



Available online at [www.jlls.org](http://www.jlls.org)

---

## JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTIC STUDIES

---

ISSN: 1305-578X

*Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(3), 2537-2542; 2021

# Exploration Of Female Self In Carol Shields' Small Ceremonies And Swann: A Mystery

Dr. K. Shanmuga Sundara Raj<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Assistant Professor of English, Govt. Arts and Science College, Kovilpatti, Thoothukudi Dist. (Govt. Arts and Science College for Women, Alangulam, Tenkasi Dist. Under Deputation) (Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli – 627012, Tamil Nadu, India.)

### APA Citation:

Raj, K.S.S., (2021). Exploration of Female Self in Carol Shields' Small Ceremonies and Swann: A Mystery. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(3), 2537-2542.

Submission Date: 25/07/2021

Acceptance Date: 17/09/2021

---

### Abstract

Women have always tried to delineate their identities in a variety of contexts as writers, academics, social reformers and revolutionaries. The female characters in Carol Shields' novels explore their social status. The brilliance of the female characters in their professions and their identity and accolades, the roles they play within and outside of the family have always become a cynosure in the midst of the male characters. This paper aims to examine and capture the women's endeavour in *Small Ceremonies* and *Swann: A Mystery*.

**Keywords:** Small Ceremonies, Swann: A Mystery, Carol Shields, women identity and female Self.

---

## 1. Introduction

Women, beyond the confinement of domestic chores, have made several attempts to establish their identity in multifarious available forums such as being writers, academicians, social reformers, revolutionists and trendsetters in their life. In *Small Ceremonies* and *Swann: A Mystery*, the female characters investigate their social status and examine their talents and brilliance in their vocation. They search for their identity and accolades, study their roles inside and outside the family, probe into reality, and even move to the extent of reviewing their roles in society.

## 2. Discussion

In *Small Ceremonies*, Shields made her maiden attempt to explore the woman's space to investigate the woman's role in the family and society as well. An academic couple 'Martin and Judith' and their two children Meredith and Richard with whom the novel is woven. In the chapter titled *September* in the novel, an academic couple, spending their sabbatical leave in England returns home. Judith happened to listen to a radio advertisement where some women were announcing that they were organizing a 'glass blitz'. The organizers of the glass blitz were Gwen Somebody, Peg Someone, Sue, Nan, Dot, and Pat. The organizers of 'glass blitz', made Judith to think of her mettle to be exercised in the field of writing which she adores. She associates her thoughts and action with the characters of the novels she

writes. She says, 'Imagine, A thought, sitting with friends one day, with Gwen, Sue, Pat and so on, and someone suddenly bursting out with, "I know what. Let's have a glass blitz".... (5).

Judith speaks of her publishers Henderson, Furlong Eberhart, her old friend and her inspiring Morris Cardiff, the first barrister in Upper Canada, and the prairie suffragette of nineties Josephine Macclesfield and her most inspiring biographer Susanna Moodie. It is very conspicuous that Judith proudly speaks of Susanna Moodie. She speaks as 'most people at least heard of her, and her name brings forth the sweet jangle of familiarity' (6). As Judith is a researcher and writer, she is looking for the right leitmotif and zeitgeist for her writing. Shields's prominent style is to write about ordinary women's life believing that their lives are erased from society. Deploying a minimum number of characters, Shields had interwoven familial issues and matters of intricacies in her writing. Considering and understanding her familial duty and responsibility, Judith wanted to be successful in her novel writing. She says that her husband Martin is a specialist in Miltonic Studies. Understanding that her social emblem is being a housewife, she believes that the domestic cripples should be erased from the female possession.

She read *Furlong*, Eberhart's new book and the biography of Susanna Moodie. For her, it was like a common snooty, vulgar; reading of the junky old novelettes and serialized articles of Susanna Moodie. Judith says, 'It is a real life, a matter of record sewn together like a leather glove with all the years joining, no worse than some and better than many ... I am setting out to exhume her searching, praying into small seams, counting' stitches, adding, subtracting, keeping score, invading an area of existence where I have no real rights. I ask the squares of light that fell on the oak table; doesn't this woman deserve the seal of oblivion? It is, after all, what I would want' (34). Judith believes that her reading of Susanna Moodie would prepare her to be the strongest woman in the world. She says, "I honestly believe I am next Shakespeare" (38).

