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Abstract

This thesis will investigate how narratives work in our perception of reality, ourselves and society through a close reading of the novels *Outline* by Rachel Cusk and *The Cost of Living* by Deborah Levy. I will argue that these novels show, among other things, how we use narratives not just to understand the world, but for a myriad of other reasons: for comfort, justification, safety, meaning, etc. More than that, these novels show how some of the common narratives of our culture, such as the narrative of the family, of the mother, and of the romantic relationship, can be deceiving, and how the common stories of our society may be inadequate in their depiction of reality as well as in their presentation of the subject, and especially of the female subject.

Among the important theorists in this thesis is Paul Ricoeur's, who uses the term "emplotment" to describe the synchronization of different elements into a coherent story with a specific narrative identity. This thesis will show that emplotment is not just done in the writing of novels, rather, it is something we all do in our everyday lives; we suppress or emphasize certain aspects of reality so that we can tell a story of our lives, and of our selves, that we can live with comfortably. This is something we also do in our relationships, that in many ways can be described as narratives. One central point of this thesis will be the long-term romantic relationship is, in the words of Lyotard, a grand narrative, that is, one that structures our lives and societal discourse and practices. I will also argue that the breakdown of the narrative of the relationship can also be the breakdown of the narrative of the self.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

As humans, we live in close relationships with narratives, to the degree that we can hardly, if at all, separate our selves from the stories we tell about our selves. Our relationships and societies, our lives and identities: We understand them all through narratives. This thesis will investigate some of the central functions that narratives perform in our lives and in our perception of reality and of ourselves through a close reading of *Outline* (2014) by Rachel Cusk, and *The Cost of Living* (2018) by Deborah Levy. I will pay particular attention to how these novels illuminate, question and probe the relationship between narrative and reality. *Outline* and *The Cost of Living* have some strikingly similar features that make them interesting to read side by side. Arguably, Cusk's *Outline* is the novel that needs the most unpacking, therefore, it will be given the most space in this thesis. Levy's *The Cost of Living* can be said to be a more straight-forward, but nevertheless equally interesting and complex exploration of the themes of narrative and identity. Together, the two novels provide useful and fascinating perspectives on how we use narratives and how narratives work on us. As both works are part of trilogies, I will also be drawing on passages from the other volumes to further illuminate and explore the themes that I am writing about.

Rachel Cusk's *Outline* was published 2014, and is the first volume of a trilogy that also consist of *Transit* (2016) and *Kudos* (2018). Cusk published her first book in 1993, and has since written six more novels. She has also written two memoirs: *A Life's Work* (2001) and *Aftermath* (2012). The descriptions of motherhood, marriage and divorce in these memoirs, particularly in *Aftermath*, led to a significant amount of criticism against Cusk, not just of her writing, but of her personal life as well. Two years after *Aftermath*, however, *Outline* was published, and was celebrated by a vast majority of critics, who called it a "reinvention" and "modernisation" of the novel. *Transit* and *Kudos* were received with equal enthusiasm.

Deborah Levy published *The Cost of Living* in 2018. It is the second volume of a trilogy, beginning with *Things I Don't Want to Know* (2013), and ending with *Real Estate* (2021). Levy has described the works as a "living autobiography", meaning that she is writing her autobiography while still in the tumults of what she is writing about. While the first volume is about her forties, the second volume is about her fifties and the third volume is about her sixties. The trilogy was received with overwhelming enthusiasm by critics, and have among other things been praised for their portrayal of womanhood.

Although *Outline* and *The Cost of Living* diverge on several remarkable levels, the similarities between the two works are even more noticeable. For one thing, they differ in form, *Outline* being written as a series of conversations, and *The Cost of Living* in more of an essayistic style. At the same time, their themes overlap: they both centre around such things as divorce, marriage, family, femininity and narratives. The narrator of *Outline*, Faye, as well as the narrator of *The Cost of Living*, Levy, have recently gotten divorced, and are struggling to navigate their new situations. Both are trying to find a new way of living in their new circumstances, outside of the nuclear family. Both are writers, both are mothers to children who are growing up. Both novels display a sensitivity and attention towards the effects and power of narratives, and are particularly concerned with unpacking and examining the received narratives concerning the female experience.

