Chapter Seven
The Art of Storytelling

The artistic expression of a short story has its aesthetic value enhanced not merely by the subject matter but also by the narratological methods and modes employed effectively in telling the story persuasively. Though Audrey Thomas writes mostly about the lives and relationships of contemporary women (with Thomas included as one of them) she has undoubtedly mastered the art of storytelling. Thomas has used autobiography, nameless characters projected as types rather than individuals, identical experience narrated in different contexts with remarkable difference in attitude, artistic purpose and approach avoiding repetitiveness, boredom and unpleasantness, stories within stories, fairy tales and so on. The research will be incomplete if this art of storytelling is not understood while comprehending the content because mere content cannot make a narration a valuable piece of literature. Therefore, this chapter is felt as a need to prove that the stories of Thomas are not mere social documents but literary expressions of contemporary lives.

Autobiography is one mode which the writer has used to attain fulfillment. The structural principle of Thomas’ fiction is one in which the psychological patterns take precedence over the aesthetic or self consciously formal patterns. The experience in them is, in merely physical terms, limited and largely repetitious; it also runs a close parallel to Thomas’ own life. Much critical attention has been paid to the autobiographical elements in Thomas’ writing. Most critics have commented on the common backgrounds Thomas’ main characters share with one another and with the author. Anthony Boxill, in a 1972 review of Thomas’ first three books, observes the similar backgrounds of characters and concludes somewhat tentatively that “One always has the feeling that Audrey Thomas’ fiction is
substantially autobiographical” (116). Constance Rooke, in the Dictionary of Literary Biography, states more confidently that “Audrey Thomas’ fiction is largely and conspicuously autobiographical” (334). In his Reader's Guide to the Canadian Novel, John Moss says, “Thomas writes autobiographical fiction” and that she does little to conceal it (355).

Much of Thomas’ writing is indeed strongly autobiographical, a kind of continuing fictionalizes memoir, and she has never denied this. However, while acknowledging, that everybody writes autobiography, Thomas points out that such works are very much “contrived” and “blatantly made up.” Audrey Thomas’ own comments on the autobiographical nature of her work suggest that she is not particularly concerned about concealing those sources. “I really don’t know anyone as well as I know myself. I find it very presumptuous to write about other people” (Bowering, Songs 14). In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, she has commented:

Yes, I think everybody writes autobiography. I think everybody writes one story, has one thing that really interests them, and I suppose what really interests me is the relationship between men and women and how we lie to one another. (Room 58)

“All my novels are one novel,” Audrey Thomas once told an interviewer (Graham 106). The reader of Thomas’ novels and short stories quickly understands the author’s statement. The central characters in Thomas’ fiction – Mrs. Blood, Isobel Cleary, Isobel Carpenter, Rachel, Alice Hoyle, the often nameless protagonists of the short stories – all these women have similar biographies, such similar personalities, that one might almost be reading one woman’s life story. And when one looks at the biographical details of Audrey
Thomas’ life, which is so closely parallel to those of her characters, it is almost inevitably concluded that what one reads is the story of one woman’s life i.e., Audrey Thomas’ autobiography. As Butling rightly argues in his essay “Thomas and her Rag-Bag,” Thomas’ use of autobiographical details in her short stories allows her to create female characters that are more real than those of other women writers in that they resist falling into paradigmatic female categories (195). The story of her protagonists’ transformation becomes the authors’ own transformation. As Eleanor Wachtel puts it in “The Guts of Mrs. Blood,” several of the stories “portray the internally consistent life of a character usually named Isobel, a woman who has much in common with her creator” (4). Indeed Thomas herself has commented that “Isobel is an exaggeration, me to the nth power” (5).

Audrey Thomas, being an autobiographical writer, employs first person narrative and her stories are experimental. She substitutes for a conventional omniscient narrator or standard first person focus of narration an elusive narrative which shifts perspective, truncates, juxtaposes, parodies, catalogues, and employs various other devices. As a result, one comes to know the main character not by her actions and accomplishments but by the quality of her perceptions and by her facility with words themselves. Time and again in her novels and short stories the same main character and circumstances lie revealed before us, splayed in a variety of voices and disguises that do little to conceal their common source outside the text, i.e., the author’s life. Not that Thomas herself is an open book: it may or may not be that she lives her life to write about it. But that is how it seems – and ‘seems,’ in fiction, is what is. Evident, as one moves from one of her story to another, is a consistency and continuity of facts, of characters and their backgrounds, of experiences, relationships, situations, and events, all of which belie invention. Names may change, details may vary, but
essentially, despite radical variations in form, the source of material remains the same. Since formal variants disallow the possibility that all are parts of a single larger work and since references and allusions are so often extraneous or virtually irrelevant to the narrative at hand, a common autobiographical source becomes the inescapable explanation for their presence.

Audrey Thomas once wrote an open letter to the Canadian poet Dorothy Livesay, in which she pointed out, “I do not write confessional novels nor, I think, novels that are at their heart, self-obsessed. I’m very interested in contemporary women because I happen to be one” (Room 71). Livesay had commented, in an interview, that writers like Thomas, who were exploring women’s issues, especially that of women’s powerlessness in society, were somehow singing a one-note song, and that they should really be writing about all human beings. This notion is a familiar one popping up in the minds of some readers at least; to write about women is to write about the marginalized, the frivolous or self-indulgent. And when the writer uses the details of her life as ingredients in her fiction, as Thomas does, this objection is compounded: how dare the writer use the novel or short story to thrash out her own problems? But, as a close survey of her fiction will reveal, Audrey Thomas is right; her stories are not mere repositories for confession, nor are they self-obsessed. Rather, they are glimpses into the obsessions and power struggles of contemporary lives and relationships.

