing the clash of extremes which usually never fit into perfect categories.

In "Paradox and Discipleship", Terryl L. Givens describes four different concepts of paradox as a valuable interconnection zone where Mormon writers can find a motley and rich source for literary tension. The first one is the "polarity of authoritarianism and individualism" (Givens, *Paradox* 40); the second one is described as the constant

paradoxical situation for Mormons that feel themselves as being part of this world but always outside of it, that is, what Givens calls “exile and election” (*Paradox* 41); the third one is what he terms “the disintegration of sacred distance” (Givens, *Paradox* 43) and here he covers the difficult relationship between the banal and the sacred; and the fourth one is what he calls “certainty and searching” (Givens, *Paradox* 45), the constant demand for a balance between feeling secure and the need and obligation to experience constant development, a root paradox in Mormon theology since it confronts Mormon epistemological certainty with the free agency so inextricable to Mormon belief. Givens asserts that this is a tension within Mormon culture that does not correspond to Mormon theology:

But the Mormon culture today – at least its public face – persists stubbornly in its personal and public expressions of religious certainty, even as its members pursue an educational agenda with an anticipated span of eons. Like the contest between authoritarianism and independence, the uneasy coexistence of certainty and searching spurs vigorous debates in the Mormon intellectual community and provides fodder for artists who both explore and depict the cultural tensions that result. (Givens, *People* 33)

Givens adds a fifth paradox which even though he applies it to LDS faith could be extrapolated to the realm of literature: the paradox of originality and assimilation. This fifth paradox goes as far back as Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church, who is mentioned by Eugene England when he confesses his own attraction to paradoxes and contraries as a source for seeking the truth<sup>244</sup>:

We want to think that Joseph started with a clean slate, repudiating the entire Christian past and starting out afresh, only teaching that which came to him direct

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<sup>244</sup> In an interview in *Irreantum*, England confesses to Louisa Wray Dalton that “I’m very attracted to paradox and contradictions and really believe that one of the great inspired insights of Joseph Smith is one he expressed by saying: ‘By proving contraries, truth is made manifest.’ If there is anything my essays try to do, it’s to take contraries – that is, ideas or experiences that seem to deny each other – then prove them by testing them out, by following them through, exploring them, and then seeing new truths emerge” (Bigelow 28).

from the heavens. But he emphatically resisted any such conception. His was a generous mind, unafraid to embrace truth wherever he found it, and bring it home to Zion. It takes real humility of spirit to be taught. But notice the example of Joseph in this regard. He showed the world he could translate gold plates written in Reformed Egyptian, then hired a Jewish schoolmaster to teach him Hebrew. He took practices of the Masons and openly adapted them to the temple ceremony, putting them back into what he considered their proper and inspired context. (Givens, *Paradox* 48)

Barber not only explores these five paradoxes on her own personal terms, but she explores the uneven, slippery and unstable middle ground, the equilibrium of the scale. In Barber, this contradiction works as a demonstration of the failure of the dichotomy or duality offered by these terms even if the middle ground found is not a satisfactory position and is still the subject of a state of indeterminacy that describes, in global terms, the definition of self and life we handle today<sup>245</sup>. Thus, my statement that Barber makes the particular universal is understood in terms of a deep consideration of her literary approach rather than a superficial consideration or an *a priori* decision. If Givens concludes that one important site of tension where Mormons could find the inspiration for their literary work is “the tension and disequilibrium between exceptionalism and generous universalism” (*Paradox* 49), Barber evokes this tension from a personal point of view in a potential delivery that broadens the consequences of this tension.

The pair root and route, when applied to place, certain and uncertainty, when applied to faith, or the need to choose between roles and dreams, in art and gender, are the poles that Barber challenges in her literature. Dichotomies and duality have been confronted in order to reveal the discourse that constructs identity. A naked awareness and a personal

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<sup>245</sup> When talking about the first of his proposed paradoxes, Givens concludes that “no consensus is ever likely to emerge in the Mormon community about the proper reconciliation of authority and independence, faithfulness and freedom” (*Paradox* 41). Barber does not propose any different conclusion to this if it is not built on a sincere compromise of personal freedom and collective tolerance. Her characters offer a picture of the difficulties and consequences of this clash never coming to a conclusive end for both sides. Never is Barber a writer of answers but of questions, though maybe, in *Raw Edges*, some kind of conclusion is metaphorically exercised in her theoretical and ethical adoption of literature as a device to grasp her communion with God with an overwhelming sense of freedom and compassion.