The thesis will begin with a literary review where I will present theories that provide different perspectives on what narrative is and how narratives work in society, culture and in our perception of reality. Among the most important theorists is Paul Ricoeur and his concept of emplotment, which he uses to describe the process of manipulating the different elements of a story in order to make them work together for the narrative identity of the story. Jean-François Lyotard's theory on the decline of grand narratives, that is, how the narratives that structure knowledge in society, are no longer there, and the consequences that has for our identities, will also be part of the focus of this thesis. Other theorists on narrative, such as Jerome Bruner, will shed light on the role that narratives play in the construction of identity. Cultural theorists such as Zygmunt Bauman and Anthony Giddens will give perspectives on how contemporary culture poses challenges for identity construction. As these novels are written by women and to some degree detail female experiences, such as being wives and mothers, I will also incorporate theories that focus of female subjectivity in particular. A main theorist in this part is Rebecca Solnit, who for instance reflects on how narratives can also be traps. Another important theorist here is Rosi Braidotti, who argues that women must write their own subjectivity, because up until now, she says, it has been written by men. Lastly, I will make use of comments that Cusk and Levy have made in interviews to illuminate these themes further.

In chapter two, I will be close-reading passages from Rachel Cusk's *Outline* in light of the theories that I have presented. I will show how *Outline* illustrates how close personal relationships are, in one sense, stories, and that the narrative of a marriage or of a family can structure the lives of the people within it. As such, it works as a story with a specific narrative identity, which decides what events and feelings should be considered important, valuable etc.

Here, Paul Ricoeur's theory on emplotment will be of importance. Cusk shows how we use emplotment to navigate the challenges of relationships, by suppressing or downplaying events and feelings that don't fit into the narrative identity of the story of the relationship. Another way that Cusk shows how our relationships are narratives, is in how we maintain them. I will argue that our relationship narratives rely on the characters in the story to believe in and be invested in the story of the relationship. Because reality can be structured into different stories, and one event can be told in several different ways, we can argue that what in many cases will make some stories true, and others not, is the level of investment in them. I will look at what it means when people stop believing in a story, which, arguably, is what often happens in the case of divorce.

I will argue that one of the remaining grand narratives in our modern society is that of the monogamous, romantic relationship, which is still portrayed in most discourse as what brings meaning and happiness to a life. I will explain how *Outline* shows that the narratives that we are invested in and live by, filter our perception of reality. As such, we use narratives to understand, but also to deal with, reality. Specifically, we use the narratives that are available to us in our culture as templates to structure the reality of our own lives into stories. I will look at how Cusk uses driving metaphors to illustrate our dependence on narratives, and how narratives also can be traps, that the stories that we, in some way or another, are a part of can force us into modes of thinking and behaving. I will also look at how narratives shape our desire, and how critically examining our desires, and where they come from, can be a way of undermining the narratives that we are immersed in.

Chapter three will consist of a close reading of Levy's *The Cost of Living*. Levy has a clear and articulated project with these novels: both of finding a new way of writing female character, and of finding a new way of living as one. Like Cusk, Levy is interested in the narrative of the family. I will focus on what Levy calls "the fairy tale of The Family House" (*The Cost of Living* 15), exploring the different ways that Levy exposes The Family House as a fairy tale, which partly has to do with the fairy tale as a genre that entails certain generic elements, and partly to do with the way that the perceived narrative of The Family House, is, like a fairy tale, not a true story. I will investigate how Levy problematizes the narrative by pointing at what it does to its participants, for instance, how the members of a family are characters in a story, and that the story of the family is so strict, that it requires a degree of consistency and predictability with its characters, that may actually end up restricting the members within the family unit. In particular, Levy shows how the narratives of motherhood is constructed by patriarchy, and, like femininity, consists largely of illusion.

I will then go on to look at Levy's portrayal of the male and female characters in *The Cost of Living*, how she constructs them, what she focuses on in their behaviour. Levy is everywhere searching for inspiration on who to be in this new life, and she finds that inspiration partly in the women she encounters. The women that she is interested in and gives attention to, however, can be argued to defy what is considered interesting in the prevalent cultural narratives of our society, as such, Levy is giving space to the women that may be dismissed in mainstream culture. Her treatment of female characters will then be contrasted with her presentation of male characters, who, notably, are not given names, and seem to act in a predictable and stereotypically masculine way. Levy, I will argue, uses her male characters predominantly as props for the sake of the narrative, rather than honouring them as complex individuals.