Everything Thomas writes is a companion piece to everything else. More than most writers, she is constantly weaving and re-weaving, cross-referencing, overlapping, even repeating her materials. Her short stories and novels reinforce and echo each other. Thomas frequently relates an event in one of her novels or short stories which will appear again in a later story, with a few key details changed. Her short stories hint that the author herself is
aware of the need for exploration. Splitting and multiplying occurs in most of her works. “I often write a story and later – even years later – say to myself I am not finished with that, let’s open it up a bit more”, says the author (GHGL XVIII). That stories can be endlessly opened up is evident from the author’s re-working many of her short stories and transforming them into novels, such as, *Songs My mother Taught Me, Blown Figures, Mrs. Blood, Intertidal Life* and *Latakia.*

As Thomas herself admits, all her works is just one story. She says:

> Each one extends, in a different style, offering more information, from a different perspective, what is basically the same story. (Hofsess 17)

The worlds of two of the stories in *Ten Green Bottles*: that of the family portrayed in “Aunt Hettie and the Gates of the New Jerusalem” and that of the insane asylum in “Salon des refuses” is returned to in her novel *Songs my Mother Taught Me*. Isobel of the accomplished novel *Blown figures* appears again in *Ladies & Escorts*, but the prize sleepwalker here is the hippychild Caroline of “Rapunzel,” wandering alone through Africa doing a little vibe-collecting and sketching and keeping a journal in one of Thomas’ favourite languages, mirror-writing. The story “Elephants to Ride Upon” links the episode involving the ‘Woolsworth’s ring’ in *Blown Figures*. The protagonist’s relationship with Jason in the novel associates to the short story, allowing the novel’s portrayal of the tentative relationship of two lovers about to be married to amplify the earlier story. “Joseph and His Brother,” reintroduces the theme of madness from demonic possession, repeating a line from *Blown Figures* about madness resulting from sexual intercourse with a ghost. But as always with motifs or sentences repeated in Thomas’ work, the context changes. While the line about madness is offered as an explanation for Joseph’s brother’s fate after he has made love with a
strange woman, the same line in *Blown Figures* is devoid of all contexts, appearing all alone on an otherwise blank page. “Kill Day on the Government Wharf,” “Three Women and Two Men” and “Aquarius” work with issues raised in *Munchmeyer and Prospero on the Island*, exposing the fake pastoralism of the hippy retreat to the islands and exploring the relationships between the quality of an artist’s life and of his or her creations.

Confronting Barthes’ either/or logic of the “Death of the Author”, Thomas says “I don’t think our stories are over until the writer is dead and then they’re not over until the reader is dead . . .” (Wachtel, Fences 30). For Thomas, the repetition and splitting of characters, story, of similarities and differences, are ways of affirming life, and a mode of expressing her protagonists’ quest for fulfillment.

Thomas treats us, for example, to the Rachel and Michael affair once more in “Harry & Violet”; she alters significantly the tone and mood from *Latakia*. Memories, atleast in the world of art, are no longer preserved intact or mummified. As well, reference to Durell’s *The Alexandria Quartet* suggests that Thomas recognizes the advantages of viewing a single event from more than one perspective. As the protagonist of “Natural History” muses, “the trick was, of course, to try and get the right distance on everything” (RM 33). This technique can be disconcerting as her works are neither straightforward autobiography, nor a traditional fictional narrative which maintains the pretence of representing real experience literally. It is, instead, writing which deliberately destabilizes traditional narrativity. Even as Audrey Thomas fixes an experience in language, she reminds us that this transparent relationship of language to experience is an illusion.

“Writers are terrible liars,” begins one of Audrey Thomas’ short stories, where the speaker is herself a writer, tussling with the nature of art’s relationship to life (L&E 88). It is
worth bearing this caveat in mind as one reads Thomas’ stories, for it is tempting to interpret them only as thinly disguised autobiography, where the narrator, whatever she is named, speaks in the author’s own voice. The narrators of her novels and stories are indeed haunted by similar memories and concerns. Isobel’s obsessions and those of the unnamed narrator of some of her stories, centre on having been jilted by the first man she really loved, and on a prolonged miscarriage suffered in a Ghanaian hospital. Miranda/Rachel is a writer highly conscious of the complexities of her craft, desperate to communicate with the man she loves but finding neither words nor deeds adequate to break down the traditional attitudes to woman’s role. These characters struggle and endure in settings drawn from the author’s own environments: the New York State of her childhood, various parts of Europe and Africa where she has lived and travelled, and British Columbia where she now makes her home.

Audrey Thomas has acknowledged that writing about her own suffering is a form of therapy and that this very fact contributes to the strength of her work: “Going back over my own works, I reread my first ‘real’ story, real because it had to be written, it seemed to be the only way I could organize the horror and utter futility of a six-months long, drawn-out miscarriage in a hospital in Africa” (My Craft 153). This episode forms the basis not only of the early story “If One Green Bottle . . .” but of Thomas’ first novel, *Mrs. Blood* and the later work *Blown Figures*. It is understandable that so disturbing an experience has to be relived and interpreted more than once, hence in her novels and short stories, apparently identical episodes, characters and settings of not so traumatic a nature reappear. Being jilted, trying to lose one’s virginity, working in a mental hospital are among the experiences we encounter in similar form more than once, reworkings therapeutic for the author and her protagonists.
When one looks closely at all of Thomas’ fiction, it becomes apparent that the
episodes are not in fact repeated; each telling is in a different form or in a different
perspective and for a different artistic purpose, as a painter might give the same model in
different poses and colours. Whatever the origins in real life might have been, the
experiences are altered by their fictional contexts and it is the artistic shaping that gives them
universal significance. Rachel, the writer who narrates the novel *Latakia*, comments on the
need for such formal control in art. Looking at a friend’s painting she thinks, “Yes, the pain
is there and very real, but where is the organization? She is at the beginning of a long, long
road. . . .” (92). That is a road Audrey Thomas has travelled in her novels and short stories,
where the pain may be very real, with its origins in actual experience, but where it is
controlled and given meaning by fictional organization.

Although she seems to repeat herself, the echoes and re-explorations, in their totality,
form a rich and spooky view of life that is never cloying or boring, and reminds us that
Audrey Thomas is in the forefront of the very talented group of writers working on the West
Coast. This repetition of her materials denotes her perpetual quest for the self and its
fulfillment, a journey that is incessant.

Audrey Thomas’ autobiographical material and repeated storylines has allowed her to
conduct a very thorough exploration of herself, an exploration that has afforded her part, but
not all of the answer she is looking for. Any further exploration lies beyond herself – she
must leave autobiography for a new kind of writing, a new kind of investigation. Anne
Archer, in her article “Real Mummies,” presents a similar argument. She observes that
‘‘Thomas’ work is troublesome, because the recurrence of fixed motifs within one basic story
induces claustrophobia” (215). She sees Thomas’ characters as caught in a “vicious circle of self-reflection” and Thomas herself as plagued by “authorial myopia” (220).

