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**Growing Up and Living in Shades of Grey: Ambiguity, Carnival,
and the Bildungsroman in Elizabeth Smart's *By Grand Central
Station I Sat Down and Wept***

Matthew A. Benoit

I am too intelligent, too demanding, and too resourceful for anyone to be able to take charge of me entirely. No one knows me or loves me completely. I have only myself.

- Simone de Beauvoir

In growing up, one discovers that the world is no longer ordered according to black and white childhood dichotomies. There are suddenly girls, boys, and those who identify as neither. There is no objective right or wrong. The distinction between good and evil becomes complicated by empathetic understanding. This learned ambiguity is characteristic of the process of maturity, and the types of novels that deal with this process of maturation are known as bildungsromane, or “novels of formation”. However, Elizabeth Smart’s 1945 novel *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* defies the traditional construction of the bildungsroman. Smart’s novel simultaneously transgresses the traditional structures of the bildungsroman while foregrounding many of the radical notions that characterize modern conceptions of femininity and the carnivalesque. In this paper, I will posit that in *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* Elizabeth Smart injects ambiguity in the bildungsroman, reimagining the form in order to illustrate the transgressive nature of youth and the possibility of freedom from the dominant society.

Smart’s use of ambiguity in constructing her bildungsroman is clearly visible when the novel is considered first as a unified whole. At the time of Smart’s writing, female-driven bildungsromane that did not end with a woman marrying a man were rare. Bildungsromane that followed a protagonist on a journey of maturation were, for the most part, reserved for male protagonists. Rather than simply writing a bildungsroman in which a female protagonist embarks on a journey, Smart defies convention and constructs *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* as a bildungsroman that does not fall into either conventional category. Smart’s protagonist neither marries her lover at the end of the novel nor embarks on a spectacular journey of individual self-discovery.

Instead, Smart's novel rejects this traditional dichotomy and blends stylistic features of both forms of bildungsromane in order to create a narrative more in tune with the ambiguous nature of maturation.

Another reason Smart's novel defies classification as a traditional journey bildungsroman is its lack of geographic features. The journey that Smart's main character, who remains nameless, undertakes is one of unremarkable geography. The story could quite easily take place anywhere. Smart pays limited attention to geography and instead focuses on the "mindscape" in which the narrator traverses. This ambiguity contrasts sharply with the traditional journey bildungsroman, in which the geographic features through which the protagonist moves are essential to the theme of maturation. Indeed, the geographic features within a traditional journey bildungsroman often mimic or reflect the stage of the protagonist's maturation. Consider *The Catcher in the Rye*, in which Holden Caulfield strolls through iconic parts of New York City. He ends his journey of maturation at the Central Park Zoo's carousel, watching from a distance children who are still innocent of the world, signifying that Holden no longer belongs to the realm of the innocent. This specificity of geography is one of the defining stylistic features of the traditional journey bildungsroman. Smart, however, only explicitly refers to three places in the novel: California in the beginning, the location of her passionate affair; Canada in the middle, the place where she is abandoned after the termination of her relationship; and Grand Central Station near the end, the junction of unlimited possibility in which the main character finds herself considering her future. This spatial ambiguity effectively erases the journey from the narrative. While the protagonist clearly embarks on at least two journeys to get from place to place, they are not important to the narrative. Indeed, as literary critic Alice Van Wart notes, "the events and the action within the novel act peripherally: they are deflected off feelings," and time and space "are important only in relation to the narrator's feelings" (39). In a traditional journey bildungsroman, the journey is both a physical excursion and a mental voyage to maturity. Here, the journey is purely mental, insofar as readers are not privy to the details of her physical travels. Thus, Smart's novel does not truly fit into the category of the journey bildungsroman, since it is missing one half of the traditional construction.

Conversely, the novel defies characterization as a romance bildungsroman, since it does not end with the marriage between the protagonist and the subject of her affection. While Smart's narrative is filled with love and passion, the novel lacks this vital piece of the romance bildungsroman. Quite the opposite: The main character and her lover end their relationship in the novel's climax. Within romance bildungsromane, the marriage that takes place in the

final pages serves as the fulfillment of the main character's maturation. In this type of bildungsroman, a character does not go on a journey but rather becomes involved with one or several romantic entanglements before coming to the "true" love near the end of the novel. Here it is useful to examine a traditional romance bildungsroman, such as *Jane Eyre*, in which the titular character comes into contact with her love interest Rochester early in her life but cannot marry him because she is his social inferior. This problem is remedied when Jane inherits a sum of money and Rochester becomes blind. As a result, Jane and Rochester marry and the novel closes with Jane narrating her story after ten happy years of marriage. Further complicating the characterisation of Smart's novel as a romance bildungsroman is the fact that neither the main character nor her lover change in order to become acceptable to the other. In *Jane Eyre*, Rochester must become Jane's equal before she marries him, but in *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, no such change occurs. In fact, both characters steadfastly refuse to alter who they are and, consequently, their relationship dissolves in the face of social pressure. As such, the novel does not fall into the category of the romance bildungsroman.

