

“Complicated, a Bit Dotty and Completely Original”:

The Issue of Self in Jane Bowles’s

Two Serious Ladies

By

Avery Czarnecki

A thesis
submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTERS OF ARTS

Department of English
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

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A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University of
Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree
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Abstract

This thesis endeavors to explore issues of self in Jane Bowles's *Two Serious Ladies*. I begin by first outlining related themes in the tradition of American literature, starting with 19th century writers and ideas of Transcendentalism. However, as a writer situated in the 20th century, Bowles must also be compared to other writers and philosophers of her era, in order to explore some of their ideas as contributing discourses to *Two Serious Ladies*. By clearly marking out a path for Bowles as both a part of, and separate from the American tradition as a whole, I will attempt to make her novel come into focus as a continuation of the discussion of self in American literature, especially as a woman writer writing about women finding their own individuality.

Acknowledgements

In beginning to write about the quest for self of Jane Bowles's "two serious ladies", I came to the understanding that I was also embarking on a quest of my own—one that has been difficult, rewarding, unforgettable and a truly priceless learning experience! It has been an honour to explore *Two Serious Ladies* and Jane Bowles's life and other works, which are full of so much humour, wit, sincerity and truth. I believe we can all find a piece of ourselves in Bowles's marvelous, sometimes problematic and other times hysterical characters and that we can learn something about ourselves from their trials and tribulations. To all of those who have been involved in, and contributed to my journey, I would like to offer my heartfelt gratitude.

I would like to extend my most sincere thanks first and foremost to my advisor, Dr. Steve Snyder, for his unbelievable support, his encouragement, his originality and enthusiasm, and for being such a wonderful teacher—from even as far back as when I was a petrified second year student! You have meant so much to me and have been such a huge inspiration, always giving me the courage to look further and to discover the "authentic self". I want to express my thanks and appreciation to the members of my thesis committee; to Dr. George Toles, for his constructive criticism and close reading of the rough draft of this thesis which were so helpful, and to Dr. Louise Renée, for her enthusiastic involvement in this project (even at the last minute!) and for her valuable insight into the feminist aspects of the novel. Thanks also to Dr. Cindy Donatelli, for her belief in me. Many thanks to all of the other great professors I have had over the years for their knowledge and excellence in teaching, and to the secretarial staff in the English department for all of their invaluable help!

Special thanks to all my friends, in particular, to Ryan English for tirelessly allowing me to read sections of my thesis over the phone “just one more time” and for introducing me to the wondrous rejuvenating effects of watching *Buffy*, to D’arcy Lee for his support and endless supply of Coke products, to my “little friend” Melissa Lucki for giving me so many fun “breaks”, to Namiko Saito for always being there—even from as far away as Japan, to Denise Lui, my “partner in crime”, for her empathetic ear as a fellow graduate student and friend. A very “extra special” thanks also to my dear friends Maryann Fitzpatrick and Christy Donald, two of my own favourite “serious ladies”, who never stop making me laugh and who constantly give me so much inspiration—each in her own unique way!

And last, but definitely not least, I would like to give my deepest gratitude and appreciation to my wonderful and caring family, especially my mother Valery, my father Larry, my sister Angela, my grannies, Bertha and Lena and my grandpa Michael, who have all supported, encouraged, fed, clothed, chauffeured, “put up with” and loved me—I couldn’t do anything without you!

I would like to dedicate this thesis to the memory of my grandpa Louis Pokrant. His passion for reading and his kind and generous nature will always be remembered.

Introduction

“Complicated, a Bit Dotty and Completely Original”¹:

The Issue of Self in Jane Bowles’s

Two Serious Ladies

Many literary critics have compared the poems of Emily Dickinson to a patchwork quilt; the poems can be read individually, but by looking at them within a larger context, by exposing their inter-connectedness and seeing them in relation to one another, new themes are brought to light and a new richness is revealed. When I think about Jane Bowles’s writing, especially her novel *Two Serious Ladies*, I am reminded of this image of Dickinson’s poems as a quilt, interwoven from a number of seemingly disparate ideas to become something original and beautiful. In *Emily Dickinson’s Open Folios*, Marta L. Werner explains in her introduction that she intends to “offer only a series of speculative and fragmentary “close-ups” –*a portrait in pieces, a constellation of questions*”². In many ways, Werner’s thoughts echo my own intentions in this thesis. By thinking about Bowles’s novel from a number of different angles regarding the issue of self, various ideas can be explored and, I think, the strength and depth of Bowles’s writing can be discovered.

The first chapter of my thesis explores a number of different perspectives regarding issues of self and individuality. I begin surveying ideas of self, from not only

¹ Jane Bowles, *My Sister’s Hand in Mine: The Collected Works of Jane Bowles* (New York: Noonday Press, 1995) 364. These lines are taken from a short story entitled “Camp Cataract”, where the main character Harriet reveals her “extremely complicated” and “rather brilliant” plan for escape from her life with her sisters (363).

² Marta L. Werner, *Emily Dickinson’s Open Folios: Scenes of Reading, Surfaces of Writing* (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1995) 2 (author’s italics).

the American tradition of literature, including authors such as Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman, but also from a diverse range of theories such as Existentialism, Feminism and Objectivism. By comparing and contrasting elements of these diverse ideas and the way that they interpret the self (which are also explored to varying degrees in Bowles's work), I am better able to understand Bowles's novel and the issues of self that become its theme.

My second chapter gives a close reading of *Two Serious Ladies* and the ladies' quest for self. Using Bowles's own interpretation of some of Kierkegaard's ideas of dread as a starting point, I intend to show the way the ladies' quest in the novel is one that moves away from dread, towards attempts at becoming an individuated (but not an utterly self-sustaining) person. I also aim to show the extent to which the other characters in the novel represent a gallery of versions of individuation. I will try to look at what these characters represent in the context of the ladies' struggle and what the ladies' quests might suggest in the end, not for the purpose of coming to a single conclusion, but in order to further explore the questions about self that arise in the novel.

This thesis concludes with a final look at the characters at the end of the novel, and ways that the narrative has progressed from beginning to end. Have the characters succeeded in their quest? Is the novel a success, or, are these questions even legitimate in the end? Through analyzing Bowles's novel as a thematic exploration of the journey of the characters, I hope to show that what makes this novel a "success" are the ladies' *attempts* at discovering the nature of self and the effort they make to take the journey, to let go of their security, in hopes of finding something authentic. In the end, it is their desire to partake in a quest for authenticity that makes them "*serious ladies*".

Chapter One

"The Soul selects her own Society":¹

Competing Discourses of Self and the Work of Jane Bowles

*"A man is a bundle of relationships, a knot of roots
whose flower and fruitage is the world"²*

In the opening scene of *Two Serious Ladies*, a young Christina Goering performs a dance of worship to the sun,

"Now don't take your eyes off me," she said. "I'm going to do a dance of worship to the sun. Then I'm going to show that I'd rather have God and no sun than the sun and no God. Do you understand?"³

Christina is the main character and first "serious lady". Her journey to discover the nature of the "self in the world" encompasses the main plot of the novel. This dance scene sets up a number of competing discourses⁴ that Bowles incorporates in her novel, about ideas of the self and the individual. Later in the novel the other serious lady, Mrs. Copperfield, says, "No one among my friends speaks any longer of character—and what interests us most, certainly, is finding out what we are like"⁵. If discovering "what we are like", or the self, is the main quest in the novel, then it is *certainly* a quest for an

¹ Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1961) 303.

² Taken from *Essays: First Series*, History. See Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays: First and Second Series* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990) 24.

³ Jane Bowles, *My Sister's Hand in Mine: The Collected Works of Jane Bowles* (New York: Noonday Press, 1995) 5.

⁴ According to Sara Mills, "discourse" can be defined as, "the formal treatment of a subject in speech or writing"(2) and notes the conflictive nature of discourse and that it is always in dialogue with other positions. I use the term "competing discourses" purposely to highlight the idea that Bowles was not following any specific model or theory in her writing, but that her work is a culmination of a number of different ideas and theoretical stances. For more on competing discourses, see Sara Mills, *Discourse* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1997).

⁵ Jane Bowles 71.

individuated self that the women are after. The aim of this thesis is to examine the way in which the issue of the nature of the individual—her process of becoming or developing (or not)—informs the structure of the novel. Because Bowles is an American writer, I wish to situate the novel's concerns within the American tradition of literature relating to "self" and distinguish the attitude of Bowles's novel from that of other writers and theories or movements.

When considering a subject as abstract as the self and the individual, the question may arise whether a focus on the individual, or on issues of "self" and "subject" in a novel that seems so ambiguous can be considered valid. One critic has said of Paul Bowles's novel *The Sheltering Sky*, "individuality is exposed as a flimsy myth and the universe invoked as bleakly indifferent to the human plight".⁶ From this quotation it might be assumed that individuality is a "flimsy myth", but no matter what one might argue, the existence of the individual is undeniable: we all by necessity experience the world as individuals—there is no escape! All of the characters in Bowles's novel to some degree embody responses to this fact of life; all of the characters are indisputably individuals, a life condition that makes the discussion of issues of self, legitimate, even necessary.

From the beginning of the novel, Christina tries to work through the problem of "human apartness" or individuality. The novel says that as a young girl Christina spends a lot of time alone, but she also seems to have an interest in others in a very detached way, as a means to the salvation she attempts to find. Christina's enactment of a "baptism" shows the struggle she has reconciling herself to finding a "higher spirit". She

⁶ Kathy Justice Gentile, "'The Dreaded Voyage Into the World.' Jane Bowles and Her Serious Ladies," *Studies in American Fiction* 22 (1) Spring (1994): 48.

lures one of her sister's friends to take off her dress, be covered in a burlap sack, and then roll around in the mud in order to be baptized in a river; a "very special game" called "I forgive you for all of your sins." When Mary asks Christina if the game is fun, she answers, "It's not for fun that we play it, but because it's necessary to play it"⁷. The necessity arises as Christina's wish to create a space for herself in which the self has religious sanction. The opening episodes dramatize Christina's concern with self and with religious ritual, as though she were trying to reconstitute a ceremony of initiation. If the novel portrays all its characters as being engaged with the question of "self", if it shows several characters in search of individuation or some form of self-authorship, it does not define in positive terms what individuation might consist of, but rather, it shows a gallery of more or less negative examples of quests for independence/self-direction, individuality or individuation.

I specifically choose the word "individuation" to refer to the apparent quest of some of the characters for a fuller sense of an "authentic" self, but I do not use the word in a specific Jungian⁸ way. The term individuation can be found in a dictionary, originating from the Medieval Latin word "*individuare*" (as individual) and is simply defined as, "to form into an individual or distinct identity"⁹. Individuation refers generally to a process whereby a person comes to locate the direction in her life more within herself than in others, but the term does not imply complete separation from humanity; rather it includes an awareness of one's ineluctable dependence. As one becomes conscious of different aspects of her personality, her talents, and ability to

⁷ Bowles 6.

⁸ See Carl Gustav Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious (Collected Works of C.G. Jung Vol. 9 Part I)* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981).

⁹ "Individuation," *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, 2001 ed.

sustain herself, she shifts the sense of authority for what she does from the outside to the inside of herself. The term "individuation" has been used by Jung, Freud, Rollo May, R.D. Laing, D.W. Winnicott, and others. In *Two Serious Ladies*, what Christina seems to desire is a sense of oneness with the world, a sense of living a life which is especially hers and of freeing herself as much as possible from a fear of things which would impede her progress toward this authentic sense of being, but Bowles's presentation of Christina is almost deliberately sketchy and tentative. The greatest hindrance to her quest in the novel's terms is her fear of life, fear of other people, and fear of her own individuality. Her problems are also echoed and highlighted by the fears of the other characters that surround her.

Although much interesting and informative work has been written on the subject of Jane Bowles and her work, I find that only a few articles pertain specifically to my own exploration of *Two Serious Ladies* and that even amongst them, I have chosen a slightly different path.

George Toles's examination of Bowles's anxiety and its effect on her writing in "The Toy Madness of Jane Bowles"¹⁰ offered the idea of "lostness" as an unplanned and risky narrative strategy; this idea of "lostness" helped me to untangle myself from the sometimes-bewildering narrative of *Two Serious Ladies*. Toles compares Jane Bowles's isolation to her husband's and discusses the difference between "true" and "false" versions of isolation. He sees Bowles as trying to "clear" herself away before writing. "No writer has ever tried harder than Jane Bowles to keep the weight of *her* "hand"—which is to say, the weight of her personal concerns, the weight of an assertive

¹⁰ George Toles, "The Toy Madness of Jane Bowles," *Arizona Quarterly* (Vol. 54, No.4, Winter 1998): 83-110.

manner—out of her writing”.¹¹ But, as he explains, her efforts actually lead to the complete opposite: her texts are “saturated with personal idiosyncrasy”.¹² The idea that Bowles’s failed attempts to remove herself from her texts resulted in “a prose that is authentic, and, in terms that she stubbornly refused to value, a triumph of purity”¹³ was very useful in my thinking through Bowles’s text in terms of the writer’s peculiar style. This article made me sensitive to the amount of separation (or lack thereof) between the writer and her work. Although “The Toy Madness of Jane Bowles” has a different focus than my thesis, dealing more with isolated moments in Bowles’s work and her self-consciousness in her writing, than with a specific thematic exploration of the journey of her characters in *Two Serious Ladies*, Toles’s essay offers interpretations of specific scenes in the novel provided another point of departure for me when thinking through my own analysis.

Andrew M. Lakritz’s “Jane Bowles’s Other World”¹⁴ gives a thematic interpretation of the plot of the novel and the metaphor of excursion, which was helpful, but he focuses more on the ladies’ transgressions than on their quest to become individualized selves.

Kathy Justice Gentile, in “‘The Dreaded Voyage into the World’: Jane Bowles and Her Serious Ladies”,¹⁵ makes many useful points and inspired me to pursue the idea of exposing the element of “dread” in Bowles’s work. However, she deals with dread in

¹¹ Toles 85.

¹² Toles 86.

¹³ Toles 87.

¹⁴ Andrew M. Lakritz, “Jane Bowles’s Other World,” *Old Maids and Radical Spinners: Unmarried Women in the Twentieth Century Novel*, ed. Laura L. Doan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) 213-234.

¹⁵ Kathy Justice Gentile, “‘The Dreaded Voyage Into the World.’ Jane Bowles and Her Serious Ladies,” *Studies in American Fiction* 22 (1) Spring (1994): 47-60.

Kierkegaard's strictest terms and does not allow for other competing discourses in the novel.

In the same sense, Robert Lougy's "The World and Art of Jane Bowles"¹⁶ gives insight into the existential dilemma of Bowles's characters, but sees the women's quest as a sort of reconciliation with themselves in an existential world, not as an attempt at individuation. He says that "the object of their quests lies ahead of them in a future thrown into doubt by what they know and what they feel. They exist in a state of sin, forever aware of the disparity between the dreamt-of and the real, between that which might have been and that which is".¹⁷ While I agree with his analysis of the limitations of an existential world where the characters must create their own meaning, I disagree that the primary objects of their quests is to reconcile their belief with the reality of the 20th century: that God no longer exists. In Lougy's final interpretation of the novel, there is no verification or denial of the redemption Christina searches for. My analysis is more optimistic; I perceive the end of the novel as positive because the women have both found a certain amount of freedom from their fears by becoming more self-directed.

In "Jane Bowles as Serious Lady,"¹⁸ James Kraft reviews *Two Serious Ladies*, reaffirming my point that Christina and Mrs. Copperfield's "presence as seeing selves is a measure of advance,"¹⁹ but then unfortunately quashes this statement by presenting the women—and Bowles—as fragmented characters and by reducing them to childlike

¹⁶ Robert E. Lougy, "The World and Art of Jane Bowles," *The CEA Critic* (1997): 157-173.

¹⁷ Lougy 165.

¹⁸ James Kraft, "Jane Bowles as Serious Lady," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 1 (1) Fall (1967): 273-277.

¹⁹ Kraft 276.

figures, offering Mr. Copperfield's parodied "words of wisdom" in his final letter to his wife²⁰ as the solution for Bowles!

Jennie Skerl's "The Legend of Jane Bowles: Stories of the Female Avant-Garde"²¹ offers an exploration of Bowles as a woman experimentalist and writer of female experience, dealing more specifically with Bowles's life and career as a writer than with *Two Serious Ladies* itself. Skerl's other article, "Sallies into the Outside World: A Literary History of Jane Bowles"²² was useful in assisting me to clarify the existential discourse in Bowles's work, by demonstrating that Bowles had a "particular interest in postwar existentialist writers", and that "within this context, her artistic preoccupation with a sense of guilt and alienation, the grotesque and the absurd, and the isolation of the individual are not eccentric but part of the Franco-American intellectual landscape of the 1940s and 1950s"²³. Skerl explores self-determinism through creativity, or having the ability to imagine something else as a key concept of existentialism, which I found very helpful, but again, her article presents a history, not a close reading and thematic analysis of the plot and characters.