The autobiographical impulse further complicates the one-plot syndrome. Though life provides the material of art, when a story partakes almost exclusively of autobiography, it seems that the tale runs the risk of either turning in on itself, the teller, or both. Jung observes, for instance, that “when a form of art is primarily personal it deserves to be treated as if it were a neurosis” (194). Undue repetition, in this context, may point to an obsession. It is the purely personal aspect of much of Audrey Thomas’ writing, coupled with her propensity to tell and retell a single story – to present us with a theme minus variations – that is both fascinating and problematic, fascinating, because of Thomas’ mastery of technique.

As Ken Adachi says in the cover of Two in the Bush and Other Stories, “Thomas . . . luxuriates in language, releasing . . . a torrent of crystalline words.”

The use of repeated stories and autobiographical material in Audrey Thomas’ writing draws the reader’s attention to the process of storytelling: how experience is translated into language and how we, in turn are shaped and defined by that language. Thomas’ fascination with language is evidenced in her use of puns and etymologies, as well as her persistent fascination with the act of storytelling.

Audrey Thomas employs fairy tales in the act of storytelling and uses them as another mode of expression in her characters’ quest for fulfillment. By parodying the fairy tales and its elements in her short stories, she confronts false romance scripts and false roles these necessitate. She rejects inherited myths, undercut traditional romance structures, and begins to re-envision the love story and to explode the quest. She creates new versions of romance which clarify her differing social visions. Thomas rests on the island of self. The deep-
rootedness of her gender identities pushes Thomas towards an affirmation of a woman’s experiential difference, and to the need for new versions of structure more appropriate to a heroine’s journey.

Bossanne, in her essay “Audrey Thomas and Lewis Carroll: Two Sides of the Looking Glass,” asserts that in Thomas’ writing, “one is forced to conclude that the path to order passes by the recognition of chaos (deconstructed fairy-tale), and constitutes the author’s deliberate ‘paradox’” (232). According to Bossanne, Thomas’ protagonists ultimately establish a clear definition of reality, going through a “corrective journey . . . in order to clear the character’s doubts as to the nature of reality” (218). Bossanne further suggests that Thomas’ ultimate intent is to present an image of harmony and order and in order for Thomas to perceive any such structure for reality, she would have to be external to the structure herself.

Thomas searches for scripts which validate the experience of her women characters. The traditional love story continues to be a script she envisions darkly, and Thomas often ironically creates a ‘romance noir’ version of such a script. She forsakes the traditional male quest for the apparent aimlessness of the heroine’s journey. Hence, in some of her stories she introduces direct or indirect fairy-tale allusions and parodies it by overturning their conventional implications. Narrative and patriarchal solemnity are both disrupted in “The Princess and the Zucchini” which parodies the traditional “The Princess and the Pea.” The conventional fairy tale expectations are set and are then subverted. As in the fairy tale, Thomas makes references to the thunderstorms, lightning and heavy rain. In the original tale the princess, in a completely worn out state, goes to the prince’s kingdom in want of a shelter, and claims herself to be a princess and is later put to test by the queen to prove that
she is a real princess. In Thomas’ story, the roles are reversed; as has been already discussed in the third chapter, it is the prince who comes to the princess’s kingdom to woo her. When he is turned into a Zucchini by a witch’s curse, he struggles to prove the princess that he is a real prince. Contrary to the fairy tale, the princess here has a name, ‘Zona’ and thereby an identity to establish herself. The traditional sexual symbolism is reversed as Zona, refusing to believe the happily ever after story of the prince, cooks him for dinner, thus voicing the incredulity of the fairytale tradition. Thus Thomas’ heroines reject the traditional ‘happily ever after’ of fairy tales, the domination of men over their lives, and the masculine code of behaviour for women, in favour of their own fantasies.

Audrey Thomas plays with the traditional notion of fairy tale. She adopts the fairy-tale structure only to dismantle it. “The Man with Clam Eyes” has references to the fairytale, “Little Mermaid.” Here too, she disrupts the traditional story and parodies it by reversing the roles of the mermaid and the prince. In the fairy tale, the mermaid longing to marry the prince of her dreams comes out of the sea and turns into a human. As opposed to the fairy tale, in Thomas’ story, as explicated in the fourth chapter, although the protagonist whimpers just like the mermaid in the fairy tale that she “cannot breathe in the water, I will drown, I have no helpful sisters. I do not know a witch” (GHGL 23), it is the merman who comes to rescue the protagonist and takes her with him by transforming her into a mermaid.

Audrey Thomas makes references to fairy tales in most of her stories to establish the fact that life is unlike a fairy tale and that there is no ‘happily-ever-after’ in real life. Not only does she attack fairy-tales by distorting them in the body of her prose, she also undoes them most skillfully by creating a structural contradiction to the principles inherently at work in fairy-tales. As Fiander notes in her book *Fairy Tales and the fiction of Iris Murdoch,*
Margaret Drabble, and A.S. Byatt, Audrey Thomas uses the “happily-ever-after unions of fairy tales with bitter irony in her stories about such dreaming young girls growing up to experience abusive, adulterous marriages” (4). In “Real Mothers,” a child whose parents are facing divorce remembers their family life, now shattered, as “a continuous fairy story” (RM 12).