In *Small Ceremonies*, Roger's wife, Ruthie was an assistant to the head of the translation department in the central library. Judith recounts her nostalgia saying about her sister Charleen, a poet. Judith and her sister turn to literature out of simple malnutrition and she simply explains that "our lives just weren't enough' (47). The dexterity of Shields is very obvious that her female characters are chiefly infused with their stories, as she has drawn material from society. Judith observes 'Breathing, walking and sleeping: our lives are steamed and shaped into stories' (51). The exploration of Judith has always been in her mind and soul. Even during her travel, she observes people, watching them to extract the rudiment to be used for her novel writing. She says, 'on trains, I watched people lasting to know their destinations, their middle names, their marital status and always and especially whether or not they are happy' (54). Variety of materials, life like experiences in multi colored genre are floating like a bubbles around her. Judith observation is tantamount to her exploration that starts from her family. She talks to Martin saying 'I think I might write novel ..... Fiction might be and out for me. And It might be entertaining too' (54). Judith raises many questions within her mind, "A theme? A starting point? A central character or situation? (56).

Also, Judith just analyzed childhood and the grown-up stage. She says "the trouble is that when you are a child you can sense something beyond the details, or at least you hope there's something" (59). Judith thought of her writers and their works and understood the state of the indispensability of the writers and their writings. Judith's interaction with Eberhart made her enlightened and focused her attention to analyze her novel writings. She says, 'Of course, I know every writer has his own private source of imagination' (60). Judith wrote a novel titled, *The Magic Rocking Horse* after returning from England on sabbatical leave. The practical truth has been discovered and explored by Judith. She observes that novel writing requires a complex mesh of details which has to be spun out of simple air. To keep her away from all her phlegmatic and lukewarm mental state, she wanted to attend a warming-up exercises seminar, conducted by Furlong. The topics like 'lovers' and 'enemies' were assigned to the participants at the seminar hall and they were asked to write a short novel of about ten chapters. Judith began her first chapter carefully introducing the main characters, providing a generous feeling of setting and observing all the conventions as she understood them. It was all the effort she made to showcase that she was a successful writer.

The chapter titled 'December' captures a vivid picture of Judith's brave journey to become a writer. It subtly dealt with meticulous efforts of Judith to accelerate the writing zone. Judith says about her experiment of writing a novel. It is put as "I would simply borrow the plot from John Spalding's first abandoned and unpublished novel, the one I had so secretly consumed in Birmingham..... good idea should never be orphaned' (71). After having made an attempt, she woke the next day feeling spare, nimble, energetic, and sinewy with health and muscle, confident and even Omnipotent. It was an astonishing moment for her and with ecstasy, she phoned Furlong and said, 'I've finally got started' (72).

With the help of her husband Martin and her son and daughter Richard and Meredith, Judith somehow managed to become an author after a brief illness. She had somehow come into the inheritance of it as though, she had entered the public domain. At the culmination of being an author of books, Judith was greatly known as a Judith, not as Mrs. Gill. It was her greatest exploration and achievement in her life.

All of her family members started recognizing her success of being an author. Judith says, 'Meredith who has called me mother for years is suddenly calling me Mommy again...am called Mummy by sixteen-year-old daughter' (91). her son Richard asked her, 'would like the newspaper' or Do we have any postage stamps? Any letters?' (91). At the height of the sensational state of accolades, Judith even hunch-backed her head to know more about Susanna Moodie's Biography. Judith was specifically looking for the portent event which altered her from a rather priggish, faintly blue but ardent young girl into a heavy, conventional, distressed perpetually disapproving and sorrowing woman. All the nuances of Susanna's life altered Judith to take and explore the road which is not taken by others.