Carolyn Allen's article entitled, "The Narrative Erotics of *Two Serious Ladies*"²⁴ presented some interesting views on the women and the novel's erotic elements and the narrative tension between the "modernist content and postmodern spirit"²⁵ which destabilized sexuality, resulting in a "queer" text. I appreciate her concerns with issues of

²⁰ Bowles 110-111.

²¹ Jennie Skerl, "The Legend of Jane Bowles: Stories of the Female Avant-Garde," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 43 (1) Spring (1999): 262-279.

²² Jennie Skerl, "Sallies into the Outside World: A Literary History of Jane Bowles," *A Tawdry Place for Salvation: The Art of Jane Bowles*, ed. Jennie Skerl (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1997): 1-18.

²³ Jennie Skerl, *Salvation* 2.

²⁴ Carolyn J. Allen, "The Narrative Erotics of *Two Serious Ladies*." *A Tawdry Place for Salvation*, 19-36.

²⁵ Carolyn Allen 19.

sexuality in the novel, although I have chosen to focus more on the issue of self, than with the women's positions on the scale of "sexual normativity".

Two Serious Ladies is not merely a novel about "the search for self"; it is also a novel that is situated at an intersection of many competing discourses of self. Bowles can be seen as "trying on" these different discourses as a way of problematizing issues of self. Her characters are a continuation of the American tradition of self but, as the novel was written in the late 1930s, the characters are 20th century versions, embarking on a traditional quest for self in a non-transcendental world. Both Christina and Mrs. Copperfield's "seriousness" comes from their constant struggle to discover an individuated self and the personal voyages they embark on for the sake of self-direction.

In *American Exceptionalism*, Seymour Lipset asserts that, "Born out of revolution, the United States is a country organized around an ideology which includes a set of dogmas about the nature of a good society"²⁶. While other countries' identities are derived from a common history, America is founded on the principle of the individual and being an American can be seen as an ideological commitment. "It is not a matter of birth. Those who reject American values are un-American"²⁷. The stress on American uniqueness situates Bowles's novel in this long-standing tradition of individualism and ideas of self. Lipset specifically describes the American tradition as "moral individualism" and says that, "An emphasis on individual morality is an elemental component of the American polity"²⁸. Even community in democratic pluralistic America is grounded in the individual as "a thinking moral actor, not in group

²⁶Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: Norton and Co., 1996) 31.

²⁷ Lipset 31.

²⁸ Lipset 275.

solidarity”²⁹. But, as Lipset points out, this ideal of individualism does not mean that man is a model of self-interested atomism: “individualism is not necessarily a force grinding against the bonds of morality; it is, rather, an integral part of American values”³⁰.

If individualism is defined as “the habit or principle of being independent and self-reliant” or, in an extreme sense, a “self-centred feeling or conduct; egotism”³¹, then in many ways, individualism poses the same problem as the process of individuation which the characters tackle in Bowles’s novel. The question follows, how does a person become independent without becoming an egotist? Lipset sees individualism as strengthening the bonds of civil society rather than weakening them and finds a positive relationship between individualistic people and their involvement in society and helping others³². But he also acknowledges the problems that an individualistic attitude can pose. The struggle of the individual to be separate, while simultaneously being involved with others, is an important theme in American ideology and literature that Bowles also explores in her work. The individual as the original American image becomes visible in the American tradition of literature of the 19th century and forms another competing discourse in Bowles’s writing.

James Fenimore Cooper’s character Natty Bumppo can be seen as one of the first representations of the original American individualistic, self-sufficient hero. In the series

²⁹ Lipset 275.

³⁰ Lipset 275.

³¹ “Individualism.” *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, 2001 ed.

³² Lipset 277.

of five novels about the character³³ Natty Bumppo, Fenimore metamorphoses Bumppo's personality and names in many different phases of his life, from Leather-Stocking in *The Pioneers*, who is a "surly quarrelsome garrulous old man who boasts tiresomely of past deeds on every occasion and even in the midst of danger, who wipes his nose with his hand and gets into childish disputes about the rules of a shooting match"³⁴, to the mature dreaded warrior Hawkeye/Pathfinder and the romantically chivalrous youth Deerslayer. What each version has in common is that Natty Bumppo is always the lone hero, independent and totally self-sufficient. There are two specific instances when Bumppo has the chance to join himself with a woman (*The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Pathfinder*) but in both cases he decides in the end that he is better off alone, "Natty had no business marrying. His mission was elsewhere"³⁵. He is self-sufficient because he doesn't need anyone else and can survive on his own, as in *The Last of the Mohicans* where he saves himself repeatedly from being captured by enemies and *The Pioneers* where he even manages to break out of jail, but he is a hero because he has a conscience; he helps others and tries to do what he thinks is right.

D.H. Lawrence called the character of Natty Bumppo the "wish-fulfillment myth"³⁶ of America. He says, "The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic and a killer"³⁷, and later that the true myth of America is Deerslayer, or Natty Bumppo: "An isolate, almost selfless, stoic, enduring man, who lives by death, by killing...This is the

³³ The series of stories about the character Natty Bumppo, known as "*The Leather-Stocking Tales*", include *The Deerslayer*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Pathfinder*, *The Pioneers* and *The Prairie*. James Fenimore Cooper, *The Leather-Stocking Tales* (New York: American Book Co., 1967).

³⁴ James Grossman, *James Fenimore Cooper* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1967) 33.

³⁵ D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Viking Press, 1961) 59.

³⁶ Lawrence 52.

³⁷ Lawrence 62.

very intrinsic-most American”³⁸. Bowles also seems to be experimenting with Lawrence’s vision of the archetypal American hero as someone who is completely cut off from humanity, for example, in the character of Ben, who has no real need for people other than for his own satisfaction. In Bowles’s work, self-sufficiency does not amount to a healthy individuated person, or a great American hero, but rather, a person who is self-sufficient becomes so egotistical that he has no ability to relate to others. In contrast to Ben and some of the other male characters, Bowles’s heroines in the novel endeavor to become individuated in a way that is still inclusive of other people.

In discussing the image of the male “American hero”, it is important to realize that Christina’s quest is a quest for all humans and, specifically, a quest for women. Alfred Kazin asserts that *Two Serious Ladies* is, “essentially a novel of women and their journeying into places beyond their ken”³⁹, but that, “although Jane Bowles’s women are closer to women than to men, they do not identify with anybody at all” because “things happen to them without modifying them—that is the comedy of *Two Serious Ladies*”⁴⁰. I would disagree with Kazin’s formulation of the women in the novel as being unable to identify with anyone and his assertion that they have no possibility for change. *Two Serious Ladies* is a novel written by a *woman*, about (primarily) *women*, with relationships between mostly *women*. Bowles tries not only to carve out a space for women to explore issues of self, but she is also creating a quest novel for women, separate from the typical “male quest”. As Jennie Skerl contends in “The Legend of Jane Bowles”,

³⁸ Lawrence 62.

³⁹ Alfred Kazin, *The Bright Book of Life* (New York: Dell, 1973) 175.

⁴⁰ Kazin 177.

Two Serious Ladies is a parodic work which presents the artist's spiritual quest from a male point of view and laughs at the grotesque "lack of fit" between female experience and the male visionary quest; in fact, the young Jane Bowles, who wrote the novel in her early twenties, boldly deconstructs the artist-hero and radically questions the bourgeois psycho-social structures that support the myth.⁴¹

Bowles's writing seems to put into question the modern myth of artistic genius—a space usually reserved for men—as in the case of *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man* and *On the Road*, by creating women on a spiritual quest for their own individuality, apart from men and models of male journeys. If the quest seems like an "ill fit" at times, the characters barely clinging onto their quest, the ill fit occurs precisely because the situation is so fraught with struggle from the start. The women are purposely rendered as being ill at ease, as though they do not know the rules of the game they are playing, and so they attempt desperately to improvise as they go along. Could Bowles be trying to show how difficult it is for a woman to live in "a man's world"? As Francine du Plessix Gray comments in *Adam & Eve and the City*, there have been many literary male heroes who have engaged in "archetypal leavetaking" (she notes everyone from Ulysses to Captain Ahab and John Updike), leaving home to search for "some mysterious deeper fulfillment", "a search for transcendence", "a quest for deepened identity" or "a search for secular salvation", as she recognizes these voyages have been variously labeled in critical literature. She says, "But neither in literature nor in real life have these exalted phrases greeted women who resolve their fear of mortality by undertaking similar journeys... Whereas heroism has ranged the world, heroinism remains fixed and static"⁴², adding that these women are usually written off as having a case of "cabin fever" at best.

⁴¹ Skerl 264.

⁴² Francine du Plessix Gray, *Adam & Eve and the City*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987) 275.

Gray sees the theme of Bowles's writing as "women's right to self-determination—at-all-cost"⁴³, a dominant theme in feminist literature, even since *Jane Eyre*. Although in many instances, *Two Serious Ladies* is undoubtedly fanatical, even fantastical and sometimes confusing and ambiguous, to say the least, as a woman, I find the female protagonists in the novel much more realistic than their male counterparts.⁴⁴ Rather than depicting a baptism, the opening scenes could represent a christening, with Christina christening herself as the master of her destiny and personality and as her own self-appointed guide in her quest for individuation.

In addition to evoking discourses of individualism and feminism, Christina's dance of worship can also be viewed as a summoning of faith, a sort of call to, or echo of, Emerson or Thoreau, to the power that exists within the self. Like the Transcendentalists before her, Christina tries to enact a search for self that would necessarily entail the presence of God. The process of Christina's dance, by virtue of its paganism, is from a Christian perspective, sinning. She worships the sun and her own free will, but still needs God and hope. For Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau, nothing was more important than the "authentic" self because that self was directly linked to God, a transcendent spiritual presence, which exists in all things and people. Tony Tanner, in *The Reign of Wonder*, explains that what the Transcendentalists sought to achieve was a release from tradition, "so that they might indulge a proper admiration for a present America neither subservient nor inferior to Europe. And the most

⁴³ Gray 286.

⁴⁴ As Gray aptly explains, "Ms. Bowles's oeuvre is all the more unique because of its Grand Guignol hilarity, its constant surprises, and a blend of realism and grotesqueness... There is a constant tension between the sturdy, supernatural physical world she describes and the gloriously unpredictable, fantastic movements of the eccentric persons who inhabit it"(288).

forceful concept with which to challenge the traditional eye was clearly the innocent eye"⁴⁵.

Bowles seems to agree with Emerson's idea of letting go of fear and of striving for openness, although her means of salvation is through experience, rather than God. Indeed, her characters' quest for individuation seems to also grant them the ability to see in a new way. But, in fact, Bowles's world is far from Emerson's. Unlike Emerson, who had faith in a transcendent reality and in the individual's oneness with God, Bowles and her character find no God, immanent or transcendent, and instead take the idea of experience to its furthest extreme. The dance of worship and baptism scenes exemplify Christina's struggle to believe, but the story reveals her inability to do so in the end. The dance is not portrayed as beautiful and graceful, but rather, as an awkward, cumbersome affair. Bowles is not interested in a romanticized view of religion or of her characters. Christina's dance is "clumsy"; "her legs were quite fat" and "her gestures were all undecided"⁴⁶. Her sister cuts short the performance by pushing her onto the grass, so she does not have a chance to finish her improvised dance. Her "faith" is left unanswered. Not only does this opening scene set up discourses on faith and God but also it again calls our attention to issues of self and situates the novel within the American tradition of literature. If Christina's dance is an attempted baptism, it is partly an attempt aimed at her self; if the dance invokes memories of religious rituals it evokes these as an improvised *au bade* to the absence of an accessible spirit.

As a disciple of Emerson, Thoreau also believed in the power of "seeing", but Thoreau felt the need to live nature and to concentrate more on "a true sauntering of the

⁴⁵ Tony Tanner, *The Reign of Wonder: Naivety and Reality in American Literature* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967) 20.

⁴⁶ Bowles 5.

eye"⁴⁷. For him, "the only kind of valuable 'seeing' is one divorced from knowledge, understanding, and philosophy"⁴⁸. By disallowing the interference of knowledge or understanding and by instead being open, nature can "show you" what you will see, apart from the hierarchy of intellect and what is seen as important by society. Thoreau takes "individuality" most literally; for him it means isolating oneself in order to discover what one is—"To drive "life" into a corner"⁴⁹. As Stanley Cavell points out in *The Senses of Walden*,

Walden's phenomenological description of finding the self, or the faith of it, is one of trailing and recovery; elsewhere it is voyaging and discovery. This is the writer's interpretation of the injunction to know thyself. His descriptions emphasize that this is a continuous *activity*, not something we may think of as an intellectual preoccupation. It is *placing* ourselves in the world. That you do not know beforehand what you will find is the reason the quest is an experiment or exploration.⁵⁰

The idea of placing oneself in the world, with a complete openness to the world becomes a competing discourse in Bowles's work. Like Bowles's characters, Thoreau "placed" himself in the world by becoming a traveler or stranger. But for Thoreau this transformation meant solitude, not isolation; the experience of "knowing thyself" in a very personal, intimate relation to the world. For Thoreau, as well as the characters in *Two Serious Ladies*, mindless conformity impedes the goal or condition of self-realization. To live other people's perceptions is a kind of self-denial. If the majority of people lead lives of "quiet desperation"⁵¹, they do so from ignorance of their own capacity for happiness. To be free from the desperate life is to awaken to the divinity within oneself, thus to have faith in oneself as ultimate value. Unfortunately, such

⁴⁷ Henry David Thoreau, *Complete Works*, vol.1 (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1986) 4.

⁴⁸ Tanner 47.

⁴⁹ Thoreau, "Walden" 1683.

⁵⁰ Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (New York: Viking Press, 1972) 52 (the author's italics).

⁵¹ Thoreau, "Walden" 1683.

awakenings are not easily negotiated. Bowles has been said to focus on “human apartness”⁵², or, more specifically, that which makes us separate. In order to become an individuated person, her characters must differentiate themselves from one another, without becoming hard and isolate.

Walt Whitman also follows many of the ideas of the Transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau, including his views on issues of self and ways of seeing. Tanner points out that, “The eye was of crucial importance to Whitman”⁵³ and that the idea of “seeing without looking”—of seeing without adding knowledge or calculation—was also of significance. Whitman aimed to find or reveal a new perspective of the world. He says in “Song of Myself”,

Long enough have you dreamed your contemptible dreams,
Now I wash the gum from your eyes,
You must habit yourself to the dazzle of the light and of
every moment of your life.⁵⁴

The naïve eye that Whitman aimed for was open and free to let the world in, without the fear and shame that all of Bowles’s characters seem to possess. In Bowles’s writing attempts are made to try and see the world from this free perspective, as if viewing it for the first time, or like a child. When Mrs. Copperfield goes walking in the red light district of Panama with her husband, there is a child-like innocence and awe in Mrs. Copperfield and openness to the experience that is very similar to Whitman’s material spirituality. In *The Bright Book of Life*, Alfred Kazin points out,

Their (the characters) gracious innocence in depraved joints in Panama is Jane Bowles’s joke, but it is not a joke on *them*; they become fond of the

⁵² Truman Capote, introduction, *My Sister’s Hand in Mine*, by Jane Bowles (New York: Noonday Press, 1995) ix.

⁵³ Tanner 65.

⁵⁴ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass.*, ed. Sculley Bradley and Harold T. Blodgett (New York: Norton, 1973) 1227-30.

whores and pimps and obvious confidence men without knowing what these strangers do. Their "innocence" is indeed what interests Bowles in her characters"⁵⁵.

The prostitutes that approach Mrs. Copperfield overwhelm her, but she makes none of the conventional judgments usually associated with someone of her class. Like Whitman, Bowles seems to be interested in a vision of humanity without the judgments and stereotypes that typically accompany it.

Emily Dickinson and her ideas of the nature of self, "I rise, because the sun shines, and sleep has done with me, and I brush my hair, and dress me, and wonder what I am"⁵⁶ can be seen as another competing discourse in the 19th century that relates to Bowles's work. What both Dickinson and Bowles have in common is their rejection of typical "women's roles". Like Thoreau, Dickinson chose to retreat in order to retain her own sense of herself. Rather than marrying and taking on the role of "wife", she instead turned her room into a sort of Thoreauian Walden Pond. Dickinson's concern was whether the inner lives of others were knowable and the experience of their consciousness. Awareness, as for Jane Bowles, was vital for Dickinson. This awareness, however, also leads to an awareness of our own mortal body. While Dickinson took on a more religious view, both she and Bowles are concerned with learning to accept the shame of our own deteriorating bodies, and in *Two Serious Ladies*, an acceptance of the body, specifically, the capacity to "let go" of shame, becomes necessary in order for Christina and Mrs. Copperfield to become individuated. By accepting death and their own mortality, they are able to release much of their dread and shame and become freer to be themselves and to take on experience.

⁵⁵ Alfred Kazin 177.

⁵⁶ Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1961) 616.