Lastly, I will explore the role that material objects get *in The Cost of Living* as well as in the other volumes of the trilogy. Levy is preoccupied with physical reality, using objects as containers of stories, stories of who she will be and what life she will lead. In how she writes about the things she buys, Levy displays how physical objects have narratives attached to them, and also how cultural narratives and personal narratives may differ, and the problems that can arise in the difference between the narrative that we attempt to construct, and the narratives that the culture we live within pushes on us. The thesis will end with a conclusion where I will discuss some of my findings.

CHAPTER 2: LITERARY REVIEW

In this chapter, I will present theories that investigate and problematise how society and the individual are both created through narrative, or, if they are not, then at least how narratives are tools that help us to understand society and ourselves, whether that understanding is real or fictional. I will begin with presenting theories that illuminate how narratives function in society, in particular in relation to power structures and the place of the individual. I will then move on to theories that present various ways of comprehending identity, with an emphasis on the role narratives play in this understanding, as well as theories that focus particularly on women's subjectivity and the role of narratives in the construction of this. Finally, I will explain how these various ideas and paradigms can function to illuminate different aspects of Rachel Cusk's *Outline* and Deborah Levy's *The Cost of Living.* In this part, I will also make use of comments that Cusk and Levy has made in interviews to illustrate this connection further.

2.1 NARRATIVE AND SOCIETY

As we can see from the introduction to this chapter, narrative is both a powerful tool and a tool for power. Narrative helps us comprehend the world, but it can also function to govern our understanding of it. This is something that many theorists have investigated in their writings, and one of these is the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, who, in his work *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) argues that postmodernism entails a break with the traditional way of organising knowledge in society. According to Lyotard, all knowledge, not just literary fiction, is presented through narratives, which, in effect, make up the foundation of society. Different disciplines use different types of narrative to convey knowledge, and the narratives of each discipline are regulated by what Lyotard refers to as "language games", that is, sets of rules that the narratives within each discipline are to follow. Metanarratives, or grand narratives, are the overarching narratives that dictate the rules of the language games. They "produce systematic accounts of how the world works" (Malpas, *The Postmodern* 37). All knowledge, all rules around what can be uttered and how it should be uttered within a society are dictated and organised by these metanarratives. In other words, the metanarratives legitimate knowledge, and how that knowledge is used and conveyed through cultural and societal practices.

For Lyotard, postmodernism represents an "incredulity towards metanarratives" (qtd. in Malpas, *Jean-François Lyotard* 16) which has implications for the subject. We relate to others, to ourselves and to the world through the language games, and our lives and identities are constructed by and through them. The grand narratives give a sense of unified identity both to society and to the subject. With the decline of the grand narratives, then, identity is no longer held together. Instead, "the social subject itself seems to dissolve in a dissemination of language games" (qtd. in Malpas, *Jean-François Lyotard* 29) and both identity and society become fragmented.

To remedy the situation, Lyotard argues that the grand narratives should be replaced by a focus on "little narratives" (Readings 47). Through focusing on individual little narratives we allow for a multitude of language games that do not adhere to an overarching organizing system. Because narratives and language games are tied to identity, a diversity of language games will allow for a broader range of identities to have a place within the society (Malpas, *Jean-François Lyotard* 30). Art plays a crucial role in the making of these little narratives. Bill Readings explains that for Lyotard, art, in fact, "is a series of little narratives" (55). Hence, it is art's purpose to challenge, disrupt and renew the language games, thereby making room for new ways of thinking.

Among the other theorists who have discussed the ways in which the modern era leads to changes in how we construct our identities and how we relate to our surroundings, is sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. In *Liquid Modernity* (2000), Bauman uses the term "fluid modernity" to illustrate the constantly changing nature of the historical period that began in the late nineteenth century when traditional practices were being abandoned in the name of efficiency and innovation. Work, which was once a source of identity and an ethical foundation both for society and for the individual, is now a matter of flexibility, instability and short-term goals. Similarly, the relationship between space and time, which used to be fixed and preordained, has become flexible and dynamic. We live, according to Bauman, in a time in which nothing is solid, nothing can be expected to endure, and the forms and shapes we surround ourselves with are always temporary – or, fluid. The modern subject is not exempt from this characterization: The notion of a stable identity based on the apparent coherence and unity of people we see from a-far, is repeatedly being ripped apart by the constant changes and flows that characterize modernity.