In the chapter titled *February*, Judith compares her life with Susanna Moodie's life. She says, 'there is a one thing I am certain of : like Mrs. Moodie of Belleville, I will, in the end , be able to trick myself; I can will myself into happiness No matter what happens I will be able to get through' (124). And some women characters in the novel too were exploring their space. Ruthie St. Pierre, Ramsay's wife is working in the library. Nancy Krantz, wife of Paul Krantz is practising Roman Catholic, but she is also a believer in signs. Finally, this novel ends with marriage between Ruthie and Ramsay where Judith says, 'my own life will never for me' (179).

*In Swann: A Mystery* too Shields undoubtedly made a woman whose life too had coupled with challenges. The first chapter of this novel titled is 'Sarah Maloney'. Sarah Maloney, a researcher is exploring life and works of the dead poet Mary Swann that captures the woman's exploration into the life. Sarah Maloney says, 'My name is Sarah Maloney and I live alone professionally. This is something people like to know these days. I'm feminist writer and a teacher who's having second thoughts about the direction of feminist writing in America. For every twenty five years we have been crying; "my life is my own" (11). My life is my own is an axiom that a woman's life is brilliantly fabricated by women only. Sarah was researching the life of the dead poet Mary. At the very beginning of the novel, Shields quotes that Virginia Woolf and Mary Swann are dead.

Dr. Maloney, as a researcher, and a scholar, is addressing one hundred students; ninety of them are women, on the subject of 'Amy Lowell'. Also, she conducts a seminar on women in Midwestern fiction and the whole room becomes charged and expectant and nippy with intelligence. Sarah plays a key role in this novel and she is the leitmotif to explore the mysterious life of Mary Swann. Dr. Sarah Maloney was even known outside the family with her famous work titled *The Female Prism*. Carol Shields's usual narrative tool has also been employed to expose that women are the harbinger of culmination in their writings. Because immediately after *The Female Prism* was published, Sarah had received two hundred such letters mostly from women. Her thirst for exploration in many fields of knowledge has not come to and with minimal writings and it has been its stride into a new shape with the identification of the new poetry written by dead poet Mary Swann. *Swann's songs* was the title of the book by the dead poet Mary Swann. Her songs are known to have survived out of the original printing of two hundred and fifty.

The protagonist Sarah took pains to explore and unearth the truth behind the mysterious life of dead Mary Swann and her poetry. Dead woman's poetry has been made into life with the lively exploration of lovely Sarah. Sarah came to know Frederic Cruzzi who had put together all the poetry of dead Swann and got printed them as a little book, titled *Swann's Songs*. The hyphenated and fragmented information inspired Sarah Maloney to explore Swann's life. As a poet, her poetic elegance and inspiring lines made an appeal to her people about her mysterious life. In the beginning, Sarah was opinionated about Swann's life that it was cheated for life. Also, she believed that Swann was cheated of her recognition. Thus it was the reason that Sarah Maloney prepared her paper on Swann for the Swann symposium in January.

When Sarah came to know that Swann was killed by her husband Agnus Swann, Sarah exploded into saying, 'God is dead, peace is dead, the sixties are dead, John Lennon and "Simone de Beauvoir are dead, the women's movement is dozing-checking its inventory, let's say –so what's left' (21). It was Sarah who recounts Swann's memory as 'my thoughts were of Mary Swann, she must also have performed right rituals, though not the same ones as mine.... There was a cat or dog that had to be let out, though she had never in her poems or her notebook mentioned such a cat or a dog' (30). Apart from Sarah Maloney, there were Hilde and Rose Hindmarch. They were also on the front line to play their major role in exposing women's roles in the arena of patriarchy. As Mary Swann was a friend to Rose Hindmarch, every week Mary Swann visits her library. Rose Hindmarch says, 'she was a reader, Mrs. Swann, a real reader as well as quite the celebrated poetess' (41). Rose is inseparable from the smell of face powder and breath mints of Mary Swann. She had known her and their mutual love for books had brought them together.