The opening scenes of the novel portray Christina as a sort of “Christ figure”, but what exactly she suffers for, and what she tries to be redeemed from remains unclear. In many ways, in the baptism scene Christina attempts not only to purify Mary, but also herself. It is as though she understands, even at a young age, the necessity of enduring the experience of suffering to allow freedom. She announces to God, “This black burlap sack proves to you that she thinks she is a sinner”⁵⁷, but Mary did not put the bag on, or choose to be baptized; it was Christina’s will and Christina also ends up “in the mud” with Mary. The baptism, or attempt at re-birth, fails. While Christina becomes quite excited and “agitated” during the act, she feels ill and abandons Mary as though her presence is a nuisance to her once the baptism ends. As it turns out, three minutes is not a sufficient amount of time to perform a baptism on someone else, or on herself. Christina has tried to re-create another person from both Mary and herself and realized that doing so becomes messy and painful and in the end, cannot be possible by just willing it so. What Christina is essentially attempting is the act of baptism through another person, an act she attempts repeatedly in different forms throughout the novel. Again, Christina’s gestures evoke the notion of self-creation in a non-religious context. As such her actions bear with them the contours of an existentialist project of self—a project that has overtones of Emerson’s religious view, but hints as well at a sensibility that wants self-creation in the absence of any “over-soul” which supports it.

While Bowles’s novel touches on many of the different ideas of self from the 19th century American tradition of literature, her characters are a continuation of this tradition, reacting also to the condition of non-Christianity in the 20th century. Possibly the most

⁵⁷ Bowles 7.

important clue to understanding Christina's desire to seek her quest for salvation and her lack of faith come from the story she tells about a man standing in a dilapidated apartment,

"I finally felt rather sad watching this and I was about to go away when a man came into one of these rooms and, walking deliberately over to the bed, took up a coverlet which he folded under his arm. It was undoubtedly a personal possession, which he had neglected to pack and had now just returned to fetch. Then he walked around the room aimlessly for a bit and finally he stood at the very edge of the room looking down into the yard with his arms akimbo. I could see him more clearly now, and I could easily tell that he was an artist. As he stood there, I was increasingly filled with horror, very much as though I were watching a scene in a nightmare"⁵⁸.

The building in Christina's description is in the process of being demolished and she is looking at the scene from next door through a hole that has been made in the wall. She is observing a process of disintegration, of something coming apart, piece-by-piece. The man walks into the room to retrieve a coverlet, something to cover himself with, to protect himself. He has forgotten the coverlet and is now coming back for it. In the midst of destruction and ruin he returns for comfort, a sort of "security blanket" so to speak. He has forgotten and remembered something dear to him, something necessary to risk going back for. But things have changed. There is now an open gap where a wall used to be which he looks out of into the garden "with an expression of pleasant curiosity". He is interested in what is out there and in the new perspective he gets from the fragmentation. Christina feels sad when watching this scene, but her sadness quickly turns to horror, as though she were watching a scene from a nightmare. Is the man's "pleasant curiosity" a sign that in the midst of destruction and ruin, there is still something left, some memory? The image of the coverlet appears again in the form of a

⁵⁸ Bowles 17.

pink blanket, near the end of the novel when Christina goes home with a gangster named Ben. Perhaps the blankets can be seen as a symbol of some vestige of self that remains after everything else is taken apart and abandoned.

The blanket scene could be viewed as an image of the 20th century and seems to be laced with possible underlying influences of existentialism. Since existentialism covers a wide spectrum of theory, from Nietzsche to Sartre, it can be most easily defined as “a philosophical theory emphasizing the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent isolated in an otherwise deterministic world”⁵⁹. In *Two Serious Ladies*, Mrs. Copperfield tells Christina,

“My husband said you had a religious nature and we almost had a terrible fight. Of course he is crazy to say that. You are gloriously unpredictable and you are afraid of no one but yourself. I hate religion in other people”⁶⁰.

There is a tension between Christianity, in which a higher authority directs the self, and free will or self-direction, in which the individual is the authority, which lays claim to our moral attention. This novel explores the influences of both Christianity and existentialism as discourses for possible ways of living, without validating either one. In both discourses there is a concern with choice, although existentialism focuses more on the individual human being and the idea that, “the only ‘authentic’ and genuine way of life is that freely chosen by each individual for himself”⁶¹.

Historically, Christina’s attempts at individuation could be compared with the ideas of existentialism that were appearing in America. Many writers, such as Saul Bellow, who saw at the core of existential thought a concern with the subject and a

⁵⁹ “Existentialism,” *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, 2001 ed.

⁶⁰ Bowles 15.

⁶¹ Leslie Stevenson, *Seven Theories of Human Nature* (New York: Oxford, 1974) 78.

rejection of all things external (i.e. codes, ideas, formulas)⁶², were influenced by existential thought. In existentialism, the struggle to find balance between self and others also comes into play in a way that is similar in *Two Serious Ladies*, as well as the ambiguity and contradiction. As John Macquarrie says, "There is a paradox involved here. A purely individual existence is not possible and could not properly be called an 'existence'; yet existence with the others is to be judged authentic to the degree that it lets individuals be free to become the unique persons that they are".⁶³ This particular quotation captures the paradox of the novel: the characters seem to want to be a unique person, yet the novel reminds us that a purely unique existence is not possible: we even need other people to negotiate with our own fear and dread.

While the existentialist movement does post-date the actual novel, as Millicent Dillon shows in *A Little Original Sin*, Bowles had spent two years in France as a youth and was very much interested in French writers, including Gide, Proust, Celine, Montherlant and Louise de Vilmorin⁶⁴, and she and her husband Paul were both attracted to the existentialist movement in Paris during the 1940s⁶⁵. French existentialism specifically, which concentrated on the individual and his freedoms and choices in a godless world, seems to have influenced Bowles's writing, evident from her first novel, which was written in French and entitled *Le Phaeton Hypocrite*.⁶⁶

⁶² John J. Clayton, *Saul Bellow: In Defense of Man* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1971) 78.

⁶³ John Macquarrie, *Existentialism*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1972) 121.

⁶⁴ Millicent Dillon, *A Little Original Sin: The Life and Work of Jane Bowles* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985) 26. On Jane's voyage back from France she actually met Celine while reading his novel, *Voyage au Bout de la Nuit*.

⁶⁵ Millicent Dillon, *Out in the World: Selected Letters of Jane Bowles* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1985) 33.

⁶⁶ Dillon, *Original Sin* 28.

Paul Bowles, who was influenced by Camus and Sartre⁶⁷, also influenced Jane Bowles, but even Paul becomes one of many competing discourses and not the singular influence in her writing. Jane herself saw the differences between her and her husband's writing. In a letter she tells Paul that he was a "truly isolated person" whose isolation is "positive and true", unlike her own isolation, which she saw as "an accident, and not inevitable"⁶⁸.

Among existentialists, Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*⁶⁹, which focuses on the importance of questioning whether life has a meaning, and the need for man to create and live life in the midst of a nihilistic world, can also be seen as part of the competing discourse of the individual found in *Two Serious Ladies*. Homer's character Sisyphus seems comparable to many of Bowles's characters, especially Christina, insofar as he lives in a world in which belief in God has become impossible. Both Sisyphus and Christina can be deemed "absurd heroes". Camus says of Sisyphus, "He *is*, as much through his passions as through his torture"⁷⁰. In the same sense, Christina exists as a heroine as much from her suffering as from her "salvation". She can be considered a heroine not by any usual measure of success, but by the distance she is willing to travel to struggle, to live and to create meaning for herself. Bowles herself says, "It is intolerable to be in this world without a myth"⁷¹. In both works, hope is what drives man, while the specific ideas about hope are quite different. Camus seems to see hope as a sign of man's attachment to life, a sort of diversion from reality, while for Bowles hope seems much more necessary and, in the end, a product of growth. In the final lines of *Two Serious*

⁶⁷ See Paul Bowles, *Sheltering Sky* (New York: Ecco Press, 1998).

⁶⁸ Dillon, *Out In the World* 33.

⁶⁹ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York: Penguin, 2000).

⁷⁰ Camus 108 (author's italic).

⁷¹ Dillon, *Original Sin* 299.

Ladies, Christina comes to the conclusion that “Hope had discarded a childish form forever”⁷². If hope is an element of man’s absurd condition, then for Christina, her hope matures and develops somehow into a real belief in herself and her ability to create meaning in her own life. However, just as Camus focuses on Sisyphus’s return down the hill to once again push up the rock, Bowles’s focus lies in Christina’s journey, not as something quantifiable, but as a success because she has been serious about the struggle. Camus ends his essay with, “The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy”⁷³. The same, I think, can also be said of Christina.

Although the existential nature of the novel has been noted by many critics, I do not believe that this novel can be declared completely existential and summed up as easily as that. Rather than taking on a purely existentialist view that has been seen by many feminist critics to be overwhelmingly “male-orientated”, Bowles combines elements of existential discourse, such as “dread”, along with her own personal feelings and many other discourses. Without delving deep into feminist theory, we must note, as previously mentioned, that Bowles is a woman, writing about a quest that two women embark on, involving primarily women. In *Radical Innocence*, Ihab Hassan discusses patterns of experience in contemporary fiction and the extent to which they are existential. He says that, “Rebel or victim, the hero is at odds with his environment”⁷⁴, but if this is the case, as heroines, which category do Bowles’s ladies fit into? They are women, which seems necessarily to make them both rebel and victim. They do not quite

⁷² Bowles 201.

⁷³ Camus 111.

⁷⁴ Ihab Hassan, *Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel* (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1961) 117.

fit into the “men’s theory”, and so again, they come to represent the embodiment of a series of competing discourses. Kathy Gentile argues, “As a philosophical concept, dread has historically been appropriated by pontifical male philosophers, such as Søren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger, and distilled into a necessary existential condition for the becoming (male) self”⁷⁵. Bowles perhaps appropriates certain aspects of existentialist theory, especially Kierkegaard’s theory of dread, and uses the idea as another competing discourse in her work. I disagree with Gentile that Bowles adheres to her husband’s own existentialist “take” in his writing⁷⁶; I believe Jane Bowles’s interpretation to be much more involved with the characters and the complications of their struggles to become individuated. As Andrew Lakritz points out in “Jane Bowles’s Other World”: “Bowles exposes not merely the content of exhausted stereotypes for women but also the powerful influences these habits of thought have on the content of her characters’ visions, aspirations, and judgments”⁷⁷. Indeed, the novel can be seen as parodying many of the competing discourses, including that of existentialism.

The characteristic humor found in Christina’s words and actions also give evidence of Bowles’s use of parody in her fiction. Christina’s definite seriousness as a young girl seems quite apparent, but, as in the baptism scene, over-dramatization converts sensuousness into ridiculousness. As Christina is “hurrying down the stairs with Mary and then out across the lawn towards the woods,” she “wasn’t sure yet what she was going to do, but she was very much excited”⁷⁸. The element of sexual arousal cannot be ignored in her attraction towards Mary, but her excitement becomes so excessive that

⁷⁵ Gentile 47.

⁷⁶ Gentile 48.

⁷⁷ Lakritz 19.

⁷⁸ Bowles 6.

it borders on hysteria. She has no idea what she is even going to do; yet she moves very quickly and with an excessive amount of emotion. She tells Mary,

“If you don’t lie down in the mud and let me pack the mud over you and then wash you in the stream, you’ll be forever condemned. Do you want to be forever condemned? This is your moment to decide.”

Mary stood beneath her black hood without saying a word. Christina pushed her down in the ground and started to pack the burlap with mud.

“The mud’s cold,” said Mary.

“The hell fires are hot,” said Christina. “If you let me do this, you won’t go to hell”⁷⁹.

Christina uses force to coerce Mary into her “half-baked” vision of salvation, even pushing her into the mud and using dramatic evangelist-like language such as, “The hell fires are hot!” while loudly shouting her prayer. The scene demonstrates Christina’s vague understanding of Christianity and her clear force and power as the one who makes the rules and who starts and finishes the so-called game. The question becomes whether Christina even believes in the religion she parodies. She plays with religion as if to see if it is a game that works, but her hysterical faith and the rules of her game seem to be completely inappropriate. She seems to be playing the game as a trial of her own self-construction.

On a more modern stage than Emerson or Thoreau, Hemingway offers a vision of the self as an isolate ego resisting the blows of the world. “To find any truth a man must be alone, alone with his senses and the seen world”⁸⁰. For Hemingway, the isolated self and its own actions and perceptions had value and the separate person has the only chance of surviving the existential nightmare of ultimate meaninglessness. In *A Farewell*

⁷⁹ Bowles 7.

⁸⁰ Tanner 245.

to *Arms*, the main character Lieutenant Henry recalls an image from his past of putting a log into a fire that was full of ants:

I remember thinking at the time that it was the end of the world and a splendid chance to be a messiah and lift the log out of the fire and throw it out where the ants could get off onto the ground. But I did not do anything but throw a cup of water on the log, so that I would have the cup empty to put whiskey in before I added water to it⁸¹.

Common to both Hemingway and Bowles's writing are remnants of feelings of the disillusionment of existentialism, combined with an awe and wonder of the world. Like the Transcendentalists, Hemingway also believed in the need to see things from a new perspective, "Let those who want to save the world if you can get to see it clear and as a whole. Then any part you make will represent the whole if it's made truly"⁸², but as a 20th century author, his calling was not to Christianity. As Tanner notes, the Hemingway hero is committed to "the now"⁸³. He says, "Existence is an incomprehensible void inhabited by concrete particulars perceptible to the senses"⁸⁴. In contrast to Dickinson's many poems contemplating death and the afterlife, Hemingway's characters see death as "a lot of shit"⁸⁵. Death is not the beginning of a spiritual afterlife, but rather, of dissolution into nothingness. Hemingway's characters are individuals in a more extreme sense than Bowles's; while they believe in individuality, they are hard and isolate in a way that is very different. For Bowles, openness to experience and involvement with other people are necessary attributes of any program, even self-proclaimed, of self-development.

⁸¹ Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (New York: Scribner, 1995) 327.

⁸² Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (London: Cape, 1972) 261.

⁸³ Tanner 233.

⁸⁴ Tanner 236.

⁸⁵ Ernest Hemingway, *Across the River and into the Trees* (New York: Scribner's, 1980) 219.

Apart from Hemingway's looming view of an existential existence as a "war on the individual"⁸⁶, Bowles's world without God becomes for her characters a kind of "old dream"⁸⁷. Mrs. Copperfield, in particular, sees religion as predictable and as even an insult:

When people believed in God they carried him from one place to another. They carried him through the jungles and across the Arctic Circle. God watched over everybody, and all men were brothers. Now there is nothing to carry with you from one place to another, and as far as I'm concerned, these people might as well be kangaroos; yet somehow there must be someone here who will remind me of something...I must find a nest in this outlandish place"⁸⁸.

For Mrs. Copperfield, God is associated with memory and exists only in the past; belief becomes instead something to be replaced. Mrs. Copperfield's search for an old dream seems to be a search for a replacement for God, for a buffer from pain—a nest where she is protected and shielded from the sun and from the "hot rays" of a world which burdens one with the need for self-direction. But Christina also seems to be connected to Mrs. Copperfield's search. When thinking about God, Mrs. Copperfield opens a gift from Christina, a manicure set. Mrs. Copperfield says she is looking for someone who will remind her of something. People used to carry God; she carries Christina's gift. Christina has been portrayed as a Christ figure, but in this instance she represents more of a guardian angel⁸⁹, capable of bestowing a gift on Mrs. Copperfield—the idea of independence (a gift she never quite receives). At the end of the first chapter, Mrs. Copperfield told Christina how terrified she was to go on the voyage and Christina

⁸⁶ Alfred Kazin, *An American Procession* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984) 372.

⁸⁷ Bowles 40.

⁸⁸ Bowles 40.

⁸⁹ Christina talks about her own guardian angel to Miss Gamelon, Bowles 11-12.

replied, "I would go anyway"⁹⁰. Is Christina, metaphorically speaking, instilling Mrs. Copperfield with the strength to make this journey into her own self? If Christina is identified as an "existentialist heroine", she calls into question the extent to which this novel supports existentialism by the very fact that her presence in the novel seems to also have some sort of religious designation over other characters, like Mrs. Copperfield. While Christina exhibits behavior that seems to imply her personal decision to recreate her self, the behavior of the other characters does not seem so associated with this goal. Collectively, the characters seem to embody a gallery of responses to the unavoidable problem of the individuality of experience.

Ayn Rand's theory of Objectivism adds another perspective to issues of self and individuality. Although Rand was Bowles's contemporary, her views helped shape the atmosphere of the era and were popular in American society. Rand believed in complete self-empowerment; her novel *The Fountainhead*⁹¹ advocates extreme self-sufficiency, dramatizing an individualism that was completely hard and isolate: "The man who attempts to live for others is a dependent. He is a parasite in motive and makes parasites of those he serves".⁹² Rand felt that "The first right on earth is the right of the ego" and that "Man's first duty is to himself"⁹³. As an extreme right wing advocate, she sees America as a country built on principles of individualism; she rejects altruism in any form and says that America was based on man's *own* right to his happiness. While Rand's views may seem radical and quite apart from Bowles's own notions of self, they do present a discourse of individuality, and offer insight into the extent to which

⁹⁰ Bowles 18.