Most of the stories begin when all the happiness is over in the relationship between the protagonists and their partners. They reject the ideal of life that fairy-tales imparts, as it is proved deceitful. There has been no ‘charming prince’ waiting for them. The excerpts from fairy-tales which Thomas incorporates into her fiction should be read with much prudence as they embody the wrong kind of literature or life-vision to which some of her heroines have once attached themselves. Thomas warns the reader against this kind of escape literature by often distorting it. In “Roots” Louise pricks herself in the act of cleaning the broken bits of a teapot. When her husband, Michael informs her that she has pricked her nose, she exclaims hideously: “Have I pricked myself and no prince came? Just not my lucky day” (WBY 5). Here, Audrey Thomas refers to the fairy tale of “Sleeping Beauty” where the princess pricks herself in a needle of the spinning wheel and falls into a deep sleep, until a prince comes along to save her by kissing her. But it is not as simple as that in the real world. Michael retorts that he is no prince as in a fairy tale. “Whoever heard of a prince with a bald spot on the top of his head? Princes have luxuriant heads of hair, always, which they wear in an attractive pageboy bob” (5). In real world, things are not as easygoing as it is in a fairy tale world. In the fairy tale, a kiss from the prince wakes up the princess from her sleep. But in Audrey Thomas’ story Michael’s kiss only infuriates her and makes her hurl harsh words at him. She cries out: “Whoever heard of a princess with stretch marks?” (5).
In “Rapunzel,” the title of the story and the name of the main character signal the ongoing subversion of the traditional ‘Rapunzel’. The fairy tale “Rapunzel” is a story of a beautiful princess with long hair, who has been imprisoned by a witch in a tower and who is doted by a young prince. Thomas takes this traditional story and makes a spoof of it by naming her protagonist Rapunzel, whose original name is Caroline. In this story too as in the fairy tale, Rapunzel has a very long hair that is unbound all the time: “her fair hair stuck in little limpet curls to forehead and to cheeks” (L&E 71). She stays in YWCA hostel on the eighth floor (a self-made tower) just like the princess in the tower, from where she says she can have a “truly amazing view” of the world (77). She leaves her rooftop/tower to go down again into life. But, as in the fairy story she is not doted by a prince. Instead, she is threatened by a black man in darkness. When the wandering innocent Rapunzel refuses this (prince) man while he comes knocking at her window, she comes up against a tough fact which she cannot ignore: rape. This shocks her out of the dreamy fairy tale naiveté. Her soft voice, struggles in “bringing out this hard word rape” (78). However, she finally succumbs to the wishes of the man, subverting the romance of the fairy tale world.

Audrey Thomas also pictures well-known fairy tale figures in the cover illustrations of some of her short story collections and then parodies that image by telling stories that are in no way related to the innocent fairytale world. Ten Green Bottles has Jack and Jill on the cover indicating total innocuousness. The stories then deal with the loss of innocence, but not the traditional loss of physical innocence. Apart from one story about being “21 and still a virgin,” which ends with the promise of intercourse (“A Winter’s Tale”), the central character is a married woman. Innocence is just a mental/emotional condition; in most of the stories the fall is more into the self. In “Xanadu,” the loss of innocence is more complex than
the traditional sexual initiation. Here it denotes the loss of that ideal of woman as emotionally or morally innocent, as loving, caring and unselfish creature.

In *Ladies and Escorts*, the cover illustration of Little Red Riding Hood introduces the subject of women’s encounters with the ‘wicked wolf’ in the ‘dark forest,’ and the title brings to mind ‘happily-ever-after’ stories. The very title suggests that ladies cannot function independently and they need escorts to guard them from the dangers they might encounter. But Thomas parodies this fairytale image of women as helpless, passive, and in need of escorts, in the face of passion, desire, or other ‘darkness.’ Her stories in this collection present ladies without escorts, with titular escorts and with unwanted escorts. These women function independently as they understand that they do not need escorts to guard them from the dangers they may encounter.

It is not just fairy tales, but there is mostly a story within a story written by the female protagonists for various reasons like to rationalize their lives. In most of her stories it is found that her characters discover a second perspective on experience. Often the discovery of such alternate perspectives has marked moments of traumatic insight or dramatic growth for the character and has constituted a pivotal or terminal element in the story.

Thomas creates what Frank Davey terms “alternate stories,” that is, secret scripts which characters have written one for another, stories inherited from mythology and literature that become superimposed on characters’ lives, stories concealed within symbolic objects, as well as stories the characters have written to rationalize their lives (Alternate Stories 5). These ‘other’ stories are contained within the apparent story, becoming ironic participants in it, qualifying it, interrogating it, sometimes working against it. The presence
of multiple ‘stories’ is reflected in disjunctive narratives in which brief ‘stories’ are abruptly contained within or juxtaposed to other ‘stories.’

Most of the stories of Audrey Thomas are visibly constructed of variant scripts. In some a second script is implicit in the first, as in “Monday Dream at Alameda Park” in which a married couple has created the story that they are “very liberated, very liberal” – a story which partly collapses when the husband finds himself drawn into group sex with another couple (L&E 121). In other stories, the alternative scripts are embedded in the first. In “Omo” the embedded diary of one character disqualifies the perceptions of the story’s narrator. In “The Albatross” one character, Herman, has composed for himself a life-story of romantic World War II adventure, a story unconnected to his current hope to succeed as a life-insurance salesman. Thomas’ text is in turn composed, among other things, of Herman’s narrative, the sound track of an insurance company sales film, and another character’s parody of Herman’s stories. In “Three Women and Two men” the main text is repeatedly interrupted by the character’s private fictions. “They must have needed to die. It must have been their karma,” Peter says of the victims of a mass-murder (L&E 149). Of her husband’s careless driving Margaret says, “I think he drives that way because he’s small. It makes him feel powerful” (L&E 151).

It is easier to conjure up a fairy tale . . . than to put one’s finger on the pulse of truth. In the tale it is all so easy. I, the princess, and he, the prince. We meet and all of a sudden fall in love. There are dragons, of course, and wicked dukes and many other dangers; but these all can be banished, crushed or conquered. We mount the milk-white steed, ride off into the silver dawn. No
sequel, nothing sordid. When the storytellers say “The end” they mean it.

Never the names of Cinderella’s children. (TGB 142)

Like the narrator of “A Winter’s Tale,” most of Thomas’ characters find it easier to “conjure up” a false story than to accept “the pulse of truth.” As here, the false story is usually fabricated of familiar materials. “Loving is letting go,” writes Peter in “Three Women and Two Men.” The bulk of these materials are those of romance, especially the fairy tale and Shakespearean comedy. The reference points include Shakespeare’s A Winter’s Tale and The Tempest (“A Winter Tale,” “Xanadu” and “Omo”), folk tales like Cinderella (“A Winter’s Tale,” “Crossing the Rubicon”), Anderson’s “The Snow Queen” (“Elephants to Ride Upon”), The Nibelungenlied (“Aquarius”), the tales collected by the brothers Grimm (“Rapunzel,” “Natural History”) and John Donne’s love poems (“Aquarius,” “Monday Dream at Alameda Park,” “The More Little Mummy in the World”).