With an exorbitant amount of curiosity, Sarah went Nadeau and stayed there for two days. Along with her, Rose Hindmarch, Homer Hart and his wife Daisy accompanied to the cemetery to see where Mary Swann was buried. They saw the inscriptions (epigraphy). The epigraphy is as, "Mary Swann, 1915-1965, Dear mother of Frances', (43). Sarah visited many places concerning the life of the dead poet Mary Swann. The poet's murder by her husband, the tampering of poetry, and Agnus Swann's suicide are the chaotic elements of the novel. The trip enabled Sarah to collect various relics and information for the 'Swann's Symposium'. Sarah came to know that there was no explanation and no one knew for sure what had happened between Agnus and Swann. Anyway, she traced out that Swann's last poems had reverberated the sense of claustrophobia and helplessness.

Swann's poems include *Lilacs*, *Pearls*, and the *Silo*. Of Swann's poems, *Apple Tree* expresses the female sensuality and her *Water* expresses the clear contours of birth and regeneration. Sarah is very firm that Swann's poems are filled with concealed references to her mother, and the strength and violence of familial bonds as well. Sarah says 'thinking of Mary Swann makes me think' (55). On the whole, to say about Swann's poetry, Sarah explores that Swann's poetry is something that is a prototype. In her words, it goes as, 'without knowing the poetry of Pound and Eliot, without even knowing their names she set to work. Her lines have all the peculiar rough thrusts and the newly made syntactical abrasions that are the mark of the prototype' (55).

The second chapter of the book speaks of Marton Jimroy, a biographer of Mary Swann. Also, it records the professional relationship between Sarah Maloney and Marton Jimroy. Marton Jimroy had contacted Mary Swann's daughter Frances Moore, who was in Nadeau, Ontario. From where Jimroy had collected some references on the life of Mary Swann. A dead poet's life had been discovered by both Sarah Maloney and Marton Jimroy. Jimroy says that Swann's daughter Frances was not ready to talk about her mother's death. He says 'her memory is opaque and lacks in detail. Anyway, some of the memories that Frances had about her mother was expressed by her. She said, it's Ma's Parker 51... it was sent to me after she died. I don't know why?' (113). Parker 51 is a gift of Swann's husband, and it was a very popular ink, in those days and it was called washable blue. A farmers' wife using parker 51 was notable one to know how superior poet Mary Swann was.

Marton Jimroy says 'Swann had rare gift of translating her despair. She wasn't writing poems about housewife blues. She was speaking about the universal sense of loss and alienation, not about washing

machines, breaking down are about' (149). As a biographer of Mary Swann, he exposes the life of the Swann. He says that Mary Swann wrote about universal perceptions. Also, he substantiates Mary Swann's old poem. It seemed to him to be a central and spiritual statement. The lines are as, "the blood, you see, is a symbol. It stands for the continuum of belied a metaphysical covenant with an inexplicable universe' (SAM 150).

Most importantly, Frederic Cruzzi's wife Hilde was also a poet. In 1977, she was engaged in the anti – nuclear movement. She often used 'good luck elsewhere' Cruzzi recounts his experience with Swann. He says that Swann was greedy to leave the poems with me for publication. She didn't mention her husband at all at the time of handing over her poetry. Frederic gives his touching expression that Swann always listens to the way a child listens. It was a negotiation of Swann's mind by exploring her poems after Swann's death. Swann left all her poems with Cruzzi to be published. But unfortunately, some of Swann's poems got damaged when Hilde accidentally used the poetry bundle to take away some fish guts. After that, they ( Cruzzi- Hilde ) contribute their lines in the missing place.

In the last chapter, Both Cruzzi and his wife Hilde sponsored their contribution of creativity to the missing lines of Swanns. Because they just wanted Swann's poems to the cynosure of the public and connoisseurs. At any cost, they never left the damaged lines for publication. In 1960s Cruzzi and his wife Hilde, also worked through chapter titled, 'The Swann Symposium'.

Carol Shields has woven the novel with the help of cinematic color. As it begins with the director's note. All the prominent characters are beefed up; for the Swann's Symposium. Dr. Sarah Maloney, Marton Jimroy, Frederic Cruzzi, his wife Hilde, Rose Hindmarch all have been to the Swann's symposium to explore and to share their views on the mysterious life of dead poet Mary Swann. Many twists and turns and distortions have also taken place at the last. Morton Jimroy speaks from his research. He addressed, 'who, given what we know, was Mary Swann? A woman, A Wife, A mother. Perhaps a love (he eyes Long who looks away). She was poor. Badly educated. A woman who travelled only a few miles from her home. She had no social security card, no medical records. Her only official papers consisted (dramatic pause) of a library card from the Nadeau public Library" (259).