⁹¹ Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1943).

⁹² Ayn Rand, *For the New Intellectual: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (New York: Random House, 1961) 80.

⁹³ Rand, *New Intellectual* 82.

Bowles's character Christina feels that separation from others is necessary in achieving self-creation. I think Bowles's vision can be more closely compared to Karen Horney's definition of self-realization. In her book entitled *Neurosis and Human Growth*, she says self-realization "does not exclusively, or even primarily, aim at developing one's special gifts. The centre of this process is one's potentialities as a human being; hence it involves—in a central place—the development of one's capacities for good human relations"⁹⁴. *Two Serious Ladies* could be seen as a parody of Rand's Objectivism. The novel shows Randian characters, but they are failures in terms of becoming healthy, unified individuals and they never gain the ability to see, or to be empathetic with others.

Bowles's characters venture on a search for a combination of self-baptism and an authentic sense of self, but her novel fosters neither an Emersonian, nor Thoreauian, nor Whitmanian, nor Hemingway perspective. The novel balances each character between the claims of a potential inner authentic self and the claims of a social world, which declares that each self is an intersection between social, personal and symbolic forces. Bowles's characters deal alternately with the attempts of others to define them, with their fears of aloneness and individuality and they do so in a world that seems bereft of Emerson's mystical underpinnings or those of formal religions. The world offers little means of structuring the individuals in a creative way that would lead one to oneself. The next chapter explores in greater detail the ideas of self and individuation, as arising out of personal fears/dread within the two main characters, as well as the attempts of other characters to also individuate themselves. While I delve into more specific issues of individuation and dread in the following chapter, I do not intend to sponsor a

⁹⁴ Karen Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth* (New York: Norton, 1950) 309.

particularly Jungian or Kierkegaardian view, but rather show the extent to which Bowles has internalized their theories, criticized them, or implemented them as competing discourses in her characters' search for self-realization.

Chapter Two

“Women Going Wild”¹:

The Search for an Individuated Self in *Two Serious Ladies*

“For the self is a synthesis in which the finite is the limiting factor, and the infinite is the expanding factor. Infinitude’s despair is therefore the fantastical, the limitless”².

In *Two Serious Ladies*, one of the characters points out that, “The starting point for everything: [is] yourself”³, an echo of Mrs. Copperfield’s idea that “what interests us most, certainly, is finding out what we are like”⁴. While the novel meanders about and echoes other points of view, it is also a discourse about competing visions of individuality. Individuation can be defined as a process that links ideas of the self such as self-awareness and self-reliance, but which also *includes* other people. My definition of individuation is, specifically, a process by which an individual, through addressing her own fears, integrates some parts of her personality, discovers the nature of her need for other people and what capacity she has for self-reliance: she does not become isolate, but shifts the psychological center of her life from others to herself. The novel reminds us repeatedly that the process does not mean completely cutting one’s self off, or becoming

¹ Taken from Jane Bowles, “In the Summer House,” *My Sister’s Hand in Mine* 210. Gertrude, the mother tells her daughter, “Whenever I think of a woman going wild, I always picture her with black hair, never blond or red. I know what I’m saying has no connection with scientific truth. It’s very personal. They say red-haired women go wild a lot but I never picture it that way. Do you?”, to which her daughter replies, “I don’t guess I’ve ever pictured women going wild”.

² Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, ed. and Translated by Howard Hong and Edna Hong (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1980) 163.

³ Bowles 145.

⁴ Bowles 71.

a hardened egotist, or a violent, non-empathetic person. Characters in Bowles's novel come to represent a variety of attempts, failures and in one case, some degree of success, at individuation (self-realization). By examining what incites the search for an individuated self and where the search leads, a clearer understanding of the relationship between individuation, dread and the ability to "see", can come into focus.

CHRISTINA

Christina, the main character and first "serious lady", says, "I have never even begun to use my code, although I judge everything by it"⁵. While Christina possesses a "code", a set of "rules" or values (like Hemingway?) which may or may not be culturally conditioned, she creates problems in her life from her own inability to apply her rules to her life. Christina wants to be in control and to throw off her "god-given" traits, including her judgments and ideals, to see if she can attempt a self-made individuation process, by incorporating seemingly unrelated ideals of becoming more self-reliant (to be more "independent", to "rely on one's own resources"⁶), self-directed (to "exercise personal control over one's own life"⁷) and to also gain self-knowledge (to "understand oneself and one's motives")⁸, with a greater openness to the world and to experience. Throughout the novel, Christina acknowledges and negotiates with all of these aspects of individuation, trying different personality traits on like dresses to see which ones fit, testing the belief that we can literally make ourselves who we are⁹. All of the characters

⁵ Bowles 19.

⁶ "Self-reliant," Canadian Oxford Dictionary, 2001 ed.

⁷ "Self-directed," Canadian Oxford Dictionary, 2001 ed.

⁸ "Self-knowledge," Canadian Oxford Dictionary, 2001 ed.

⁹ For more on negotiating competing discourses, see Sara Mills, *Discourse* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1997). By "negotiate" I mean specifically that Christina attempts to deal with, work through and experience all of these aspects of individuation, not that she has successfully completed this task.

in the novel exist to some degree as “models for living” or attempts at individuation with which Christina experiments. Each character is seen through her eyes and comes to be connected either directly to Christina, or indirectly through Mrs. Copperfield, who, I will argue is an inverted mirror image of Christina. Every person in the novel can be understood as a stop on the road—a new point of understanding and realization—of individuation.

The opening baptism scene has already been seen to elicit many important themes in the novel, including competing discourses of faith, God, self-reliance and self-awareness. Christina’s christening evolves another important discourse that focuses on the dread (or fear), which drives and also sometimes impedes the characters in their search for self. Even at the beginning of the novel in the baptism scene, a sense of dread is already evoked, “Forget what you are afraid of. God’s watching you now and He has no sympathy for you yet”¹⁰; these feelings of dread become evident in many instances throughout the novel.

In a letter to her husband in 1947, Jane Bowles mentioned that she read Søren Kierkegaard’s *Sickness unto Death*, a companion piece to *The Concept of Dread*¹¹, and the word “dread” is used repeatedly in Bowles’s novel and stories. For Bowles, and her character Christina, “the idea is to change first of our own volition and according to our own inner promptings, before they impose completely arbitrary changes on us”¹². Dread becomes an “inner prompting”, which summons us to explore our own freedom. In “The Dreaded Voyage Into the World: Jane Bowles and her Serious Ladies”, Kathy Gentile contends that the “‘knowledgeable’ dread that follows sin provokes a sense of guilt which

¹⁰ Bowles 7.

¹¹ Dillon, *Out in the World* 41.

¹² Bowles 29.

can carry the individual to the abyss of a dizzying freedom—the freedom to choose faith”¹³. Gentile views the ladies’ sinning as the key factor in producing dread, thereby allowing them to make the necessary leap towards faith. I would argue that while the ladies do engage in a “leap of faith”, the leap is, rather, towards individuation and the freedom to know oneself, not God.

In referring to Kierkegaard’s notion of “dread”, I think that the point is not that Bowles read Kierkegaard and applied his ideas directly to her writing, but that she takes from him the idea of dread, which becomes an additional discourse for her. It is Bowles’s version of dread that concerns us, and the place it occupies in the novel. Bowles treats Kierkegaard’s dread by hypothesizing “individuation” as the means of salvation from dread, or the fear that she feels. If salvation is a way to be saved from something, then, in the context of the novel, through salvation from dread the possibility exists for one to have a more intimate relationship to the world and more freedom to know one’s self. As previously stated, Bowles uses the word “dread” time and again in her own novel and short stories. Her interpretation of dread becomes the principal factor in acknowledging the self and the need to seek salvation. Dread allows, even incites, a person to expand herself and find the ability to “see”. While I do not intend to expound Kierkegaard’s theories as the basis of my analysis of the novel, some of his ideas follow important themes that exist in the novel and relate to Bowles’s own ideas and my interpretations.

¹³ Gentile 48.

In *The Denial of Death*, in his chapter on Kierkegaard, Ernest Becker explains, "The foundation stone for Kierkegaard's view of man is the myth of the Fall"¹⁴. Because man is a union of opposites, of self-consciousness and of physical body, he has the ability to be aware of his own individuality and the terror of the world and his own death and decay: "The fall into self-consciousness, the emergence from comfortable ignorance in nature, had one great penalty for man: it gave him dread"¹⁵. This is the conflict that Christina, and indeed all of Bowles's characters, face: the sense of an unlimited mind vs. a very limited body. For Kierkegaard, dread and despair were conditions that might lead an individual to confront her own sinful state, rejecting the emptiness of a Godless existence by making a leap of faith. He says, "dread is constantly to be understood as oriented toward freedom"¹⁶. Dread comes from our awareness of original sin and our participation in it, but freedom exists in the possibility of making the leap towards faith. However, as Kierkegaard also shows, sometimes man refuses to confront his "existential condition", and instead chooses to deny possibility by living as an "inauthentic man". Dread can be seen as a much better "school" than reality, because unlike reality, which can be "lied about, twisted and tamed by tricks of cultural perception and repression"¹⁷, dread cannot be lied about: "He who is educated by dread is educated by possibility"¹⁸. What makes Bowles's two ladies "serious" are their attempts to escape each one's socially constructed reality and undertake a search for possibility through their confrontation of dread.

¹⁴Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997) 68.

¹⁵ Becker 69.

¹⁶ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957, translated by Walter Lowrie) 60.

¹⁷ Becker 88.

¹⁸ Kierkegaard, *Dread*, 41.

The sense of dread evoked in *Two Serious Ladies* can also be seen in Bowles's play *In the Summer House*, in the character of Lionel,

“I dread being a minister in a way because it brings you so close to death all the time. You would get too deep in it to ever forget death and eternity again, as long as you lived—not even for an afternoon. I think that even when you were talking to your friends or eating or joking, it would be there in the back of your mind. Death, I mean...and eternity¹⁹.”

Like Lionel, Christina's sense of faith becomes complicated because she constantly battles her feelings of dread and tries to make a leap of faith. For Emerson, faith was different from formal “belief” which owed everything to someone else; faith was natural—faith was the heart. Christina's sense of faith is not Christian; her sense of faith comes from the confidence she has in her own sense of herself—from her belief that “I am merely working something out for myself”. It is Christina's faith in her own self that allows her to recognize dread. She says to Mary, “Does your sin taste bitter in your mouth? It must.”²⁰, already recognizing dread at a young age and the possibility of freedom from it—first by these “rituals” and later by her search for salvation through sinning and repentance, which leads to individuation. Christina tries to continually overcome her own sense of dread by going into dreadful situations. She keeps trying to baptize herself over and over.

But does Christina really understand anything she says or, rather, is she not mouthing a clutter of fragments from rituals she does not understand? Does she simply sense the dread, and sees Christianity as her only possible solution at this point? The baptism scene also brings up questions about “false moves”, or fraudulent forms of individuation. Many of the characters' attempts at self-liberation can be construed as

¹⁹ Bowles 233.

²⁰ Bowles 6.

false because the characters' dread is working in the opposite direction, causing them to fear exploring their inner conflicts. Becker explains, "One of the great dangers of life is too much possibility" and that "freedom is dangerous"²¹. Dread is like a double-edged sword. It allows us to become freer to know ourselves, but it can also inhibit if the person is too fearful of the world to open herself up to the possibility of experience.

Although Christina realized in the baptism scene the necessity of dread for freedom, as an adult she is at first unable to make the leap of faith necessary to seek the freedom she needs. Instead of beginning her journey, Christina chooses to have Miss Gamelon move in with her, engaging in a period of "cocooning" similar to Mrs. Copperfield's "fantasy cocoon". Again, as shown earlier, Christina tries desperately to stay in control, yet she betrays a certain amount of hysteria, which lurks not far under the surface of her behavior.

When she has dinner with Miss Gamelon, Christina becomes extremely nervous, changes everything around so they eat in the parlor and spends "a great deal of time switching the lights off and on". "I don't particularly enjoy it, but I expect in the future to be under control"²² she tells Miss Gamelon. Christina's near hysteria seems to be linked to the unresolved questions she has about herself and the struggle to understand the part faith plays with her own desires. Her disposition comes from her inability to do what she knows she must do—from the impossible ability to recreate religion. Dread keeps her from confronting herself, and yet it is her sense of dread that gives her the motivation (in the future) to attempt her own process of individuation. In many ways she

²¹ Becker 75.

²² Bowles 11.

is similar to another of Bowles's characters, Bozoe Flanner, in the unfinished novel *Going to Massachusetts*,

To think of the world—filled her with dread and desolation. She feared that her place on earth—would be contested before she had found it—The fact that she was free to find it—and had not done—so—made her ashamed—guilty—. ²³

Bozoe's feelings echo many of the latent feelings found in Christina as a grown woman in the beginning of the novel. Her expectations of being under control in the future mean that she will have to leave the comfort of her life and take a chance with experience. As her journey progresses, the incidents of hysteria lessen because she learns to use her fear as a means of spurring herself on and opening herself up to possibility.

As previously mentioned, the image of the coverlet that Christina talks about when she recollects the man standing in the demolished building scene, appears again in the form of a pink blanket, near the end of the novel when Christina goes home with a gangster named Ben. The connection between the blankets can be seen as both being a symbol of some vestige of self that remains after everything else is taken apart and abandoned. If dread is a "school" which offers possibility and freedom, destroying the vital lie of the character is the only means of attaining this possibility and freedom. Kierkegaard says, "the self must be broken in order to become a self"²⁴, meaning that the only way to salvation is through confronting man's greatest fear: death. In this sense, the scene Christina retells becomes a symbol of the possibility of possibility, of a new freedom that comes from the destruction of the self through facing up to the terror of existence. As Becker says, "The self must be destroyed, brought down to nothing, in

²³ Dillon, *Original Sin* 298.

²⁴ Kierkegaard, *Death* 199.

order for self-transcendence to begin"²⁵. But I am not proposing that the novel advocates transcendence to God, necessarily, as in the case of the Transcendentalists. The transcendence is a "self-transcendence", which comes from experience. Through confronting fear (his return to the ruins) and discovering what is truly essential to him (i.e. comfort and security which are found through associations with others), the man in the demolition scene is able to acquire a new perspective that was not available before.

Does Christina see the man standing in the midst of ruin, looking out into nature as a nightmare because of the dread it instills in her, or because of what the blanket comes to represent: faith? In "The World and Art of Jane Bowles", Robert Lougy says,

For those who have the courage to descend into this "black pit" of which Mrs. Constable of *In the Summer House*, speaks, redemption is possible; and thus Bowles' "two serious ladies" thrust themselves into it, seeking within for that God Who might be hiding at the bottom²⁶.

If the "black pit" represents death, then hysteria becomes a necessary means—an excessive form of dread that enables Christina to confront death. Her faith is not necessarily in God, but in her own ability to confront what she most fears. Taking a leap of faith is not easy; it requires courage to confront dread and to make the decision to break out, something that many of the characters cannot do. In Bowles's story entitled "Camp Cataract", the main character Harriet also displays hysteria as a sort of explosion of fear that allows her to attempt what she is usually unable to. She says of her hysteria, "The fits are unpleasant; I get much more nervous than I usually am and there's a blank moment or two"²⁷, but it is her "fits" that allow her to leave her home, separate herself

²⁵ Becker 89.

²⁶ Lougy 162.

²⁷ Bowles 364.

from her family and venture out into the world alone to follow her “extremely complicated” yet “rather brilliant” plan towards her own self-development²⁸. For Christina, the process of dealing with fear is difficult at first, but I think, her willingness to entertain own hysteria enables her to “thrust” herself into conditions of human complexity; thus hysteria functions as part of a means of salvation from dread.

After Christina’s story about the coverlet, where she was a third party, or onlooker to the unknown man’s confrontation and individuation, Christina is ready to “break out” of her shell and take on experience. It is as though witnessing another person’s confrontation with death gives her the courage to seek her own “self” project. She goes alone to a party where she meets Arnold, a stranger whose sexual bravado appeals to her, and then proceeds to get into a cab with him to go back to his place. Again, Christina becomes “nervous and hysterical” because the cab is leading them through so many dark and deserted streets and she feels certain that the cab driver will torture and murder them. The “penetration into the interior”, which Mr. Copperfield proudly boasts, reveals the hysteria found in Christina. She is going somewhere she will be unable to return from unchanged. She forces herself, through experience, to uncover new parts of her own interior and more importantly, she forces herself to confront death and her own finite existence through delving into a dreadful situation. “I am certain that most people feel the same way about it that I do, but they have the good taste not to mention it”²⁹, she says. Most people are afraid inside, but they can control it, they can stay away from the dread that forces them to confront their own mortality. It is also the penetration into the interiors of her own being that makes Christina hysterical. She is

²⁸ Bowles 363.