These ambiguities and differences from the traditional forms of the genre serve to build Smart's unique construction of the bildungsroman. She re-conceives the genre not merely as a novel of formation, but as a novel that subverts the dichotomies of the traditional. Smart thus creates characters who do not fit into the neat boxes to which society expects them to conform. Rather, they exist as figures of ambivalence and ambiguity. Consequently, the novel exists in a state of ambiguity, resisting characterisation as either a journey or marriage bildungsroman. Instead, by using characteristics of both, Smart creates a novel of transgressive formation. Within such a shaping, the bildungsroman is not merely a coming of age story, but a narrative that challenges the social constructs that create dichotomies. The main mode novels of transgressive formation utilise to achieve this deconstruction is ambiguity, employing elements of carnival theory as established by Mikhail Bakhtin in his introduction to *Rabelais and His World*. In his text, Bakhtin divides the world into two realms that exist in opposition to each other: the official and the carnival. Further, Bakhtin identifies carnival with the concepts of becoming, ambivalence, liberty from order, and especially, the maternal, as carnival is a time of rebirth free from hierarchical order (Bakhtin 7-11). These concepts also factor into Bakhtin's formation of the notion of the grotesque body, which focuses on the lower body, especially the genitalia; employs imagery of openness; speaks to ideas of creation, change, and renewal; and is centered on the earthly (18-21). The grotesque body stands in contrast to the

official body, which is clean, rational, focused on the head, and removed from the cycle of creation (48-52). The grotesque, then, is seen as transgressive to the dominant Official. Considering Bakhtin's definitions, it is clear that Smart's novel and its main character are excellent examples of carnival and the grotesque body. The effect of Smart's characterization of her characters in terms that resemble those of the carnival and grotesque is to establish them as transgressive towards the "official" culture. This characterization is significant because it provides a platform on which to align these characters with carnival theory, which in turn affiliate the ambiguity of Smart's narrative construction with carnival theory.

Within the theory of the grotesque, there exists a subset of grotesque characters identified as the feminine grotesque, and within the category of the feminine grotesque, femininity is construed as an over-arching marker "which masks non-identity" (Russo 69). By not naming the main character, Smart effectively creates an "everywoman". The main character wears her femininity as a "mask," preserving her own identity while assuming the non-identity of the everywoman. This "mask" allows the main character to stand separate from Smart, whose life mirrors much of the main character's narrative. In her assumption of this mask, the main character, thus, creates the potential for her abjection should this mask be removed. This removal comes in the form of pregnancy, as her body, "because of its maternal functions, acknowledges its 'debt to nature' and is consequently more likely to signify the abject" (Creed 11). Pregnancy thus separates her from the official body, which must not display its "debt to nature" (11). A woman's body that demonstrates its ability to create thus becomes a source of abjection. When faced with this abject body, others radically exclude it in order to maintain a separation between the abject and themselves, thereby remaining within the realm of the official (12). A key factor on which this process of abjection and exclusion hinges is the intersection between attraction and repulsion towards the abject. This vacillation is due to the fact that, "although the subject must exclude the abject, the abject must, nevertheless, be tolerated for that which threatens to destroy life also helps to define life. The main character's lover is still clearly attracted to her, but he is repelled from her by the pull of his wife. He must radically exclude the main character from himself in order to remain part of the Official.

This concept of the feminine grotesque in opposition to the official body is expanded and reinforced through both plot and literary means. In terms of plot, the main character's pregnancy, symbolizing the abjection of her feminine body, occurs around the time that her lover abandons her in favour of his wife, representing the official body. Smart then uses various allusions to reinforce

that the main character is part of the feminine grotesque. For example, the main character aligns of her womb with Mount Vesuvius, stating that, “It is not the certainties which love cannot surmount, but the doubts the terrible doubts that make Vesuvius in [her] stomach” (Smart 88). By linking the fountainhead of creation with an image of overwhelming destruction, Smart inverts the notion of the feminine body of a source of creation. In fact, a reading of this Part (Part Eight) of the novel reinforces the idea that the main character blames her feminine body for the death of her romantic relationship. By aligning her creative ability as a woman with destruction, the main character becomes further associated with the feminine grotesque, since the grotesque represents an ambivalent relation between her and her womb. Considering this information in light of the social and cultural milieu in which the novel is set, namely, mid-twentieth century America, it is clear that the protagonist, as a woman pregnant not only out of wedlock but as a result of adultery, is nothing if not a transgressive figure. She does not bow or break in the face of the Official and its demands of her. She only halts when she has lost her lover forever. Thus, unlike much of carnival literature, transgression is broken not in order to return to the realm of the official, but rather, as the result of personal losses. As such, transgression is shown to be attainable but susceptible to break down in the face of personal turmoil.