geography of self have been sought as demonstrations of that artificiality of social imperatives and cultural shaping which is determined by exterior forces rather than by the self. Those boundaries are necessary to determine an individual definition and place, but when they become barriers the place is isolated and the definition banished. That is why Barber needs to travel (but also to stay). That is why she needs to experience (but also to belong). That is why she needs to be a mother (but also a woman). That is why she needs freedom (but also boundaries). The tension that emanates from the conflict between extremes is narrated in her fiction and in her autobiographies with a special sincerity and commitment that helps to give body to these theories, a human flavor which Barber attains through her portrayal of this tension as a rough journey, both personal and fictional, but always a literary journey in which the duality of extremes is deployed, not with theoretical conviction but with human desperation. That is why there is an emotional, bare and painful price to be paid and one which takes the shape of words. Trying to balance all this unveils a universal impossibility and pain that is substantial (in its social construction but also in the personal influence) to human beings. In her fiction, the characters that rebel show failure in *The School of Love*; in *And the Desert Shall Blossom*, Esther enjoys no complete happy ending or conclusion; the autobiographies sway between joy and sadness, almost without stopping; and the miracles in *Parting the Veil* are all a matter of interpretation and faith. All this combines in feelings of expectation and loss in one impulse that could be called melancholia, “if you’re inclined to compartmentalize”, “if you’re inclined to tidy diagnoses” (Barber, *Raw* 124), a melancholia that can be defined as the fallibility of human ideals, the constant echo of the impulse “to seek the Great Perhaps” (Barber, *Raw* 234). Melancholia does not always need to be something negative because in illness a certain epiphany of knowledge and beauty blossoms:

Weak hearts. Weak knees. Weak minds. Did unrelenting sadness mean a person had a weak or sick mind? Did it mean a person was mad? And what did madness mean anyway? Maybe it was a word that took on too much just as the word “love” took on too much. Madness could be a curse, but it could also be a kiss from God, couldn’t it? A chance to know the full spectrum of humanity, a chance to feel the condition of being tied to the moon and tides and the pull of the ocean waves, back and forth, in and out. It took immense strength to love so deeply and to sorrow so sadly. Maybe weakness had nothing to do with it. (Barber, *Raw* 125)

And this melancholia enables a communication or connectedness which facilitates the real meaning of Barber’s fiction, a search for completeness, relief and understanding which is only possible through the only river which always dies in two oceans at the same time: love. Barber’s books could be summarized in a single sentence: “There is love after all.” (Barber, *Raw* 265). And love is a universal feeling. Coming from her particular world view, to a universal act of creative communication, Barber develops “the fluidity of discourse, the liquid stream of sounds and words” (Mora 2) as an exaltation of paradox and risk to produce meaning and balance.

Mormon literature deserves a place in this new academy of western literature that is concerned about minorities, diversity and difference. This study is an attempt to make Mormon literature visible for an international audience because, as many critics suggest, Mormon authors have something worthwhile to say. Barber’s attempt is not unique. Several Mormon authors have tried to develop a Mormon literature that is appealing to both insiders and outsiders. These Mormon writers are nulifying Karl Keller’s warning: “because we hold to the idea that literature should conform to the conventions of society controlled by these Mormon tenets of morality and taste, we reduce the possibility of a body of literature” (Keller, *On* 14). In that body of literature, Barber is one of the best examples. Lavina Fielding Anderson considers Barber’s work a “promise for the future” (*Masks* 9) in Mormon literature; England includes her name on his list of positive prospects

for the future of Mormon literature (*Mormon* 12). Her work is valuable as the independent compilation of one writer's literary skills but she surpasses that level to become an important part within a context in which her literary work opens horizons and determines new ways and possibilities. Within a Mormon literary context, her books work to make inappropriate the words by Robert Raleigh:

There is a tendency within Mormon culture to see the world in terms of good and evil only. You are either for or against the Kingdom of God. Within Mormon culture, art can entertain, but it should also instruct and enlighten. There is a growing body of work, however, that doesn't fit these categories or purposes. It is not for or against, but about. It doesn't exactly instruct, though it often provokes feeling and thought. (Raleigh viii)

In her fiction, Barber's deals with topics which encourage a general analysis of certain conflicts in Mormon culture, such as those of motherhood, authority and role-production<sup>246</sup>. But Barber's work also demands a proper place within Western American literature because her work is a particular rendition of the West which approximates Mormon specifics into the complex and diverse group of Western experiences. Barber's approach to Western landscape, to its urban and rural nature, to some of its cities, to the rhizome in its fields, to its essence and history pivots upon new theories of definition of the West as a zone of tension, as a discourse which has been clothed with archetypal qualities. So many years of unmasking and trying to be visible turned into a good example of the increasing success of Mormon literature. Barber really became successful once she was able to communicate her view of the world while, at the same time, portraying the view of the world of people from outside her community in her work. Barber's literature is crafted, refined, skillful, and highly poetical. But above all, she will always be outstanding because

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<sup>246</sup> Her work also helps to avoid what Hanks regrets from Mormon feminism: that within male centered discourse much of the fiction written by women "repeatedly disappear within the culture." (Hanks xxiii)



of her devoted and responsible conception of the act of writing, something that is inestimable not only for Mormon literature but for the literary world at large.

Five hundred pages back, I concluded my introduction to this study with a single desire: I crossed my fingers and hoped I could show why Barber's fiction is worth reading. By analyzing her literary production, I have attempted to defend her literary value and her contribution to Mormon literature and to Western American literature as a whole. Now, it is time to let the genius of literature and literary criticism play their game.



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