²⁹ Bowles 19.

beginning the process of peeling back layers of her own self to expose what is left in the midst of the wreckage and there is an intense panic and fear in discovering her innermost self.

Another necessary step in Christina's road to salvation entails her decision to sell her house and move to a shack in the middle of nowhere,

“In order for me to work out my own little idea of salvation I really believe that it is necessary for me to live in some more tawdry place and particularly in some place that I was not born”³⁰.

It is especially important to Christina that she moves to “somewhere that she wasn't born” because she is trying to disconnect herself from the past, from who she is, from the kind of person she was supposedly born as (as in accepted notions of God-given traits). She also says she feels comfortable and safe in the house, feelings that will not lead to salvation, and she must give up the “dispensation” that was bestowed on her by her “guardian angel”: money. Because Christina has never had to worry about money and lives in luxury, in order for her to suffer, to also *live in a dreadful situation*, she must get rid of everything and live on the bare necessities of survival. Christina believes in having control over changing yourself before experience and outside forces cause you to change in ways you are unprepared to handle.

The first chapter of this novel ends with Christina's decision to sell her house and move to a shack, “the beginning in a tremendous scheme”³¹. After her first voyage “out” of her cocoon of self-ignorance, she decides to sell the home and everything in it in an effort to get rid of all of the culturally sanctioned garbage that disables a person from

³⁰ Bowles 28.

³¹ Bowles 32.

seeing who they really are. Thoreau says that a tendency towards conformity goes against the goal of self-realization. To get to who we are, we must throw off all of our “necessary luxuries”, which include the comforts of home, money, and even the comforts of conforming to society’s rules. Christina has made a decision to “penetrate the interior”, to get rid of the things that define her, to demolish the house and see what is left. George Toles compares *Two Serious Ladies* to the cartoon in the china store where the china comes to life after the store closes³². He sees the ladies like the china that plays and dances. In this play, pieces are broken, things crumble, and they cannot be put back together again. The project of self, of relating to the world, requires that we shed our layers of conditioned response and get to the essential “thing” that defines us (with the possible irony that such an essence may be the capacity for change). Here Thoreau and Bowles seem to be in agreement. In the beginning of the final chapter, Christina says, “It is not for fun that I am going, but because it is necessary to do so”³³, repeating what she said to Mary about the baptism game. We can see that the necessity is predicated on Christina’s “Thoreau-ian” sense of self-discovery. Now that Christina has sold her house and all of her possessions, she forces herself to “get into the mud”, so to speak. Her next step in her search for salvation from dread entails her forcing herself, with fewer cushions, into experience; into purposely doing things that she dreads in order to gain an awareness of herself. She seems to force herself almost nakedly into dreadful situations and attempts to find a balance between needing people and being her own individual, perhaps in the belief that by doing so she will find either a release from dread, or that she will rediscover something like Emerson’s sense of spiritual wholeness (It is possible to

³² Toles 108.

³³ Bowles 124.

fear being a part of being someone else as much as to fear having no part in someone else). To die and be reborn may be a culturally conditioned myth, which impedes more than helps, for Christina's self-project is not like Whitman's in "Song of Myself". But although Christina attempts a re-birth in the beginning of the novel when she is a child, as a woman beginning her "tremendous scheme"³⁴, which follows "the spirit of the age" as she says³⁵, she is quite apart from Emerson's transcendentalism. Her "scheme" or search does not involve an association with nature, but rather, a union with others as part of the individuation process. If she dies and is reborn, it is not through nature or a belief in the spirituality of God, but through other people and an acceptance of death and the mortal body.

There is another interesting parallel that can be made between Christina and Harriet from "Camp Cataract". In both cases, the women need to abandon their former lives in order to seek out a new understanding of their selves. Harriet is very much like Christina in her relentlessness to follow through with her own process of individuation:

"My plan is extremely complicated and from my point of view rather brilliant. First I will come here for several years...I don't know yet exactly how many, but long enough to imitate roots...I mean to imitate the natural family roots of childhood... As I remove myself gradually from within my family circle and establish myself more and more solidly into Camp Cataract, then from here at some later date I can make my own sallies into the outside world almost unnoticed. None of it will seem to the onlooker as an ugly impetuous escape"³⁶.

In Harriet's case, separating herself from her family becomes crucial in attempting to gain her own self-awareness. For Christina also there seems to be a constant process of bringing people in and then separating herself from them. Miss Gamelon and Arnold

³⁴ Bowles 32.

³⁵ Bowles 29.

³⁶ Bowles 363.

move into the rundown shack on the island with her, but Christina then forces herself to make little trips to the mainland alone and refuses to let them come along with her, "Her excursions would be more or less devoid of any moral value in her own eyes if they accompanied her"³⁷. She meets men, such as Andy, but once they become attached to her, she distances herself from them as well, as though they were now awkward lumps of unreality with which she is no longer concerned. Both women, Christina and Harriet, seem to have a plan, which involves moving to a cottage first, and then from there, making "sallies into the outside world". If Harriet is also a version of Christina, then the title of the story, "Camp Cataract", raises an interesting question. The word "cataract" is defined as, "an eye disease in which the lens becomes covered in an opaque film that affects sight, eventually causing total blindness"³⁸. The shack Christina retreats to can be seen as her own "Camp Cataract", a place where you lose the ability to see. For Harriet, the story ends with her sister's suicide caused by her blindness. Christina, for her part, must overcome her own blindness (by leaving the shack which was meant as a place of "suffering", but which has actually become as comforting as her house) if she wants to succeed in individuating herself.

What does "Camp Cataract" say about Thoreau's Walden Pond? Is the retreat away from others not an approach towards individuation, but actually a means into blindness? "Seeing" seems to be, in the context of the novel, a by-product of individuation, or even the end result. Individuation allows you to see yourself and others, to be a centered, healthy, empathetic person. Bowles's use of the title "Camp Cataract" points to fraudulent attempts at individuation by both Harriet and Christina (and even

³⁷ Bowles 162.

³⁸ "Cataract," *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, 2001 ed.

Thoreau!). In Bowles's world, the idea of completely separating yourself from others does not warrant individuation, but seems to only increase the risk of becoming a self-centered, inconsiderate person.

Emerson says that, "It is easy to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after your own; but the great man is he who in the midst of a crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude".³⁹ Emerson's quotation echoes the ideal of individuation: to shift the center of life from others to oneself, but still to include others. It is finding the balance that is important. For Harriet, there is no balance, everything revolves around her plan to become separated and "imitate roots", but for Christina there is a constant struggle between being with others and being alone. She doesn't retreat to the shack alone. She brings a couple of people with her, and she is not as happy to leave them to make her excursions as Harriet is. "She hated to do this as she knew how upsetting it would be, and the more she considered it, the more attractive the life in the little house seemed to her"⁴⁰. Dread is the provoking agent that makes her venture out. It is "not for fun" that she goes, "but because it is necessary to do so".⁴¹

For Christina, "heroes who believe themselves to be monsters because they are so far removed from other men turn around much later and see really monstrous acts being committed in the name of something mediocre".⁴² If her attempt at individuation involves removing herself from her attachments with others to some degree, then at least it is in the name of something larger than those who do it every day for no reason. As Andrew Lakritz contends in "Jane Bowles' Other World", "Heroes for Goering are alienated

³⁹ Emerson, "Self-Reliance" 518.

⁴⁰ Bowles 124.

⁴¹ Bowles 124.

⁴² Bowles 188.

(removed—on excursions); to be normalized is to be mediocre, to risk mediocrity”,⁴³ but I think Christina tries to accomplish something much more sophisticated than simply endeavoring to escape mediocrity. Christina is after the salvation of self-creation and she doesn't make any excuses for her actions. “I have my own star to follow,”⁴⁴ she says. Although it seems funny when, after breaking up with Andy, he shouts after her, “Lunatic! You're not even a Christian!” it is actually a very interesting comment, as though she has no right to discover herself or search for a God that she does not believe in, or that she has no right to search for salvation if she doesn't believe in God. As Christina leaves with Ben, she tries to look back at Andy, but is unable to see him because a crowd has suddenly filled the ice-cream parlor. Could this be a metaphor meaning that Andy has suddenly become like everyone else in Christina's eyes? I think that Christina's failure to see Andy may also be a failure to see her own self in many ways and the disconnection from humanity that she risks.

The necessity of including others in her attempts at individuation take on a sort of metaphorical kind of prostitution, even from the beginning of the novel. The baptism scene foreshadows the sexual encounters that Christina becomes involved in later. The acts of sex in which Christina engages are not unlike the action of this early scene where she tries to be purified through rolling around in the dirt with another person. In both instances, she attempts to experience “dirtiness” as a positive aspect of personality as a means of individuation. The union with another person as a means to personal salvation from fear becomes an important theme. It is as though her sexual encounters are not only attempts to throw off social convention, but also ways of involving her body with other

⁴³ Lakritz 224.

⁴⁴ Bowles 187.

people, while still separating her inner self. The question becomes: But are these encounters ever attempts to make authentic contact with another person? I would argue that Christina's connections to others are authentic in some cases. In the sense that Christina allows herself to experience "dirtiness", she is also allowing herself to experience something real that goes beyond her own control—the experience of another person in a very intimate and real way.

If the Fall entails man becoming two parts, body and soul, then perhaps Christina is attempting to reconcile the two through her sexual encounters with others. Is sex a means of individuation for her, or a failed attempt? Nowhere in *Two Serious Ladies*, or in any of Bowles's work for that matter, does sex ever become rendered explicitly. Everything is implied. Not only does Bowles never use the word "sex", there are no literal descriptions of any sexual encounters, even though they are alluded to. The erotic scenes that take place are as un-erotic as possible—even to the point of being disgusting—as though Bowles has no interest in romanticized views of love and passion. Possibly, this nauseatingly real image of romance may be in part due to the fact that Christina's (and Bowles's) interest is elsewhere.

Although there is much literary criticism written on the novel in terms of the lesbian relationships and relating to queer theory, it strikes me that the women are no more concerned with sexual relationships with other women than they are with their sexual relationships involving men. While the women cling to other women (as in the cases of Christina's relationship with Miss Gamelon or Mrs. Copperfield's relationship with Pacifica) for protection and security, the men are not rejected because of sexual orientation. In fact, sex does not play a large part in this novel (the women are more

asexual or innocently childlike then bi-sexual or “sexually deviant”). In choosing mates, or rather, in choosing to become involved with others, it appears that Christina lacks any sort of discrimination and accepts without question whomever crosses her path, but to what degree does she really accept them? Isn't she actually just tolerating them and even choosing them for their “lack of fit” or apparent strangeness and deviance?

Nevertheless, Bowles does not seem to be concerned with nature or the private thoughts of characters either; everything is about the characters' interactions with each other and, even more specifically, the understanding—or usually lack of understanding—that goes on between characters. The most explicit Bowles ever gets is in her reference to prostitutes and prostitution. In Christina's case, her “prostitution” seems to be another attempt at going into dreadful situations because she seems much more fearful of involving herself with these men than she does of being alone. The men she chooses are dreadful; the feelings of dread they instill in her cause her to suffer and to seek salvation, or redemption from this dread through individuation, the process of addressing her own fears and discovering self-reliance—what I would call a kind of “positive prostitution”.

In Yeats' poem, appropriately entitled, “Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop”, the last stanza gives a positive take on the idea of prostitution:

‘A woman can be proud and stiff
When on love intent;
But love has pitched his mansion in
The place of excrement;
For nothing can be sole or whole
That has not been rent.’⁴⁵

⁴⁵ W.B. Yeats, “Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop” *20th Century Poetics*, ed. Gary Geddes (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1985) 14-15.

Perhaps Bowles is thinking in terms of Yeats' poem; to live is to fall into the reality of compromise. Life in the real world requires self-reliance, but also a "scale" of measurement, which realistically sees human limitations. We all have to eat, wear clothes, etc., and we all have to necessarily rely on others. Christina sleeps with men in order to gain experience and thus "redemption" through suffering. The sex act, though never referred to specifically, becomes Christina's attempt to unify herself with another person in order to become individuated. It is necessary for her to "rent" in order to be "sole," or self-individuated—free to know herself through knowing others. All of the characters in this novel can be seen as possible models of ways of living and as different "positions" on the continuum of individuation, from Mrs. Copperfield who is at one extreme, to Ben, who is at the other.

Christina says to Ben, "I don't object to prostitutes, but I really assure you I am no such thing"⁴⁶. Is this what she is aiming for? The words "horror", "horrified", and "whore" are used many times in the novel, and often interchangeably. Both Mrs. Copperfield and Christina are constantly accused of being a "horror" and/or a "whore" and both of them are also usually feeling horrified. Mr. Copperfield calls his wife a "horror" in his final letter to her, which is striking because she has adopted the life of the Panamanian whores she lives with, but by "horror", a very strong, painful feeling of fear, shock, or disgust, his meaning is much closer to that of hysteria and dread. He is horrified at his wife the same way that she is hysterical and dreading the possibility of her own free will.

⁴⁶ Bowles 185.

Kierkegaard says, "Innocence is ignorance"⁴⁷. If by falling, man was given the ability to think and to have a "self", then the Fall could be seen as a "fortunate fall" because it gives man the possibility of escaping his feelings of dread. Rather than Christina's prostitution being necessarily negative and sinful as it first appears, the possibility exists in the 20th century that through her encounters with others (a form of self-prostitution), she is able to form a union with humanity similar to that of Whitman, an exchange which entails for her an acceptance and new understanding of the self as a part of humanity. This is "positive prostitution". As Stevenson points out, "The true nature of sin is nothing essentially bodily, but rather the assertion of man's will against God's and his consequent alienation from God"⁴⁸. It is my contention that in Bowles's novel at least, for a person to discover her whole self, she must undergo a certain prostitution of her soul. Prostitution can be understood as an admission of emotional need, but emotional need does not require surrendering one's self-direction to others. Christina becomes involved with others through the course of the novel, but she seems to possess the feeling that it is essential for her to continue on her own quest. Prostitution becomes in this novel a necessary metaphorical stage in the process of individuation. In many ways the novel could be seen as a *Pilgrim's Progress*, filtered through the mud of Whitman, with Dickinson cheering on. As previously mentioned, the novel is not a failure because it ends with an opportunity that *is* positive—the opportunity to "see". The question may be asked, would the novel necessarily be a failure if it ended in a negative way? I think that the novel's triumph is similar to Sisyphus walking back down the hill as after the rock has rolled down. Success cannot be calculated by the usual standards, but

⁴⁷ Kierkegaard, *Dread* 37.

⁴⁸ Stevenson 41.

for the characters the novel ends in a triumph of some sort, however ambiguous that triumph may seem, because both Mrs. Copperfield and Christina are trying to live authentically.

MRS. COPPERFIELD

Mrs. Copperfield is the other “serious lady”, but more than being “other”, she can be seen as an alter ego that Christina tries to shed. Her personality and her search can be identified as the mirror image of Christina’s. By examining Mrs. Copperfield and her journey as an aspect of Christina, the question becomes, where does she fit in the continuum of individuation?

Copper is defined as “a common reddish brown material which is soft and used in a lot of electrical equipment because it allows heat and electricity to go through it”.⁴⁹ Mrs. Copperfield is soft, easily bent and shaped by other’s influence:

She was completely dominated by Mr. Copperfield, as she was by almost anyone with whom she came in contact. Still certain people who knew her well affirmed that she was capable of suddenly making a very radical and independent move without a soul to back her up⁵⁰.

Although Mrs. Copperfield is malleable like copper, she is also a conductor that allows things to pass through her without affecting her. Her sudden moves show her lack of control. She has an amount of independence, but she is afraid to exert it, with the result that her impulses for self-direction come out in uncontrolled bursts. For example, a woman comes up to Mrs. Copperfield on the ship as they are arriving and gives her a number of “rules” about Colon and the proper way to behave:

⁴⁹ “Copper,” *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, 2001 ed.

⁵⁰ Bowles 38.

“Now remember, the minute you get to your hotel, stretch yourself out and rest. Don’t let them drag you through the streets, no matter what kind of wild time they promise you. Nothing but monkeys in the streets anyway. There isn’t a fine- looking person in the whole town that isn’t connected with the American army, and the Americans stick pretty much to their own quarter...”⁵¹.

No sooner does the woman finish telling her the rules than Mrs. Copperfield breaks one by insulting her husband. The woman tells her she will have a wonderful time because “you’ve got that beautiful husband of yours” to which Mrs. Copperfield replies, “That doesn’t help”, but the moment her words come out she is horrified at herself (and the woman is horrified at her as well). Mrs. Copperfield is so inhibited by dread at the beginning of the novel that she is almost paralyzed. Her search is not for freedom, but for a way to be sheltered from her feelings of dread: “I must try to find a nest in this outlandish place”.⁵²

Mrs. Copperfield’s reaction to the story Christina told about the demolished house when they met at the party also directs our attention to her inability to dictate her own feelings: “How amusing. Or perhaps it was depressing”⁵³. While Christina finds the situation strange, sad and then horrific, Mrs. Copperfield can’t seem to decide. She seems to be at a crossroad. In the very next instant, Mr. Copperfield is overheard saying that they will go to Panama to “penetrate into the interior”. This idea comes as much more of a horror to Mrs. Copperfield than Christina’s story, because the last thing she wants to do is penetrate into the interior of herself, or anything or anyone else for that matter. She is not ready to confront her feelings of dread.