Rose Hindmarch is a reader; read many books especially the one she read the most tales of espionage. She says, 'there is nothing random about the world of espionage. Evil is never the accidental eruption, it is in real life.... Death is never for a minute left in the hands of capricious gods.... Death is clean errand dispatched by a hired gun' (138). The voracious reading habit made Rose to explore more about life and death of human race. Rose recollects of Swann, 'There are tears standing in her eyes, and her nose is red. She is a woman who can never speak coherently when her emotions are stirred, and, for their reason she is anxious to escape' (261). Sarah and Jimroy's research about the Mary Swann were stolen especially at the last just before the commencement of Swann Symposium.

Frederic Cruzzi and Hilde's known fact about Swann was blurring as they were got tampered. Everybody speaks in the symposium with the minimum ideas but not all are authentic. The two years of research of Sarah has come to great debacle as it was stolen by an unknown intruder. Sarah Maloney addressed the gathering of symposium with blurring facts and thoughts. It is quoted as, 'yes...no....fine, honestly ... yes...., no, she's fine, just fine. Not complaining one bit. She loves travelling. No... No ....yes, it is ... lonely here, too, I know (she looks around the room, takes in Cruzzi, Rose Jimroy. ). No really ....yes,....me too....I promise , yes ...Bye" (SAM 302) . At last, it was found that the culprit of the Swann's paraphernalia was Brownie.

### 3. Conclusion

Thus the female characters of Carol Shields have been investigating their social status. They experiment with their talents and brilliance in their vocation and avocation. Also, they tirelessly search for their identity and accolades. A reader is left to know the fact that all the female characters employed by Shields are curious to explore their spaces inside and outside the family. They probe into reality, and

they even move into the extent of scrutinizing, observing, and reviewing their roles in their life and society.

## References

- Eleanor Wachtel, 'Interview with Carol Shields', *Room of One's Own*, 13 ½ (1989). 5-45 (pp-30-31)
- Hammill, Faye. "My Own Life Will Never Be Enough for Me": Carol Shields as Biographer." Thomson, Gale. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 193
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Canadian Postmodernism*. Toronto: Oxford, 1988.
- Mavis, Gallant. "My Heart is Broken". Toronto: New Press, 1957, 194.
- Moodie, Susanna : *Voice and Vision*. Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1977.
- Shields, Carol. *Small Ceremonies*, 1976. London, Fourth Estate, 1995.
- . *Swann: A Mystery*. 1987. Toronto: Stoddard, 1993.
- Neelakandan, P. "Chetan Bhagat's Revolution 2020: A Study." *The Criterion*, vol. 5, no. 6, Dec. 2014, pp. 96-100.
- Prema, P. "Tradition Vs. Modernity in Chetan Bhagat's Revolution 2020." *Asia Pacific Journal of Research*, vol. 1, no. XXIV, Feb. 2015, pp. 220-223.
- Prema, P. "Identity Crisis in Atwood's *The Edible Woman*." *Think India Journal*, vol. 22, no. 14, Dec. 2019, pp. 5080-5084.
- Shanthi, R. "Challenge the Unchanging Submissive State of Rural Women in Flora Nwapa's 'Efuru'", *Rock Pebbles* vol. 23, no. 1, 2019, pp 77-81.
- Shanthi, R. "A Thematic study of Carol Shields' *Small Ceremonies* and *Swann: A Mystery*" *Rock Pebbles* vol. 26, no. 1, 2020, pp 111-116.
- "Because She's a Woman" Myth and Meta fiction in Carol Shields's *Unless*. Foster Stovel, Nora, *English Studies in Canada*. 32.4 (Dec. 2006): 32.4 (Dec. 2006) p 51. Literary Resource Centre.
- "Carol Shields and Pierre Bourdieu: Reading *Swann*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 44.3 (spring, 2003) :313-28.