Another aspect that characterizes modern society, is, according to Michel Foucault, the workings of power. Foucault argues that power in the modern world is exercised through discourse, defined by Donald E. Hall as "all human mechanisms for the conveyance of

meaning and value" (91). Power in modernity lies in who can speak and in what is regarded as real knowledge. Discourse is instrumental to power in determining what should be regarded as true, right, valuable, normal. The relation between power and discourse, is, however, more complex than that. According to Foucault, discourse can also be "a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (qtd. in Hall 93). While discourse can be used to uphold existing power structures, it can also be appropriated to work against them.

Foucault's argument of discourse having the potential both for the exertion of and resistance to power, is interesting in relation to literary texts, which are, of course, a part of the discourse of a society. As Hall puts it, "it prods us to examine 'texts' as instances of discursive production and possibly pointed and effective resistance" (95). It tells us that literary texts both can work to reproduce the power structures and existing views of what is true, normal, etc., or they can work as points of resistance, and introduce new ways of thinking about the world, as well as its inhabitants.

According to Foucault, the subject is a product of discourse, and consequently a product of power. Christopher Butler argues that in showing how power works on the constitution of the subject, Foucault demonstrates how "discourses entailed, imposed, demanded (…) a particular kind of *identity* for all those who were affected by them" (50). Power, through discourse, expresses what is appropriate for a subject to be, to want, to do, to look like. As subjects, our view of the world and of our selves are the effects of discursive power, we are constructed through discourse, and it is through discourse that we learn to understand ourselves and society. Consequently, literary texts hold a discursive power in the shaping of our identities and self-understanding, and can act as points of resistance by introducing new or marginalized perspectives, bringing forth new ways of thinking about what a subject and society can be. As such, Foucault shows the relation between discursive power and how we understand the world, society and ourselves.

We have seen how modern society entails changes regarding how identity is formed. Lyotard and Bauman argue that the changes in society, that is, the decrease of stable points or grand narratives to which one might tether one's identity, makes it necessary to find new ways of creating identity. In this, Lyotard and Foucault shows us, the narratives that we produce through art, such as literature, play a significant role. I will now look further into the relationship between narrative and subjectivity and narrative and identity.

2.2 NARRATIVE AND SUBJECTIVITY

The concept of narrative and the concept of identity work together, and overlap, in a number of ways. One theorist who has produced an elaborate theory of identity and how it is tied to narrative, is Paul Ricoeur. In *Oneself as Another* (1992), Ricoeur argues that there are two dominating ways of looking at the concept of identity: Identity as *sameness* and identity as *selfhood*. Identity as sameness (or, in Latin, *idem*, which Ricoeur uses interchangeably) can be numerical or qualitative: Numerical identity entails that several different phenomena that are designated by the same noun, are, in fact, the same thing. Qualitative identity has to do with resemblance: If two people are wearing suits that look exactly similar, one can say that that the two people are wearing the same suit. Numerical and qualitative identity, however, are not always sufficient in establishing someone's or something's sameness. Ricoeur emphasizes the role of time in the concept of sameness. What happens, for instance, if the someone or something has aged so much as to make both numerical and qualitative identity impossible to establish? A third aspect of sameness, then, is that of "uninterrupted continuity" (Ricoeur 117). When something has changed beyond resemblance, it is the ability to demonstrate the successive stages of small changes that have ultimately led to an appearance that is different, that can show that it is in fact still the same.

Ricoeur's most important criterion for sameness, which lays the foundation for the other criteria, is the principle of "permanence in time" (117). In other words: In order to ultimately establish the sameness of something, one has to be able to establish its existence over time. The question, then, becomes: what part needs to exist over time? If all of the different parts of a tool are replaced, one by one, how can we say that it is the same tool? What part of the tool keeps permanence in time, if all of the separate parts are replaced? According to Ricoeur, the answer is structure. The structure, not the separate parts, is what needs to keep permanence in time. This is why we can say that a person who has had replaced limbs and organs is the same person. A structure is made up of the relations between the different elements, and it is these relations, more than the specific elements, that are important to the principle of permanence in time. The question of personal identity as sameness thus is connected to the search for a "relational invariant" (Ricoeur 188), for something that through its relational structure persists through time.