⁵¹ Bowles 36.

⁵² Bowles 40.

⁵³ Bowles 17.

The journey on which Mrs. Copperfield embarks does not start out as a spiritual quest the way Christina's does, but begins instead as a physical journey she takes with her husband. At trip's beginning, she fears everything. She feels happy to have reached land because she has a great fear of drowning (In her own self? In others?). Unlike Christina, who begins the novel with a dance of worship to the sun, Mrs. Copperfield begins her appearance in the novel with putting on her "sun helmet" to shield her from the sun. We could understand this gesture as a representation of Mrs. Copperfield battling against her desire for self-direction and individuation. She tries to let herself be led, to follow the rules, to stay in control, but she keeps slipping up. Is she afraid of what might happen if she confronts her own fears?

Fittingly, the hotel Mr. Copperfield books is situated in the heart of the red-light district. He and his wife are "penetrating into the interior" to discover what's there. Does Bowles wish to suggest both are themselves kinds of self-prostitutes? It is important that Mr. Copperfield forces his wife to go to the slum hotel, rather than to the more conventional American Hotel Washington. The lady on the boat tells them, "the Americans stick pretty much to their own quarter"⁵⁴, meaning that most respectable Americans stay within their own socially acceptable society rather than risking a potentially unsavory situation that may break "the rules". In the beginning, Mrs. Copperfield agrees with this attitude. It would seem that she, as a more conventional American woman/wife, has been conditioned to fear everything. She wants to feel safe around the other Americans; in short, she doesn't want to have to discover something different because difference poses a threat.

⁵⁴ Bowles 36.

Mrs. Copperfield's motto is "No experience please". Memory means everything: "For her, all that which was not already an old dream was an outrage"⁵⁵. The incipient idea is that she does not want new experience because she has no control over such experience; she has control only over the past. Her goal is to find a safe nest where she can find peace and be shielded from her own dread. The hotel in the center of the red-light district can be seen as the center of non-conformity. Only in a non-bourgeois approved lifestyle can Mrs. Copperfield be lured to explore the possibility of individuation. While at the beginning of the novel, Mrs. Copperfield refuses the rejection of social conventions (which her husband advocated), later on she finds that it is the lack of social conventions that allows (forces?) her to follow her desires and confront her own dread.

"Mrs. Copperfield hated to know what was around her, because it always turned out to be stranger than she feared"⁵⁶. For Mrs. Copperfield, the outside world is terrifying because it is unknown and uncontrollable, and because it makes demands. The novel makes references to the hot sun, indicating that Mrs. Copperfield is afraid of being exposed. She wants to be sheltered from experience, from emotional trials, from the sun. Nature doesn't elicit feelings of transcendence and freedom for her, but instead brings about feelings of fear: "she could not suppress a rising feeling of dread as she looked around at the landscape"⁵⁷. Again, the same vague feelings of dread that Christina experiences materialize in specific form in Mrs. Copperfield. But her dread does not incite her to confront her own "sinful state"; it instead pushes her further away from any self-realization. Mrs. Copperfield does not want to explore; she feels too much a sense of

⁵⁵ Bowles 40.

⁵⁶ Bowles 59.

⁵⁷ Bowles 59.

dread at the openness and at the unknown. If, for Mrs. Copperfield, there is no God and no apparent interest in being self-reliant, what else is there?

When Mr. Copperfield asks his wife to go to the edge of the water with him, she refuses, saying, "I think I've gone far enough"⁵⁸, meaning, "I've had enough experience, thank you". She tells her husband, "I feel so lost and far away and frightened" because "it's all so strange and has no connection with anything"⁵⁹. Mrs. Copperfield wants familiarity because familiar things are detoxified; she wants a connection with the past that feels safe for her. She sees self-reliance and self-directedness as the same thing: conditions which alienate you from others, much like throwing yourself out into the wilderness without being protected by someone else. She suffers disconnection from her husband who wants her to be a stronger, more independent person. She tells him, "I don't have winged feet like you. You must forgive me. I can't move about so easily. At thirty-three I have certain habits"⁶⁰. Her admission of age is surprising because she has been acting more like she is eighty-three, with hopes of attaining the level of a three year old! Mrs. Copperfield doesn't want to fly; she just wants to find a nest to stay in and be shielded, to revert back to being a baby.

Like Christina, Mrs. Copperfield is also bombarded with so-called "rules" that seem completely ridiculous. As previously shown, her inability to follow the rules causes her dread. But her dread gives her the ability to say "no"—for whatever reason. In Mrs. Copperfield's journey, she starts out saying "no" to experience, but negation becomes for her a way of gaining the power to move towards individuation, whether she wants to or not! As the Copperfields walk through the red light district, they encounter a prostitute

⁵⁸ Bowles 59.

⁵⁹ Bowles 60.

⁶⁰ Bowles 62.

who tries to get Mrs. Copperfield to go with her. At that moment, they are stopped by a policeman and the girl runs away.

“You better mind your own business,” said the policeman. “Why don’t you go over and look at the stores? Everybody walks along the streets where the stores are. Buy something for your uncle or your cousin.”

“No, that’s not what I want to do,” said Mrs. Copperfield.

“Well, then, go to a movie,” said the policemen, walking away⁶¹.

The importance of this scene lies in Mrs. Copperfield’s ability to say “no”. While she is portrayed as a person who can be easily pushed around, she does not let the policeman’s imposed rules guide her behavior; she does not follow society’s rules. As Stevenson asserts, “The power of negation is, then, the same thing as freedom—both freedom of mind (to imagine possibilities) and freedom of action (to try to actualize them). It follows that to be conscious is to be free”⁶². In this way, Mrs. Copperfield’s negations are relatively small, but not without some consequence.

Repeatedly in this novel there are instances of so-called rules being imposed on the two women. The policeman can be compared to the conductor on the train who tells Christina that there is no talking allowed and that she is not allowed to “molest” anyone. Christina smiles to herself at the ridiculousness of these made up rules, but she also smiles because she thinks she is outside of them. It seems Bowles is trying to “say no” to the idea that the self is an already defined identity. She shows the rules as being made up and silly and of no great concern. If you have a belief in self-direction then, as Thoreau would say, many of society’s rules and mores should not be followed because they do not allow you to be true to yourself. The fact that Mrs. Copperfield says “no” is a huge step

⁶¹ Bowles 42.

⁶² Stevenson 83.

for her at this point. She seems to be saying “no” to everything that she has previously wanted. Earlier, she couldn’t follow the rules of the lady who gave her advice on the boat because she lacked self-control, but at this point she seems to do away with convention altogether and takes the first step towards doing what she wants to do, including talking to prostitutes and refusing to obey a policeman’s orders. Could the sudden cause of Mrs. Copperfield’s change be attributed to her suddenly being taken away from the comforts of her home and forced to confront an entirely different world, free from the usual binding rules of American society? If Mrs. Copperfield seems fraught with anxiety and if she has too much dread to seek out new experience, she begins nonetheless (however haltingly) with the process of negation—a journey towards individuation.

What is the significance of Mrs. Copperfield’s involvement with prostitutes? It seems as though in the midst of all of her feelings of dread and her “no experience please” attitude, she still has the competing desire to be exposed, to do what she wants, to exhibit her own will. Mrs. Copperfield’s interest in prostitutes points to a kind of artificial form of experience, acting without the risk of being exposed to any real danger. She is not entirely allowing herself to be dismantled or to completely let go of her self-control, but is rather engaging in an almost “voyeuristic” form of experience by adopting the prostitutes’ lifestyle, lacking the commitment of actually becoming a prostitute. Her repeated acts of negation can also be viewed as a sort of exertion of free will, whether she realizes it or not. The effect of saying “no” is that it leads Mrs. Copperfield towards the expression of her innermost desires. If she doesn’t want experience, she cannot

experience more self-awareness or self-development, but at the same time, she seems to be moving towards a hesitant attempt at individuation through her encounters with others.

Mrs. Copperfield's first experience with another person begins when she goes off alone with a prostitute, a "giantess", into the prostitute's room, which she admired through the window. In contrast to the view from outside, the inside of the room is described as being quite bare: "the only adornments were those which had been visible from the street". From the outside Mrs. Copperfield imagined the room had looked so cozy and nest-like, but once she goes in she sees it is actually empty, and the woman who seemed like the mannequin from her dream, tall and protective, just wants her money and for her to leave. This scene parodies false individuation. Mrs. Copperfield had told the prostitute, "I love to be free"⁶³, but her freedom leaves her alone in the street crying—she is scared of this freedom, yet she still has a desire for a "certain amount" of it. This scene also conveys Mrs. Copperfield's inability to "see" at this point in the novel. From the outside she thinks things look great, but once she gets involved she realizes that she has not seen them correctly. Mrs. Copperfield wrote in her journal,

"Tourists, generally speaking, are human beings so impressed with the immutability and importance of their own manner of living that they are capable of traveling through the most fantastic places without experiencing anything more than a visual reaction. The hardier tourists find that one place resembles another"⁶⁴.

Mrs. Copperfield seems to doubt the validity of the visual world—she refuses to see what is around her and she has no interest in seeing/confronting her own desires and fears. For her, "one place resembles another" because she does not want to see difference. The

⁶³ Bowles 43.

⁶⁴ Bowles 45.

unknown is dreadful and so it becomes easier for her to pretend that it doesn't exist, to close her eyes and pretend that "one place resembles another".

However, things begin to change when Mrs. Copperfield meets Pacifica, another Panamanian prostitute. When Mrs. Copperfield and Pacifica first meet, Mrs. Copperfield has been standing alone crying in the street and Mr. Copperfield has just found her. Pacifica is Mrs. Copperfield's pacifier; she calms her down and symbolizes for Mrs. Copperfield the nest she has been searching for. After meeting Pacifica, Mrs. Copperfield seems to feel less dread, but it is only because she thinks she has found what she was looking for: her mannequin—the person who will protect her from her dread instead of leading her towards it.

The Hotel de Las Palmas, where Pacifica lives, is filled with birdcages in the halls, a paradise for Mrs. Copperfield, who would love nothing more than to be caged. She says, "there is really no rapport between ourselves and birds"⁶⁵, refusing to accept Pacifica's insight that we are all caged birds, or our connection to them. At the same time, Mrs. Copperfield loves the hotel and wants to live in it forever, completely disregarding the fact that the women who live there are prostitutes and that they are using her for her money. But that the women are prostitutes may also be what attracts Mrs. Copperfield. If they can be rented then she has the ability to control them with her money. Pacifica will never leave her so long as she gives her what she wants.

Although Mrs. Copperfield believes that Pacifica will protect her, when she goes home with her she finds quite the opposite situation. Instead of falling asleep, Mrs. Copperfield and Pacifica are rudely awakened by one of Pacifica's customers, a sailor

⁶⁵ Bowles 48.

who is violent and abusive. Mrs. Copperfield reacts to the intrusion by “becoming hysterical” and letting Meyer in against Pacifica’s orders. She tells Pacifica, “No, no—I have always promised myself that I would open the door if someone was trying to break in”⁶⁶. For Mrs. Copperfield, the fear of the unknown is unbearable and Meyer behind the door represents the unknown; so she would rather let him in and face possible violence then experience the excruciating dread of the unknown. Could this scene be a metaphor for Mrs. Copperfield’s view of life? Instead of finding peace with Pacifica, Mrs. Copperfield has been forced to confront dread and to take part in experience. Her throwing open the door could be a gesture towards the process of individuation, the confrontation of her fear, but it has no consequences for her, only for Pacifica.

As soon as Mrs. Copperfield leaves Pacifica and the hotel, she feels again a sense of “lostness” and dread beginning to overtake her. The Copperfields’ attempt to “penetrate the interior” of the jungle fails. They do not go deep inside, but walk around “the outskirts of the city”⁶⁷ and in the jungle “only around the edges where there were paths”⁶⁸ because they do not possess the proper equipment, physically or mentally, to deal with going in deeper. They cannot penetrate into the jungle, Panama, each other, or themselves, and instead have to follow “prescribed paths”. In the end, Mrs. Copperfield decides to leave and go back to Colon: “If I don’t feel like going in it I won’t. It doesn’t matter.” She begins to exert self-directedness, one of the traits of individuation, but she is not responsible for her actions, she is simply negating everything. She leaves her husband to go back to Pacifica and Mrs. Quill. The scene ends with Mrs. Copperfield

⁶⁶ Bowles 51.

⁶⁷ Bowles 58.

⁶⁸ Bowles 62.

leaving the jungle on the bus, accompanied by only the three hysterical women at the back who ride around on the bus for fun, but who are going nowhere.

Mrs. Copperfield's decision to leave the jungle and her husband is a decision to go back to the hotel (to her nest), and to follow her desires. But when she returns, she finds that everything has changed, "Mrs. Copperfield was appalled at the turn of events"⁶⁹. While she had expected everything to be the same, she finds that the layers are peeling away and that these people are becoming exposed. Pacifica looks "tired" and worn out and Mrs. Quill looks "weaker than usual". Mrs. Copperfield tells herself, "The longer I live, the less I can foresee anything,"⁷⁰. She is unable to rely on others to make her happy, not even in her nest, so she tries to solve this problem by getting drunk. "At a certain point, gin takes everything off your hands and you flop around like a little baby". Alcohol is a buffer that removes Mrs. Copperfield's responsibility for being in control of herself, but is it not also a way of letting go? If it is an attempt, it is false, in the same way that Mrs. Copperfield's early attempts at individuation were false. She says,

*"Le bonheur...what an angel a happy moment is—and how nice not to have to struggle too much for inner peace! I know that I shall enjoy certain moments of gaiety, willy-nilly. No one among my friends speaks any longer of character—and what interests us most, certainly, is finding out what we are like"*⁷¹.

For Mrs. Copperfield, even happiness becomes something that she has no control over—she just expects happy moments to come no matter what. This idea echoes Whitman's belief that true happiness is never a product of control or cause: "I merely stir, press, feel with my fingers, and I am happy"⁷². Mrs. Copperfield tries not to "struggle for

⁶⁹ Bowles 70.

⁷⁰ Bowles 71.

⁷¹ Bowles 71.

⁷² Whitman 176.

inner peace” by drinking, in an attempt to be freer like Pacifica. But Mrs. Copperfield is not a “Whitmanesque hero” like Pacifica (who seems to possess a Whitman-like self-sufficiency), because she does not have the capacity to “let go”; she is always consumed by dread. Mrs. Copperfield may seem like she does not care about anything, but she is actually making a huge choice when she leaves her husband in Panama. She decides to do what she wants—to follow her desire. Even if doing so means throwing away her responsibility as a wife, she is serious in her choice to be shielded and to find her nest. She says Pacifica is lovable because “she takes everyone quite seriously”⁷³, but is not this “lovableness” also what Mrs. Copperfield is trying to accomplish? She wants to be “serious” by being individuated—a person who knows herself, and yet her dread of the unknown keeps her from truly pursuing her ideal. Instead, she goes through a series of false attempts, which are centered on her own desires without a real concern for integrating her personality and discovering any sort of self-reliance.

Perhaps Mrs. Copperfield’s only true attempt at individuation occurs when Pacifica and Mrs. Copperfield go to the beach. It is the moment Mrs. Copperfield decides to go in the water with Pacifica (after saying no to her husband) that something changes. She has “a great fear of drowning” and she cannot swim, but she goes into the water anyway, almost in spite of her dread, to participate in a baptism scene similar to the opening scene in the novel,

Mrs. Copperfield looked around wildly, but she obeyed, and floated on her back with only the support of Pacifica’s open hand under her head to keep her from sinking. She could see her own narrow feet floating on top of the water⁷⁴.

⁷³ Bowles 58.

⁷⁴ Bowles 97.

In this instant, Mrs. Copperfield finds the ability to see herself. Pacifica supports her, but she floats on her own and she does not see Pacifica at this point; she sees herself. This moment is consequential for Mrs. Copperfield's self-awareness. She realizes what she wants in life and she also makes the final decision to leave her husband,

Mrs. Copperfield felt happy and sick at once. She turned her face and in doing so she brushed Pacifica's heavy stomach with her cheek. She held on hard to Pacifica's thigh with the strength of years of sorrow and frustration in her hand.

"Don't leave me," she called out⁷⁵.

For Mrs. Copperfield, being protected in the water by Pacifica, as if in an amniotic, womb-like state is the ultimate love experience for her. This is not a sexy love scene, with Pacifica's "heavy thighs", pubic hair "hanging between her legs" and cold sores, but one where Mrs. Copperfield is able to let out all of the built up anxiety and bottled up dread that she has felt for so long over living for other people and not for herself. If anything this scene is maternal; Mrs. Copperfield is able to give voice to her fear of abandonment with the words, "Don't leave me". In many ways, this scene is a fulfillment of Mrs. Copperfield's mannequin dream. She is being protected and shielded by Pacifica; she has found the "remembrance of an old dream" that she was looking for.