In her short stories men and women seem equally vulnerable to the roles demanded by these inherited fictions, and greet these roles with varying amounts of insight. Unlike the female mental patients of “Salon de Refuses” who unquestioningly prefer their delusions of wealth and love to the facts of their actual conditions, the young woman of “A Winter’s Tale” can see that her life is but a poor imitation of romantic fantasy. In “Elephants to Ride Upon” a young man who feels forced back together, after several months’ separation, with a young woman he has made pregnant, projects onto her and himself stereotypically evil roles – “An ice maiden, the snow queen” (TGB128).

He remembered how in the old romances the beautiful maiden turns into a hag if the wrong questions are asked, if the right answers are not given. He stood
now, defeated, horrified to discover that he hated her – not only for what she
had become, but for what he had become: a false knight, an imposter.

(TGB 125)

But his discovery that her coldness has been caused mostly by her fear of his family and by
her concern for him eventually dissipates his fantasy. The male point-of-view character of
“Aquarius,” however, has no sense that, by having variously cast his wife Erica as Brunhilde
to his Siegfried, as a vampire who “renewed herself with his passion” (L&E 12), as “the very
essence of female” (10), as the “barefoot wife” (14) of the romantic artist, he has cheated
himself out of ever discovering who this Erica may actually be.

In the stories from *Real Mothers*, these inherited romantic stories appear most often
as stories which women have allowed men to impose upon them. Men are seldom – like the
young man of “Elephants to Ride Upon” or the husband of “Aquarius” – presented as being
impoverished by such stories, but rather as receiving advantage from them. As already
explicated in the third chapter, the protagonists of “Galatea,” “Out in the Midday Sun” and
“Timbuktu” feel as if they have been co-opted into a script written by their husbands. In
“Galatea” the woman is a painter who has stopped painting “large canvasses full of brutal
colours” because these “disturb” her husband and has “gone back to watercolours” of
“decorative” subjects which he finds “less disturbing” (RM 40). Her husband, a womanizing
writer, links himself with inherited romance when he defines greatness as “one of those
magic pitchers in a fairy tale – you pour it out and it is still full to the top” (37). Thomas’
title, “Galatea,” which invokes the inherited story of the sea-nymph who was bullied by the
cyclops Polyphemos, whose lover Acis was pinned by Polyphemos beneath a rock, and who
saved Acis by transforming him into a river, casts ironic light on both the narrator and her
marriage. The narrator is abused by nothing but her own passivity; the French river she walks beside has never been her lover; the water-colours she paints mark not an historic affinity with sea and water but merely her own weakness.

In “Timbuktu” Thomas presents the wife of an American B’hai convert who has naively brought her and their children to Africa to work as missionaries. Again the woman has been entangled in her husband’s script. Here the script reaches to the inherited story of the Bible, its implicit definition of ‘motherhood’, its patriarchal god, its self-presumed authority. Rona’s narrative contains not only the B’hai wife’s story but the Biblical story both women inherit.

“She’ll do what God wants her to,” Janet said. “It’s out of her hands.”

Rona found this aphorism, coming from the mouth of a child, almost obscene. On the bedside table by the sick child was a jug of water and a book, *Baha’u’llah and the New Era*. She leafed through it. . . . There was an almost Germanic profusion of capital letters: ‘He, His, Servant of the Blessed Perfection, Declaration, Supreme Singleness, the Most Great Peace.’ But . . . the basic tenets of the faith were harmless, indeed unarguable ‘motherhood issues,’ one might say. How exotic it sounded! Like *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. But also, sheep-like. Baa-Baa-Baa. . . . There were a lot of old fashioned Biblical endings on the verbs: ‘enacteth, enforceth, sitteth, cometh, shineth.’ (RM 131)

Almost each story contains not only smaller stories but the explicit words ‘story’ or ‘fairy tale’. “That story was one of her best ones” (“Aquarius,” L&E 17); “As he told his new tale, our steward’s hands would clench with excitement” (Joseph and His Brother,” L&E 23);
“Marie Anne felt as if someone had been telling her a continuous fairy story” (Real Mothers,” RM 12); “Old wives’ tales came back to her” (“Natural History,” RM 25); “She felt like one of those queens in the fairy tales” (“Dejeuner sur l’herbe,” RM 140); “[S]he doesn’t look back. In my story, that is” (“Crossing the Rubicon,” RM 168). A typical Thomas story is a story about characters who have so many inherited stories that they have no single authentic story. That is, it is a story about not being able to participate consciously in the construction of one’s own story. The contained stories – the petty lies the characters tell about themselves, the scripts they accept from their spouses or from traditional mythology or literature – demolish the container.

In “Two in the Bush” a young woman, bored with her marriage, hitches a ride with another young married woman from Ghana to the Ivory Coast, expecting sexual adventure, meeting people who are implicit stories of gunrunner, freedom-fighter, shady banker, corrupt soldier, romantic lover, but returns having had no sexual adventure, no “miracle,” no story. “I know nothing about Africa, nothing,” she concludes, and for Africa we read romance, story (L&E 44, 70). At its closing, the story is implicitly about a story which didn’t happen, a gunrunner who doesn’t run guns, a lover who missed his tryst. “Crossing the Rubicon” contains various stories – the narrator’s story of a love affair with a married man, of being attracted as a girl to abusive boys, the stories told by the mottoes on Valentine candy (“Be my sugar Daddy,” “You’re a Slick Chick”), the story told and untold by the motto on a button (“Cinderella married for money”), the story of Liza Minnelli and Michael York in Cabaret – but ends with the woman still unable to not “look back” at her married lover, unable to refuse the inherited story (RM 155, 168).
In “Dejeuner surl’herbe,” two ex-lovers pretend (one story) to be brother and sister while travelling in Europe. The woman’s “latest lover” has told her she is “too insipid” (two stories). Her husband has told her that she “leaned on him too much” (three stories). “I have had this pain”, she told the imaginary doctor, “all my life” [four stories or perhaps five] (RM 141). In London she reads warning signs about unattended parcels” “DON’T TOUCH . . . DON’T GET INVOLVED” – a sixth story (154). She is “content, for the most part, merely to go wherever he suggested” – another story. In a Parisian garden, “slender metal chairs” have been “left in groups which seemed . . . to tell stories” (146). At a restaurant, she asks her lover, “Do we have to play out roles that other people impose on us?” (149). She reads a French phrase book, each phrase a story. In a French cemetery while picnicking they encounter a distraught and incoherent woman with a kitten, who returns past them without it, her hands covered with dirt. Her companion says that he believes the woman said “[t]hat the kitten was sick. That she killed it.”