In fact, in an inversion of the expectation that the transgressive woman return to the official sphere, in Smart’s text, it is the main character’s lover that returns to the realm of the official, and he does so not out of Love for his wife but rather for Pity (107). He chooses his wife over the main character because he pities his wife. The result of this choice is to momentarily halt the main character’s transgressive formation. She is faced with the choice to return to the official by rejecting her passions or continue with her transgression. She chooses the latter, and it is a choice that places her outside of the stable realm of the official. She is given no promise of tomorrow. This message becomes clear in the passage following the main character’s resolution to take a train the next morning, after which she finds Tomorrow, the personification of an ensured future, and her former lover intertwined (110). He reaches down and disturbs the main character’s image, which dissolves as it is covered by mud. She then sees them embracing and kissing under a linden tree. As Tomorrow occupies the place that the main character had been before, it is clear that Tomorrow becomes available to her ex-lover as a result of his removal of her from his life. Since the main character does not return to the official like her former lover does, she is therefore denied access to Tomorrow. Furthermore, the capitalisation of the word tomorrow creates a link to Plato’s theory of Forms. Platonic Forms are the essence of a thing,

its most perfect conceptualisation. Capitalised “Tomorrow” here becomes the essence of the future, the perfect idealisation of tomorrow. Also, by linking this essence of future with the image of embracing lovers, Smart provides a powerful message about the nature of the transgressive: it is always changing and always uncertain. The main character is assured no future lover, while her former lover is, theoretically assured his wife. Moreover, in this part of the novel, the main character repeats the word “Amore,” the Italian word for love (110). Significantly, in the immediately preceding sentences, she identifies the language of love as “uninterpreted” and “inarticulate” (110). By presenting the word “love” in another language, Smart thus makes love “uninterpreted.” She changes love into a foreign thing. The main character does not know love any more than she knows Italian. The final result of this insistence on transgression, however, is that the main character is free. She is free of the Official. She is free of the limitations of dichotomies. She is finally free of the expectations of society. Her former lover sleeps, as he has returned to the official, but the main character does not (111). Instead, she is left to cry out in vain for love. Nevertheless, she answers to nobody, while he follows the instruction of his guardian angel (111). Ultimately, the main character continues to transgress the official as she progresses through her life, free from the desires of the official, and free to work for her own desires.

Smart extends this liberation to all those willing to be transgressive. The transgression in which the main character partakes, however, is merely a part of Smart’s larger conception of transgression. Smart extends transgression, in some shape or form, to everyone in the stages of formation. She does this through her allusion to the Biblical parable of the Prodigal Son, stating that she “enters [her] parents’ house but another prodigal daughter” (55). In the Biblical parable, a son asks his father for his inheritance only to squander it on worldly pleasures. In a similar way, the narrator has gone into the world and “squandered” time and effort in her affair with a married man. Thus, she is forced to return home to her parents in Canada as a “prodigal daughter.” Rather than spending her parents’ money, she has instead “spent” their imagination. Smart further extends this characterisation as prodigal sons and daughters to almost all children, claiming that, “parents’ imaginations build frameworks out of their won hopes and regrets into which children seldom grow, but instead, contrary as trees, lean sideways out of the architecture” (55). In this way, almost all people are “prodigal,” since they fail to live up to the expectations of their parents. Thus, nearly all people in the stages of formation behave in a manner that is transgressive, acting contrary to the desires of the official, which, in this case, is their parents. This concept of transgression as a fairly universal pastime in the stage of formation is further

supported by the anonymity of the main character. Without prior knowledge of Smart's personal history, one would not be able to make the logical inference that the main character is a depiction of Smart. Instead, since the audience is not privy to Smart's autobiography via the text alone, the anonymous nature of the main character serves to universalize her narrative, or, at least, to universalise her struggle. Thus, anonymity is important because it underscores the ubiquitous narrative of maturation to rebel and subvert the official.

Smart's *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* employs ambiguity in the bildungsroman construction in order to create a theme of transgression and illustrate the power of rebellion. Unlike a traditional bildungsroman, however, the main character of Smart's novel neither embarks on a journey of self-discovery nor marries her lover. Instead, she becomes aligned with themes of carnival and is established as a grotesque body to illustrate the ambiguity of the narrative of maturation. By subverting the traditional construction of the novel of formation, Smart furthers the idea of transgression as a universal narrative of formation. As a person matures, he or she often rebels against societal mores. For many, this transgression ends and the individual returns to official society. According to Smart, however, it is possible to live outside of official society in a state of constant transgression, free and unencumbered.

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