The image of the beach scene can be observed as another version of Christina's baptism scene at the beginning of the novel. Just as Christina's attempt at baptism/rebirth was impossible because she tried to baptize herself through another person, so, in all probability, is Mrs. Copperfield's attempt. Here the novel suggests that individuation is impossible if the developing person wants only to become totally dependent on the person she uses as a catalyst. The beach scene raises many questions about Mrs.

⁷⁵ Bowles 97.

Copperfield as to whether or not she has become individuated. If individuation is an ongoing process, then she has taken a step towards becoming individuated, but her plan has one flaw: she has neglected to separate herself from Pacifica, to shift the focus from others to the self.

The attempted rebirth at the beach leads Mrs. Copperfield to recall her mannequin dream that reoccurred often in her life and embodies everything that she has been repressing. It starts with Mrs. Copperfield being chased uphill by a dog. She is running away from something, but it is soon forgotten when she reaches the top of the hill and sees the mannequin,

At the top of the hill there stood a few pine trees and a mannequin about eight feet high. She approached the mannequin and discovered her to be fashioned out of flesh, but without life. Her dress was of black velvet, and tapered very narrow at the hem. Mrs. Copperfield wrapped one of the mannequin's arms tightly around her own waist. She was startled by the thickness of the arm and very pleased. The mannequin's other arm she bent upward from the elbow with her free hand. Then the mannequin began to sway backwards and forwards. Mrs. Copperfield clung all the more tightly to the mannequin and together they fell off the top of the hill and continued rolling for quite a distance until they landed on a little walk, where they remained in each other's arms. Mrs. Copperfield loved this part of the dream best; and the fact that all the way down the hill the mannequin acted as a buffer between herself and the broken bottles and little stones over which they fell gave her particular satisfaction⁷⁶.

This is the definitive dream for Mrs. Copperfield of being shielded and protected by someone else. In fleeing dread she finds "particular satisfaction" not feeling life's bumps and bruises, but letting someone else feel them for her. Her failure to integrate frightening things and to personally take part in things that she is afraid of means that she is unable to

⁷⁶ Bowles 98.

move towards individuation and freedom from dread. Also, she imagines the other person not as being fully human but, rather, inanimate.

The dream and the scene at the beach end with the sun's rays "directly in line" with Pacifica, who is swimming alone. The sun keeps Mrs. Copperfield from seeing Pacifica and so she falls asleep, which raises questions about Mrs. Copperfield's ability to see Pacifica for who she really is. If Pacifica is directly in line with the sun, she is aligned with individuation. Mrs. Copperfield cannot see this about her; she does not understand that Pacifica is not a flesh mannequin, but a human being that cannot be controlled.

Because of her experience of attempted individuation with Pacifica, Mrs. Copperfield finally allows herself the power to make a choice: she chooses freedom as a form of following her desire,

Mrs. Copperfield started to tremble after the girl had closed the door behind her. She trembled so violently that she shook the bed. She was suffering as much as she had ever suffered before, because she knew she was going to do what she wanted to do. She knew that it would not make her happy, because only the dreams of crazy people come true. She thought that she was only interested in duplicating a dream, but in doing so she necessarily became the complete victim of a nightmare⁷⁷.

Mrs. Copperfield realizes that she must make a choice for herself. Individuation is not an easy process and does not necessarily lead to happiness. Her choice is not an end to suffering. I see Mrs. Copperfield as choosing self-direction at this point—she chooses to do what she wants to do, but she satisfies a small desire and does not initiate a search for individuation. Mrs. Copperfield is not crazy because she can now see that her actions will hurt others and that she was much crazier to stay with a man who she did not want to be

⁷⁷ Bowles 107.

with. She wanted to live in a dream, but she now realizes that the dream can only be possible with a flesh mannequin; you cannot control others, so you are always at the risk of a nightmare. It is fitting that when Mrs. Copperfield tells her husband that she is not leaving with him, he calls her a "horror", smashes a pitcher out the window onto the street and then leaves⁷⁸. He says "horror", not "whore". Mr. Copperfield is horrified at his wife's inability to deal with life, to take her dream to the point that it obsesses her and to allow it to ruin everything that they have together. The smashing of the pitcher out the window marks the disintegration, not only of their relationship, but also of Mrs. Copperfield, who starts to crumble. Her rejection of Mr. Copperfield for Pacifica is not a question of sexual preference, but of protection, which seems to have become an obsession for her. Mr. Copperfield, who believes in "never reassuring his wife" and in "[giving] her fears their just due"⁷⁹, does not have the ability to protect her or to empathize with her the way she feels Pacifica does. In the end, Mrs. Copperfield's dependence on Pacifica may be compared to "bad faith" in existentialist philosophy. As Jean-Paul Sartre explains,

Bad faith [is] a lie to oneself within the unity of a single consciousness. Through bad faith a person seeks to escape the responsible freedom of Being-for-itself. Bad faith rests on a vacillation between transcendence and facticity which refuses to recognize either one for what it really is or to synthesize them.⁸⁰

Mrs. Copperfield can be said to exhibit a kind of "bad faith" because of her willingness to sacrifice everything to find a nest, yet at the same time, she seems to also be happy in her ability to make her own decisions.

⁷⁸ Bowles 108.

⁷⁹ Bowles 39.

⁸⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956) 800.

PACIFICA

Not only is Pacifica Mrs. Copperfield's "pacifier", she is also a model of healthiness and a reasonably successful model of individuation. The name "Pacifica" means "peace" and is associated with water; Pacifica's relationship to the ocean and water suggests someone who has been baptized and hearkens back to the opening of the novel. When she and Mrs. Copperfield go to the beach, Pacifica unashamedly strips down and goes into the water. For her, water is associated with freedom and life, with an acceptance of the body. It does not represent for her any of the dread that it does for Mrs. Copperfield. Pacifica is not searching for an authentic self; she seems to know who she is—she is centered in herself and relatively free from paranoiac dread—and she accepts her life the way it is. She is not inert but imaginatively engaged with her life-world.

If one of the questions raised in the novel is, "what is a state of non-dread?" then Pacifica seems to have found the answer: peace. She talks about how she equates true beauty with a lack of worry and she never seems to really worry too much about anything. She always lives in the moment and holds herself responsible for her own actions. She seems to believe in a God of some kind, but she has none of the inner struggle that Christina has because she is peaceful.

Pacifica talks about the American who would take her to a store to buy her things in a big hurry because he was so afraid of being caught by his wife and would say, "Quick, quick, pick anything you want but be in a hurry about it"⁸¹. She says it was terrible and that she always went "so crazy". For her, the idea of unlimited possibility summons the threat of craziness. Pacifica compares herself to being a caged bird; she has

⁸¹ Bowles 47.

the capability of seeing what life means for her, she does not have a hubristic notion of self-liberation; she understands humans are limited. Pacifica is *aware* and her awareness makes her responsible for her actions. Pacifica also talks a lot about how she is against men who have unrealistic ideals,

“The damn boats. When they tell me they just want to go around the world all their life on a boat I tell them: ‘You don’t know what you’re missing. I’m through with you, boy.’ I don’t like them when they are like that”⁸².

Pacifica seems to have a problem with people who are unrealistic about life and she is opposed to wandering because in the discourse of the novel she knows who she is. Pacifica is like a house, grounded and safe within herself.

Surprisingly, Pacifica does not play a large part in the novel. As the model of successful individuation, she is one of the least talked about characters. Even Christina, who meets her at the end of the novel, has little interest in her. Christina’s impression of Pacifica is perplexing: “Pacifica reminded her of Miss Gamelon although certainly Pacifica was a much nicer person and more attractive physically”⁸³. If Christina sees Miss Gamelon as “the embodiment of all evil”⁸⁴, where is the similarity? Could it be that what Pacifica provides for Mrs. Copperfield reminds her of what she had with Miss Gamelon? The question becomes, then, why does Bowles lose interest in Pacifica? It seems to be because Pacifica’s peace is unattainable. Pacifica can relate to others, she is a model of healthiness. For her it is simple—just let go, but this model does not require a journey. If anything, Pacifica seems unoriginal in comparison to Bowles’s other creations, “unoriginal” being the greatest insult that could be brandished to one of her characters. Even Harriet from “Camp Cataract” says, “I *am* original...not like my

⁸² Bowles 49.

⁸³ Bowles 200.

⁸⁴ Bowles 115.

sisters...oddly enough I don't even seem to belong socially to the same class as my sisters do. I am somehow—more fashionable"⁸⁵, an echo of Bowles's own epitaph in her friend's book "You asked me to write in your book, I scarcely know how to begin, for there's nothing original about me, but a little original sin"⁸⁶. While Bowles's interest lies in the nature of the self in the world and the ideal of individuation, her focus on "original sin" means that the attempts and the struggles along the road are more important than the final finished product. What makes her characters original is precisely their sin and Pacifica feels none of the dread associated with sinning that "the ladies" do. Pacifica is an ideal; she represents the goal of all the characters in the novel and her sincere feelings and caring attitude towards Mrs. Copperfield could be seen to symbolize a vision of a truly empathetic individual.

THE OTHER LADIES

Miss Gamelon, the first character that Christina joins herself with, comes to represent a very different view of life from that of the two ladies. In many ways, her relationship with Christina can be compared to Mrs. Copperfield and Pacifica's. As far as Miss Lucy Gamelon is concerned,

"I always believe that you get your warning. Some people don't heed their warnings. That's when they come into conflict. I think anything you feel strange or nervous about, you weren't cut out to do"⁸⁷.

Miss Gamelon does not seem to have any belief in free will or even in self-discovery. She believes in a religion of "warnings", of an omnipresent God who controls man's will,

⁸⁵ Bowles 364.

⁸⁶ Dillon, *Original Sin* 7.

⁸⁷ Bowles 10.

who should not be tested. For Miss Gamelon, Christina's plan to "try and work out her idea of salvation" interferes with God. She tells Christina,

There are certain people who turn peace from the door as though it were a red dragon breathing fire out of its nostrils and there are certain people who won't leave God alone either"⁸⁸.

Miss Gamelon represents an attitude of determinism; the self is "fated". She believes that peace is "not asking questions" and leaving God alone and that you simply are who you are (who God made you to be). She closes off her sight in this manner, refusing to question who she is and what she does. She never questions her decision to move in with Christina and to continue on with her to the shack, even when she is miserable, because she probably believes that it is "God's plan" and that she has no other choice.

Miss Gamelon says she is interested in the finer things in life, but these "finer things" do not include anything "serious". Life becomes "gloomier than Miss Gamelon had expected it would be, since she hadn't much imagination, and reality was often more frightening to her than her wildest dreams"⁸⁹. She is unable to "see", to use the imagination that free will allows her. Immediately, a connection is made between Miss Gamelon and Mrs. Copperfield, who "hated to know what was around her, because it always turned out to be even stranger than she had feared"⁹⁰. Miss Gamelon's presence in the novel helps us to see the degree of difficulty that Mrs. Copperfield must undergo in her own self-confrontation. Christina sees Miss Gamelon as "the embodiment of all evil", but still helps her and consoles her when she becomes the unwitting victim of Arnold's violence. When Miss Gamelon is hit she feels dread for the first time:

⁸⁸ Bowles 31.

⁸⁹ Bowles 112.

⁹⁰ Bowles 59.

The more she thought about it, the more serious it became in her mind, and while she stood in front of the house she was suddenly frightened for the first time in her life. How far she had traveled from her home⁹¹.

It appears that all of Miss Gamelon's thoughts have been made physical. A fear suddenly exists in Miss Gamelon that was not there before and also the realization that she has changed without even meaning to; a change that is impossible to renege. For her, dread does not incite her to move forward; it does not wake her from her dream of innocence.

Dread instead pushes her towards becoming even more "safe" and conventional:

She felt that all of God's wrath had descended upon her own head. The world and the people in it had suddenly slipped beyond her comprehension and she felt in great danger of losing the whole world once and for all—a feeling that is difficult to explain⁹².

Miss Gamelon resembles Mrs. Copperfield in her lack of desire to take responsibility for her actions; she blames God and Christina for all of her trouble, but she never actually does anything to change her situation. The final chapter of the novel purposely begins with a focus on Miss Gamelon because of her similarity to Mrs. Copperfield, and Miss Gamelon also goes through a kind of metamorphosis in this novel. She starts out with a lot of ideas about her tastes and habits. She thinks she knows what she is getting into, and that she is safe because she is not at "their mercy" like Christina, but she undergoes drastic changes in the course of the story. She ends up in a relationship with Arnold, a man she hated, who calls her "Bubbles"⁹³ and lives a very ordinary, conventional life in a house with him. Although her lack of imagination remains unchanged and her attitude stays frigid, she moves from a very unconventional life with Christina, who she claimed she understood when she first met her, to a rather conventional life with Arnold, who

⁹¹ Bowles 115.

⁹² Bowles 116.

⁹³ Jane Bowles also called her husband Paul "Bubbles", as indicated in her letters to him in Millicent Dillon, *Out in the World* 38, 42 and 51, among others.

seems to be much easier for her to control. In the end, Miss Gamelon might be seen as representative of American middle-class, but more than anything, I see her simply as someone who has no interest in issues of self.

Mrs. Quill owns the Hotel de las Palmas and can be seen as almost a madam to the prostitutes that live there and epitomizes a total lack of self-reliance and the inability to experience. She is actually an extreme version of Mrs. Copperfield in many ways. She needs other people around her all the time, so much so that she lives in a hotel so that she is always surrounded by people: "Such an awful, dreadful, mean thing to be alone in the world even for a moment"⁹⁴. Dread rules her entire life and keeps her in a cocooned state, so that she rarely even leaves the hotel and when she does she is unable to function. In her only excursion outside of the hotel, Mrs. Copperfield must come and bail her out of the Hotel Washington, symbolic of Mrs. Quill's failure to fit into even conventional society because of her extreme dread that becomes essentially crippling. In this sense, Mrs. Quill can be seen as an alter ego of Mrs. Copperfield, who is in turn an alter ego of Christina.

Mrs. Quill is the owner of the hotel but she makes no money because she is completely ignorant of her "managerial duties". She says, "The fewer people that get involved, the better off everybody is. That's one law I have in this hotel."⁹⁵, but in fact she always wants to be involved with other people. Although she has lost interest in sex, she still wants a boyfriend to keep her company. Mrs. Copperfield sees that Mrs. Quill has built herself a nest and is moved by her perception of the nest to leave her husband and live at the hotel, "You sound so happy I have the feeling I'm going to nestle right in

⁹⁴ Bowles 89.

⁹⁵ Bowles 54.

here, in this hotel."⁹⁶ Mrs. Copperfield doesn't realize that Mrs. Quill is not happy; she is lonely and has to rely on other people to entertain her. Both Mrs. Quill and Mrs. Copperfield are completely sheltered and need to be taken care of. Mrs. Quill says, "I'm behaving just like a baby",⁹⁷ which echoes Mrs. Copperfield's desire, "Tonight I want to be a little baby".⁹⁸ Both Miss Gamelon and Mrs. Quill can be seen as models of fraudulent neediness. Neither of them have any interest in becoming individuated, nor do they know much about their real emotional needs. They cling to other people as a way of escaping the necessity of having to confront their selves and cannot even confront their own feelings of dread.

THE MEN

Arnold attracts Christina because of his boldness and "lack of decorum", two traits which seem to be suitable for Christina's quest to put herself into uncomfortable situations. In the beginning, Arnold seems to act apart from the standardized social conventions of the time and seems to represent an adventure into the unknown. Arnold could be seen to represent someone who feels the need to change, because it seems like the thing to do, but one who lacks the energy and self-knowledge to follow through with it. Christina's encounter with Arnold is an example of disconnection and separation from others that Bowles makes apparent in the novel. Christina was impressed with Arnold when she first met him because he was totally out of control in a way she admired, but she loses interest when he is unable to keep up his act. The charade of his personality quickly diminishes and he is revealed to be quite average and boring, unable to make any

⁹⁶ Bowles 56.

⁹⁷ Bowles 83.

⁹⁸ Bowles 71.

changes for himself, but is instead, lazy to the point of relying on anyone who is willing to take care of him.

Arnold also takes no responsibility for his violence towards Miss Gamelon. He blames her for hurting him by saying insulting things about him to Christina, but neither of them will leave the house and Christina is quite glad to have both of them around, almost in spite of their personalities. Arnold says, "The house gives me a certain amount of freedom", but this is a freedom from responsibility. Arnold refers to himself as an artist, but he has no imagination and his fraudulent attempts at individuation are meant to impress Christina and are usually copies of what she has done. Arnold and Miss Gamelon are counter-models of people who need each other but still are not really being empathetic or truly imaginative. Arnold seems to fit Kierkegaard's model of a man who may be "perfectly well able to live on, to be a man, as it seems, to occupy himself with temporal things, get married, beget children, win honor and esteem—and perhaps no one notices that in a deeper sense he lacks a self"⁹⁹. If Mrs. Copperfield is a model of bad self-reliance, then Miss Gamelon and Arnold are models of fraudulent "neediness".