‘Are you sure?’

‘No I’m not sure. But there really is nothing that we can do.’

. . .

But she was already running down the path. ‘I’m going to find that kitten. You made it up, about what the woman said!’

. . .

‘And what if you do,’ he called after her. ‘What then?’ (RM 154)

What indeed. What would happen if any Thomas character found the story his or her life was constructing?
In Thomas’ fiction the culturally ‘received’ stories seem unconsciously adopted by the characters, who may become aware of them in the course of the story. In Thomas, the major source of these inherited stories is romance and they are generally oppressive in nature. Perhaps most important for us to consider, a major part of the western literary heritage – particularly the romance mode with its roots in Greek mythology and the Bible, its pervasive presence in myth and fairy tale, its huge presence in medieval and Renaissance literature, especially in Shakespeare – is marked in these stories as destructive to authentic story. The romance is presented as an unyielding, unitary, and patriarchal inheritance that leads the passive character, male or female, ultimately to no story.

Quest partakes of a necessarily symbiotic relationship with travel. Audrey Thomas uses ‘travel’ as a metaphor for the process of metamorphosis, when one thing turns into another, for one of self-discovery. Travelling alone in foreign countries is the subject of most of her stories. Her characters pass through many stages of the monomythic journey in their search and the journey might be periodical and arranged, a voluntary journey or as a necessary displacement. The characters move through exotic places of different cultural milieu like Africa, Mexico, Greece and England. The strangeness of the environment may result in the surfacing of things previously unknown even to the characters themselves. Audrey Thomas herself has remarked in an interview to CBC Radio by Eleanor Wachtel (1981) thus:

You cast people in foreign countries and you just know they’ll reveal things about themselves. They’re up against a different culture, eating different foods, getting lost or sick it’s too hot too cold or they’ve missed the train. All sorts of things surface that one kept very well hidden at home. I really love
travelling partly because I have to redefine myself everytime I go. It’s not simply just a matter of collection material. Something happens to me. It extends me in ways that I like . . .

Audrey Thomas endows many of her women characters with consummate competence to observe and describe scenes, places, persons and the complicated psychological states of tension. She also presents them as intensely experiencing hurt feelings, choked emotions, moments of cold and ruthless insensitiveness and memories and fantasies haunting the lonely self. The journey from somewhere to somewhere is the expression of frustration of the imaginative, ideal dream world by a grim, real one. The journey’s end or the destination arrived at need not always result in a developmental growth or be a passage from one state of being to another. It may result in the revelation of an unresolved state of tension between the two worlds.

Audrey Thomas’ women travel through and to an ‘unknown’ place for the purpose either of adventure or of psychological exploration. Her protagonists, always journeying in quest of their self, travel by plane, ship, train, bus, taxi, ferry, truck, and even on foot,. This happens when they have lost the sense of belonging to a place or society, feeling themselves to be an alien in the existing conditions. They move out into the unknown territory in an effort to gain knowledge of themselves and to acquire a sense of belonging. Thus the issue of ‘belongingness’ may be at the root of alienated existence. Thus their journey may be viewed as a quest for identity, and for self-recognition.

The female protagonists in her stories travel through different countries. This makes explicit that (one of) Thomas’ most common metaphors for the problematic nature of
language is “travelling in foreign countries, adrift on the cross-cultural confusions and the multiple meanings of words” (Godard *Fiddlehead* 111).

Caroline in “Rapunzel” also travels through Accra but for reasons not made clear in the story: “. . . and moved like a dream . . . ‘Searching for what?’” (L&E 71, 72). She holds a pineapple in one hand and moves down Kojo Thompson Road and onto Castle Road on her bare toes which has turned rusty-red from the dust. In the later part of the story she moves toward the North. There is no destination for her travel. Travel in itself is a destination. She just “goes wherever the current takes her,” reasoning out the meaninglessness of her life (75).

In “Dance” the protagonist travels with her daughter in Greece. She is also a writer. She walks around into the town along with her daughter to explore the place. They have left a perfectly wonderful island where they were having a wonderful time. On her way to the island in the car-ferry, she sits on the deck and watches the island that seemed to “come towards” her (GHGL 74). She records that she likes going places by boat. “I suppose it has something to do with ‘crossing the waters’” which to her is always symbolic as well as real (74). Before the travel, the boat appears to be large and whatever one is heading for looks “invisible or just a smudge on the horizon” (74). Gradually as one moves forward the smudge becomes larger and larger until there is a moment when the boat and the island appear to be the same size. This, the protagonist feels is a wonderful moment just like the moment before the tide turns, “when the whole universe seems to be in balance” (74). She observes that her daughter too loves to travel by boat and enjoys the voyage with the mother.

In the title story of *Goodbye Harold, Good Luck* we again find a mother and daughter travelling together. The journey this time is from Vancouver to Dawson Creek by train and bus, both modes of travel which, like the ferry boat in “The Dance,” emphasize the process
of “getting there” (GHGL 75). Francine is taking a vacation away from a husband who
demeans and ridicules both her and her daughter. She has reached a point in her marriage
where she feels unbearably restricted and believes that her husband hates her. This feeling
manifests itself in the physical symptom of an inability to breathe. A lonely woman, mostly
with a daughter and recently separated from her husband (more rightly, the husband’s
desertion) retreating to an island or sitting in a restaurant cogitating her life is a common
image found in her short stories.

Coupled with her protagonists’ penchant for the voyager’s explorations is Thomas’
use of island setting. Literary conventions in the writing of Audrey Thomas have invented
the islands as a distinct region. Withdrawing themselves from the society and retreating to an
island is another mode of expression of Thomas in presenting her women’s quest for
fulfillment. As Miranda rightly states in *Munchmeyer and Prospero on the Island*, islands in
general serve many purposes, from “prison” to “private paradise” to “sanctuary” (91). The
traveller aestheticizes the landscape, seeks “density of meaning” in that landscape, and tries
to find her true ‘self’ thereby attaining her fulfillment (91).

Thomas’ women withdraw themselves and retreat further and further away from
others, first choosing to live on an island, away from the rest of the world, then eliminating
on the male sex from her world, so that she may live in a ‘sorority’, and finally, reducing the
world to include nobody but herself, living completely alone. They cut themselves off from
others by isolating themselves on the island in order to ‘be themselves,’ trying to affirm their
sense of self this way, they come to believe too firmly in their own alienation.

As Wachtel points out in his essay “Guts of Mrs. Blood,” to Thomas “islands are in
themselves romantic and replete with exotic resonance,” (3) where she gets to reaffirm her
‘self’ in her strength as an island. She asserts her freedom to be in solitude, in self, and at peace in her island self. In this state of self-romancing transcendence she attains a unity with the self. Thus, Thomas’ island is a metaphor for self – a woman is an island. Alone in the island, the protagonist gradually breaks out of her stasis and begins to experience and observe life through her mind.

Thomas’ island stories like “Natural History” and “Elevation,” draw her away from a woman’s romantic focus on men towards a refocusing on herself – a woman writing. In her short stories women begins to investigate Virginia Woolf’s premise that every woman writer needs a room of [her] own; in Thomas’ case every woman writer needs an island, a place where both she, as an independent woman, and her written text can come into being. These processes prove analogues, since a woman’s becoming an island unto herself is the subject of Thomas’ island stories. Whereas John Donne suggests, “No man is an island”, Thomas asks whether a woman who is also a writer can be an island on her own.

Thomas suggests that a woman can be an island unto herself and can gain power and control over her own life, but at the cost of losing a man as her center (as seen in the third chapter). When she makes herself as writer the center, she moves from a state of subjection, “marriage as archetypal enclosure” (Pratt 45), to a state of transcendence, love of self; she “centers on personal rather than patriarchal space” (Pratt 135). Thomas’ fiction shows how a woman writer achieves this transcendence at the particular cost of her traditional romance relationships with men. If she is also a mature, erotic woman who enjoys male companionship and shared parenting, the loss of a husband/lover seems a high cost indeed.

In Audrey Thomas’ stories island is looked as a circle, an encompassing, comforting, inclusive place to be. For Thomas this place is self: self in solitude, self in nature, self in
creation through the act of writing. She explores herself by retreating to an island and
writing; writing in and about the islands allows them to break free from perhaps more prosaic
forms in which they work and to indulge in works of imagination. Just as the place seems to
bestow upon every islander the capacity to be an artisan, the region also enables its
inhabitants, purely by virtue of belonging to place, to be writers.

As Coral Ann Howells has pointed out, many of Thomas’ stories are not about
couples or married women but “women living alone and writing” (Private 9). The female
protagonists confront society not only as women but also as female artists. They reject male
dominance through the medium of art. For the protagonists, the feminine quest includes the
search for freedom of imagination and expression through the medium of art. Many of her
stories are about women who write fiction while the others are about women who are trying
to rewrite the stories of their own lives in order to live differently. They are writers searching
for a self underneath the patriarchal fictions of womanhood. This she acknowledges in her
interview to Wachtel. She says, “The process of writing . . . may have brought me closer to
myself, which may not have been where I thought I was” (Room 49). Writing for her was the
means of living and working on one’s own terms and as a woman. It was the way to resist
dichotomy and to survive a divided female self. The self for Thomas is neither constant nor
stable; it is a shifting identity, and writing, (for Audrey Thomas’ women) is one way to try to
understand and clarify their position(s) occupied by that identity. This concern with identity,
is evident in most of her short stories. As has already been discussed in the third chapter,
Writing is one mode through which her protagonists establish their identity.

Thomas is acutely aware of the power that comes with the writer’s ability to have the
last word, to tell the story her way. In “Out in the Midday Sun,” for instance, the female
protagonist is a writer searching for a self underneath the patriarchal fictions of womanhood. She uses writing in an attempt to articulate her social identity and competes with her husband, another author. She imagines telling him that her story is to be published and in that vision tries not to look at his stricken face:

Or would she? Would she notice every little detail of his pain, the way his hands clenched and unclenched (perhaps he would even break the stem of his glass), the whole terrible bravado of his celebration.

Would she notice all that, and then, when she got free of him, write about that, too? (RM 100)

The protagonist is clearly in control here; not only has she won the victory, but she also writes about it.

Thomas has mentioned in her interview to the Capilano Review that she was first driven to write because she was “small and shy and unconfident.” The writing was to make her “large, non-shy and confident.” Then the words on the page were supposed to “make some kind of order out of the chaos that my life was” (Coupey 87-109). Like Audrey Thomas, many of her protagonists use writing to bring order to their varied existence, giving themselves a context through words. Fictionalizing can also seem simply to emphasize the disparity between wishful thinking and the stark reality of women’s fictive roles versus real desires. In “Crossing the Rubicon,” writing is used to analyze the protagonist’s broken relationship in the form of a story within the story. The protagonist writes an apparently autobiographical fiction about a meeting with an ex-lover, and the containing fiction ends: “And she doesn’t look back. In my story, that is. She doesn’t look back in my story” (RM 168). Thomas thereby suggests that the text is written by the protagonist for herself, to
impose a sense of order upon reality. Writing is her way of recreating his (ex-lover) presence and alleviating at least temporarily her own pervasive sense of loss and loneliness. Through her self-reflective writing, the protagonist attempts to discover what constitutes the essential core of her being. She hopes that the discovery of this stable, unified and essential truth about herself will provide her with comfort and reassurance in her times of personal crisis. Here too, the emphasis is on the attempt to ‘organize’ the chaos of experience by writing it. As Thomas draws our attention again and again to the process of telling the story, one can hardly escape being aware of the needs that motivate that process.