Arnold's father is a man who believes in "serious hating", whose life's ambition has always been "to be a notch higher on the tree than his neighbors" and says he is "used to fighting".¹⁰⁰ He thinks that his son, and people like him, are inferior because "nothing ever begins or finishes with them and because they aim to please and be pleased." Arnold's father is also "a great believer in personal experience". In the beginning, he exemplifies self-determination and can be seen as a man who has fought for himself and his own identity, even if it is "a strange doctrine," as Christina says. Her attraction to

⁹⁹ Kierkegaard, *Death* 165.

¹⁰⁰ Bowles 25.

Arnold's father is not a sexual one, but an attraction to the strength of his personality and his fearlessness. She is attracted to the amount of self-directedness he seems to possess.

But even Arnold's father undergoes a sort of metamorphosis in the course of the novel. He comes to Christina's shack after leaving his wife, but his attitude is quite changed from when Christina first met him. He says he wants to return to his "boyish tastes," to go back to nature, but what he really wants is for Christina to be by his side so he can be totally dependent on her: "It involves you being a true woman. Sympathetic and willing to defend all that I say and do. At the same time prone to scolding me just a little".¹⁰¹ He wants her to be a stereotypical woman, to be a (replacement) wife and mother figure, and he attempts to coerce her into another conventional mode of behavior. Christina is not willing to be a caregiver to anyone. She has no interest at all in mothering any of the men she comes across and seems to be looking for someone who does not have to depend on her. She is disappointed in Arnold's father's sudden change. She admired him more when he didn't care what others thought and when he called himself a fighter. Now, he seems as lost and confused as everyone else. He says of his wife, "she will live, providing she is willing to leave everything behind her as I have done".¹⁰²

By the end of the novel, the fighter has given up, he has settled because he is tired, which disappoints Christina greatly. After Christina reads the letter he has written to his wife she asks him, "Is that what you felt?" Arnold's father answers, "I believe so. It must have been"¹⁰³. He doesn't know how he feels anymore. The letter that Arnold's

¹⁰¹ Bowles 120.

¹⁰² Bowles 123.

¹⁰³ Bowles 181.

father wrote his wife asking to come home could also be compared with Mr. Copperfield's letter to his wife. Arnold's father says,

I can only say that there is, in every man's life, a strong urge to leave his life behind him for a while and seek a new one. If he is living near to the sea, a strong urge to take the next boat and sail away no matter how happy his home or how beloved his wife or mother¹⁰⁴.

Mr. Copperfield also talks about boats: "For God's sake, a ship leaving port is still a wonderful thing to see"¹⁰⁵. While Mr. Copperfield's letter is about hope keeping you stagnant, Arnold's father has completely lost hope, and uses the boat as an excuse for why he left. The boat theme is very interesting in this novel because everyone seems to be always talking about boats, from Pacifica and her dislike of sailors who are not "grounded", to Meyer who loves living on a boat, to Christina and the ferry that represents a crossing over into her inner self, to Arnold's father who compares himself to a young man on an adventure.

Arnold's father always goes by the name of "Arnold's father," rather than his actual name Edgar because he is an extension of Arnold himself; both father and son are trying to change, but for both change is impossible. Change is not as easy as it seems, nor is it even possible for most people. Immediately following Arnold's father's letter to his wife, Christina reads Arnold's letter to her, which also sounds dejected, but makes Christina less annoyed because he had never been a fighter the way his father had. This novel persistently suggests that people need to abandon everything in order to live, but Arnold's father is unable to succeed; he can be identified as more of a model of someone who is "beaten down", then someone who has gone on a journey. He may have wanted

¹⁰⁴ Bowles 181.

¹⁰⁵ Bowles 111.

to be free of other people, but his desire was neither for self-reliance, nor even self-knowledge, but for a mere change of scenery. He chooses conventionality because he is afraid of real individuation. He is physically still a child. The novel suggests that self-discovery, self-reliance and self-knowledge are goals equated with adulthood.

Andy represents the first experience that Christina has when she leaves her shack. Andy is outside the norm of “dependent children”, like Miss Gamelon and Arnold and becomes for Christina another test and attempt at baptism. If Christina’s goal is to conquer “dread”, then it makes sense to find someone more dreadful than she has previously known. Unfortunately, Andy turns out to be much less frightening than he first appeared at the bar. He calls himself “Citizen Skunk”¹⁰⁶ and tells Christina about the midget who gave him syphilis. His obsession with a midget is also an obsession with total control over someone else who is dependent on him (like Mrs. Copperfield’s mannequin), but even Andy can’t have total control—hence the syphilis! Andy is a man who also feels completely beaten down by life, but through his own actions. When Andy propositions Christina, she thinks not about Andy’s attractiveness to her, but of how he fits into her own scheme,

She was thinking of this very seriously because she suspected that were she to accept Andy’s offer it would be far more difficult for her to put a stop to her excursions, should she feel so disposed¹⁰⁷.

Christina has more concern with the implications of sleeping with Andy, than with Andy himself. His character makes no difference to her; she considers him because he is “disagreeable”, possibly “dangerous” and has a way of talking to her, which makes her feel “inconsequential”. A relationship with him will force her to make more frequent

¹⁰⁶ Bowles 152.

¹⁰⁷ Bowles 154.

trips to the island and continue her journey. This is not about sex or love, or even attraction for Christina—it is about salvation.

After only eight days, Andy improves and no longer thinks of himself as a bum, thanks to Christina, “This would have pleased her greatly had she been interested in reforming her friends, but unfortunately she was only interested in the course that she was following in order to attain her own salvation”¹⁰⁸. As in the case with Arnold’s father, Christina has no intention of taking care of anyone and is only trying to pursue her own salvation. We are each one of us alone, and must do what is necessary for ourselves.

The scene with Andy and the businessmen is also important because it illustrates how you cannot return once you have “been in the mud”, to being the kind of person you were before. The men laugh at Andy and they do not take him seriously; he loses language and realizes that he is totally out of his league, but he has hope. Is it the loss of hope that makes him feel better, or is it that he is beaten down again and relieved that he does not have to participate in life?

When Christina tells Andy she is leaving, he tries to make her responsible for what she’s doing to him, but she refuses to be responsible for anyone else. “I am merely working out something for myself.” He tells her, “You have no right to. You’re not alone in the world!”¹⁰⁹ But isn’t she? Aren’t we all? This is where the question comes into play of how much do we really owe other people? How can we somehow balance being true to ourselves with also being involved with other people and what responsibility do we have to others, especially when it means sacrificing what we want to do?

¹⁰⁸ Bowles 172.

¹⁰⁹ Bowles 188.

Andy threatens to put Christina to shame, but she has no sense of shame because she is doing what she wants to do. Andy even calls her crazy and monstrous and says that she is committing a "monstrous act"¹¹⁰. Christina is only monstrous though because she is doing what she wants rather than taking care of him

Ben can be seen as Andy's replacement and a further step lower on the rung of dangerous and frightening men. Christina's attraction to Ben lies in the fact that he seems "unfamiliar", is of "mammoth proportions" and drives a car that looks like a hearse.¹¹¹ Does the man with the "hearse car" represent death? There is something very "Dickinsonian" about Ben that seems familiar! When Christina finally meets him, he accuses her of being a prostitute and takes no real interest in her whatsoever. "You look like a prostitute and that's what you are. I don't mean a real small-time prostitute. I mean a medium one"¹¹². Isn't she also surrendering herself to something the way a prostitute does? Even as she is trying to convince him that he is wrong, he is already running his foot up her leg!

Ben's attitude seems to be, "Do whatever the hell you want,"¹¹³ as he tells Christina. Has he achieved the state of being able to do whatever he wants without the need for others? Ben's individuality is not necessarily "Thoreau-ian". Perhaps he is best seen as a shadow side of self-reliance and a symbol for Christina to test her freedom from dread. He tells Christina, "I hope you understand that we won't go dancing or any nonsense. I can't stand what people call fun". When Christina objects, saying she enjoys

¹¹⁰ Bowles 188.

¹¹¹ Similarly, Jane says, after first meeting her then to be husband Paul, "He wrote music and was mysterious and sinister. The first time I saw him I said to a friend: He's my enemy" Dillon, *A Little Original Sin* 38. Christina also complains that Andy has become "devoid of anything sinister". Bowles 173.

¹¹² Bowles 185.

¹¹³ Bowles 189.

those things, he answers her by yawning and she realizes, "He's never going to listen to me"¹¹⁴.

If Mrs. Copperfield is an inverted mirror image of Christina, then Meyer seems to be a mirror image of Ben. Meyer almost breaks down Pacifica's door so he can sleep with her and then goes crazy about how he doesn't care about her house and how a boat is better than a house any day¹¹⁵. He wants Pacifica for sex, and has no concern for her feelings, only his own needs. Meyer represents the opposite of Pacifica, who is grounded to houses, to other people and to notions of realism. He lives in a boat, drifting around from place to place, with no commitments or responsibility, only caring about himself. He is completely self-sufficient to the point that he is uncontrollable and can only relate to others with anger and violence. But his self-sufficiency doesn't make him evil; his self-reliance is marred by blindness to other people. Similar to Ben, Meyer represents Bowles's belief that self-reliance must not include this kind of childish, abrasive egomaniacal behavior. Meyer buys independence at the stiff price of losing the ability to love or harbor a capacity for empathy within him.

Mr. Copperfield can be seen to epitomize the complete opposite of his wife. He is a man with no memory. In contrast to his wife who shields herself from the sun, Mr. Copperfield is not afraid to venture out, to be in control, or to make his own decisions. Yet we must also note that the novel never presents him as an object worthy of emulation. The novel may to some degree approve of his attitude of self-reliance but the novel does not approve of his failure to see other people, especially his wife. If Mr. Copperfield is a model of self-reliance he is also in some way a model of failure – failure

¹¹⁴ Bowles 191.

¹¹⁵ Bowles 52.

to engage other humans at a level of imagination and empathy. He has no understanding of his wife and he lacks the ability to imagine others' "insides". The relationship ends with Mr. Copperfield's letter to his wife, in which there are more so-called rules, which he hopes will influence her,

I do not advise you to spend your life surrounding yourself with those things which you term necessary to your existence, regardless of whether or not they are objectively interesting in themselves or even to your own particular intellect¹¹⁶.

He objects to the idea of Mrs. Copperfield surrounding herself with anything, because he sees how it leads to a repetitive life full of pain and suffering. He also talks about "hope" when he warns her not to spend her life "fleeing from her first fear to her first hope". But is he not in essence trying to force her into his own ideal of individuation?

In the end, the characters' presence as "seeing selves" becomes the true measure of their advance. Even if what is seen is horribly less than they hoped for, there is a sense of movement that is growth only attained by the process of individuation. Their successes and failures, their attempts, both fraudulent and real, shape the novel as a quest to understanding the nature of the self in the world. As a competing discourse involving individuation and dread, the novel problematizes many of the accepted ideals the 20th century views of the self.

¹¹⁶ Bowles 110.

Conclusion

It has been said of *Two Serious Ladies* that the novel's narrative does not move forward and that the characters are not equipped with any ability to change¹. The novel begins with a parody ritual: Christina, in the mud, attempting to baptize herself and it ends with another ritual, in this case a ritual of repeated abandonment in an attempt to be saved from suffering, but it is important to realize that at the end of the novel, Christina is not back where she started. She has gone through a spiral; she has forced herself to take on experience, to open her self up to possibility, and to gain a new perspective she did not possess before. Christina *has* moved forward—even though her progression is into a new and complicated world. In many ways her struggle can be compared to the film entitled *La Strada*, where the main character Zampano emerges from the ocean baptized, aware and in pain. For both characters, their awareness does not mean an end to suffering, but rather it is just the beginning. While Christina has managed to free herself from dread, as an empathetic person, she will still be vulnerable to pain.

At the end of the novel, Christina becomes aware through a loss of hope. What she gains, as she stands alone on the road in the final scene, is the ability to “see,” her own sort of pink blanket or coverlet. Do you need to lose something to become something more? Andy told her, “you can have some fun in the mud though, if you just accept a seat in it, instead of trying to squirm around”,² you can find happiness if you accept the body as part of being human, as Whitman does, instead of worrying about a separate and holy soul. The idea is to not hold oneself as separate; individuation entails openness to relationship since there is nothing to fear or lose. The reference to the mud

¹ Kazin, *The Bright Book of Life* 177.

² Bowles 152.

not only echoes the opening scene where Christina rolls around in the mud with Mary, but it also represents another attempt by Christina to experience dirtiness as a positive stage in self-discovery. The object of the quest is to fall, to become a person who is aware of her feelings of dread, to then lose oneself by letting go of all of the social conventions and memories that keep you from confronting your fears and from there, to find glory in the mud by accepting death, giving you a new ability to see yourself as an individuated person.

In the final scene of the novel when Mrs. Copperfield and Christina meet, Mrs. Copperfield seems more hysterical than ever before. While Mrs. Copperfield says she is completely satisfied and contented, she also admits that she feels worried because she can't allow "anything to happen that she doesn't want to happen". She tries desperately to hold onto what she abandoned all else for, "I can't live without her. Not even for a minute. I'd go completely to pieces".³ Christina tells Mrs. Copperfield: "But you have gone to pieces", which makes Mrs. Copperfield go hysterical,

"I have gone to pieces, which is a thing I've wanted to do for years. I know I'm as guilty as can be, but I have my happiness which I guard like a wolf, and I have authority now and a certain amount of daring I never had before"⁴.

For Mrs. Copperfield, her "daring" and her happiness are now associated with controlling someone else, Pacifica, whom she completely depends on. She says she has authority, meaning that she has gained a "certain amount" of freedom because she is doing what she wants, rather than worrying about the rules and conforming to what everyone else thinks. Her guilt comes from her failure to become a unified persona; she has gone to pieces and

³ Bowles 197.

⁴ Bowles 197.

has become a totally fragmented person who has let her obsession with Pacifica take over. Mrs. Copperfield has lost control, along with the nest she dreamed of. Christina used to admire Mrs. Copperfield's suffering; she tells her that she remembers her as being shy but "very courageous" for living with Mr. Copperfield, but she does not admire the new Mrs. Copperfield and her surrender to her desires, without any care for anyone else. Mrs. Copperfield says to Christina,

"You will contend that all people are of equal importance, but although I love Pacifica very much, I think it is obvious that I am more important"⁵.

Christina feels repulsed by Mrs. Copperfield's lack of empathy, and her inability to keep herself under control, but the women have gained a new perspective of each other and of themselves, that they never had before. If Mrs. Copperfield has not completely fulfilled her quest to become individuated, at the very least she *has* taken steps towards her own self-direction, has gained "a certain amount of freedom" and has succeeded in confronting her fear, even if it has in the process made her "the complete victim of a nightmare"⁶.

In Christianity, salvation of a person or her spirit is the state of being saved from evil and its effects by the death of Jesus Christ on a cross. Salvation is achieved by confronting death. If Christina christens herself God in the beginning, her attempt includes trying to suffer, to lose hope, and to confront death in order to redeem herself from her sins. She tries to save herself from dread by suffering, but it isn't until Death/Ben leaves her that she is able to really see. If Ben, with his "mammoth

⁵ Bowles 198.

⁶ Bowles 107.

proportions”, his “frightening face”⁷, his car that resembled a “hearse”, and his lack of respect for others, represents death for Christina, then her growth is a success because she has faced him and survived. Christina has confronted her finite existence and she has let go of the shame of her body.

Christina reflects, “Certainly I am nearer to becoming a saint, but is it possible that a part of me hidden from my sight is piling sin upon sin as fast as Mrs. Copperfield?”⁸ To become a “saint”—an individuated person in a post-transcendentalist world—she has to be in contact with all of humanity, to understand the connections that all people need to be alive. Whether she is sinning seems to be of “considerable interest”, but is ultimately of “no great importance” to her. Christina discovers individuation through creativity, which allows her to “control her irrational fears and exorcise them,”⁹ and she has gained the ability to see. John Clellon Holmes makes a statement about *On the Road* that is also applicable to *Two Serious Ladies*. He says that the characters were actually “on a quest, and that the specific object of their quest was spiritual. Though they rushed back and forth across the country on the slightest pretext, gathering kicks along the way, their real journey was inward; and if they seemed to trespass most boundaries, legal and moral, it was only in the hope of finding a belief on the other side”.¹⁰ What Christina finds is, in the context of the twentieth century, a “very special” kind of belief: a belief in herself, in her capacity to submit to experience and grow.

⁷ Bowles 172.

⁸ Bowles 201.

⁹ Skerl 5.

¹⁰ John Clellon Holmes, introduction, *On the Road*, by Jack Kerouac (New York: Penguin, 1991) xxx.

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