The same goes with Wilma of “Bear Country” who is a performance artist and a writer, especially a feminist. Once she hears a male professor, a man who has a tendency towards marrying his students, say to another man that the air in Canada is putrid with feminism. The word ‘putrid’ scares her. It makes her think of “something rotten and stinking, like a decayed tooth or a gangrenous leg: something poisonous and foul” (TPT 152). She wants to get rid of this image. So, she takes it as a theme and writes a skit titled “Acceptable Levels.” It is based on the Pollution Scoreboard at the McGill Metro. Instead of indicating levels of dust, sulphur dioxide and carbon monoxide, the scoreboard at the back of the stage shows levels of feminism for that day, with anything over fifty indicating “being bad” (151). The skit involves a metro car, full of men and women, with a stewardess on board, just like an airplane. The stewardess explains that if the levels of feminism get too high, masks will automatically drop from the ceiling and they must breathe normally. The train passes the McGill metro station again and again. The level goes above fifty on the board and the masks drop down. The men clutch at their throats and gasp for breath, while the women carry on reading or chatting or just waiting quietly to get to their destination. The
first part ends with a male voice saying, “Soon there were days when it wasn’t safe for men to go out at all” (152). Wilma never falls for men who addressed her as a Burne-Jones painting “or a Renoir or an Ingres, whatever” (153). She wants to make a work of art rather than to be an object of beauty.

As many of Thomas’ protagonists are writers, it is evidenced that writing is used as an act of self-confirmation that gives them a liberatory potential and helps them to define themselves as something other than housewives. It facilitates them to discover their identities and to establish themselves. Rejected by, and rejecting in turn the men in their lives, Thomas’ women retain their identity as writers as a self-in-relation with others. In this respect, Thomas’ writer-protagonists have until now been content with constructing the subject, through various versions of the self. Through art they organize the chaos of the contradictions of human relationships, its joys and pain.

As already mentioned in the third chapter, it is not only writing that the protagonists take up to establish her identity, but also visual arts like painting as used by the protagonist of “Galatea”. The influence of visual art on her work is recorded in many of her short stories. Thomas herself acknowledges a visual influence on her work from the early stages of her literary career in a group interview for the journal Writing:

> I’ve been surrounded by visual artists all my life. I was married to one, lived with one, my mother went to art school, and one grandfather was an inventor and mechanical engineer . . . I don’t work in visual art myself but with writing, doing the seeing for the reader (Alexander 4).

The interviewers comment that they “see a strong influence of . . . visual arts” (Alexander 4) in Thomas’ writing. Thomas’ interest in the role of visual art is registered in
her short story “Dejeuner sur l’herbe”. The title is also the name of the painting by Manet noted primarily for its disrespectful attitude toward classical aesthetic order in visual art, and its brash representation of ‘nude’ as ‘naked.’ Thomas’ story deals with a man and a woman vacationing, appropriately, in Paris. They view their relationship and their environment from a cautious and superficial distance but, as the story progresses, the heroine gradually realizes the facade of the existence they have been maintaining. The story ends with a picnic in a cemetery covered in bright sunlight and the shade of trees, reminiscent of Manet’s “Dejeuner sur l’herbe.” The heroine defines the visit as “a chance to picnic with Degas” (RM 152), and it is during this meal with an Impressionist that she finally acknowledges the artifice which has controlled their lives. She taunts her companion with the slogan they have been toting throughout the story, “Don't Touch! Don't Get Involved!” (154) and, ultimately, does get involved, by helping rescue an abandoned kitten. Though not a major gesture of liberation, the act suggests that the heroine has at least begun to break through the aesthetic order of social dictates, just as Manet had with his painting.

Thomas’ story “Still Life with Flowers,” presents a parallel structure. Like “Dejeuner sur l'herbe,” “Still Life with Flowers” is set in a cemetery and it contrasts a character’s “aesthetic satisfaction” (TGB 17) with her inability to relate to the funereal rigidity of her society. The ‘still life’ of aesthetic arrangement is ultimately disrupted, as the heroine realizes that static social structures are both confining and disempowering. Manet’s painting “Dejeuner sur l'herbe” was shown at the exhibition entitled “Salon des Refuses,” which is also the title of her short story. This story opens with a description which accents some of the major stylistic concerns of the Impressionist movement:
The pale sunlight of a winter dawn, cold as a false smile, sidled through the bars and deposited small parcels of light on the floor. (TGB 165)

In this opening line, Thomas uses two central elements of Impressionism – the blurred image, and the play of light and shadow. The phrase “cold as a false smile” also echoes the Impressionist artist’s interest in blurring the boundaries between external and internal reality.

The mental fusion of context and consciousness is central to the story’s plot, which deals with the unconventional views of patients in an insane asylum. The reference, in the story, to a Van Gogh print on the wall, reinforces the association of the theme of dissolution and chaos with the Impressionists. Godard argues that “the Van Gogh paintings on the asylum walls, as well as the story’s title, which is evocative of the impressionist painters, allude . . . to the very blurred boundaries between revolutionary art and insanity, both of which challenge our understanding of rules and order while presenting reality in cryptic symbols” (Audrey 29). As with her story “Dejeuner sur l’herbe,” the only conclusion Thomas offers in “Salon de Refuses” is that no definition of social order can possibly account for the multiple perspectives of a chaotic reality.

Thomas positions visual art nearer to reality than verbal art when defining her own writing strategy. In her interview for Writing, Thomas notes that she herself often “begin[s] with an image” (Alexander 4) and that the text develops from this visual source. “I’m interested,” Thomas states, “in reproducing the visual in words” (4). Thus it is seen that by using the visual arts and by writing themselves into story, Thomas’ women discover their own voices and explore and reclaim their identity.

This chapter takes a look at Thomas’ craft, her innovative use of form, language and narrative voice. Thomas’ work is not like a mystery story, where a series of hidden clues add
up finally to the one, the inevitable truth. Rather it is – as a whole, and also in its parts – more like a folk-tale collected in several variant forms. No one story is the true story, but the sum of the stories is. As has been discussed, autobiography, repetition, parody, fairy Tales, alternate stories, travelling, island setting and writing are the modes that Audrey Thomas employs in her short stories to present the woman’s Quest for fulfillment.