Identity as selfhood (or, in Latin, *ipse*), as opposed to that of sameness, entails that identity has a reflexive self, a self that relates to itself. The question of selfhood implies: is there a form of permanence in time that does not require sameness? As an answer to this, Ricoeur presents a model of permanence in time he calls "keeping one's word" (Ricoeur 123). To keep a promise that one has given, is a way of keeping permanence in time that is not

connected to sameness, because the keeping of a promise through time does not rely on things not changing, rather that one, even if everything does change, will "hold firm" (Ricoeur 124) and stick to the promise that one's self has made. This shows the constancy of the self, rather than the sameness of the self. To keep one's word is to relate to the "I" that made the promise, even if that "I" has changed to someone unrecognizable.

As opposed to the model of keeping one's word, which illustrates identity as selfhood, Ricoeur suggests another model, called "character", that illustrates identity as sameness. He defines character as "the set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognized" (Ricoeur 121). These "lasting dispositions" can consist of habits. In sticking to certain habits through time, one shows that one is and continues to be the same person. Sticking to habits becomes lasting dispositions or character traits and displays a sort of permanence through time. Another form of lasting dispositions is "acquired identifications", that is, identifications with certain values and ideals (Ricoeur 121). As Ricoeur puts it, "recognizing oneself *in* contributes to recognizing oneself *by*" (121). When an individual identifies with a certain value, she is likely to act in ways that are appropriate according to that value. For instance, an individual that recognizes hard work as an important value will (probably) act in accordance with that value and work hard. Ultimately being "hard working" becomes one of her character traits, something that she is recognized by. Upholding these values becomes a way of maintaining one's identity as sameness.

A significant difference between these two models is that while the self-constancy-model separates selfhood from sameness and shows that selfhood can exist independently, the character-model in fact shows that sameness and selfhood overlap. Character, Ricoeur argues, is "me, myself, *ipse;* but this *ipse* expresses itself as *idem*" (121). As we have seen, character mainly consists of habits, which endure through time and thereby express identity as sameness. However, Ricoeur points out that acquiring habits is a process of innovation followed by sedimentation. The sedimentation is the habit, which is what is visible in the character. The innovation preceding the sedimentation is invisible, but it is a process to which the self's relating to itself, or what Ricoeur calls *selfhood*, is integral. The model of keeping one's word, on the other hand, opposes selfhood to sameness and places a gap in between them. Here, Ricoeur introduces narrative identity as a mediator. Like Lyotard, then, Ricoeur sees narrative as central to the forming of identity, but while to Lyotard identity is constructed within narratives, Ricoeur sees narrative as a mediator between the poles of identity as selfhood and identity as sameness.

According to Ricoeur, narrative identity is created through emplotment. Ricoeur defines emplotment as the "synthesis of the heterogenous" (141). In every story there will be a demand for concordance, for events to fall together in a certain order. There will, however, also be discordances, events that destabilize the narrative and thereby threaten the identity of the story. In order to preserve the identity, concordance and discordances have to be mediated between; in other words, the different elements have to be composed into a narrative unity, thereby creating the narrative identity. This process of emplotment can be transferred to character as an integral part of a narrative. The diverse events and actions making up the life of the literary character are "emplotted" into a coherent life story which is understood as the character's identity. The character's narrative identity in this scheme consists of experiences and is made up of the story that is told.

Ricoeur sees literature as a "laboratory for thought experiments" (148) around the interplay of identity as sameness and identity as selfhood. By showing the two poles of identity in different relations, narratives expose the difference between sameness and selfhood. Where fairy tales operate on the sameness side of the pole, in which characters remain the same throughout the whole story, the realistic novels of the 18th century, in which the characters often undergo change but still remain identifiable as the same, tend to operate in more of a middle ground. The stream-of-consciousness novel of modernism refuses structures that emplot the character and the narrative, however, and when the character is no longer ordered within a plot, it loses its identity as sameness. Thus, Ricoeur argues that to refuse emplotment, to refuse the configuration of narrative and character into a coherent narrative identity is to expose character as selfhood, stripping away the appearances of sameness.

It is the emplotment of character that Hélène Cixous criticizes in the essay "The Character of 'Character'" (1974). Cixous argues that the concept of "character" in literary texts is based on the notion of the self as something we can fully know and that can be fully conscious of itself. The construction of literary character thereby is a repression of the unconscious, because the unconscious is the unknowable, unstable, the always shifting undercurrents of the subject. To ascribe character is to classify the subject, to make it predictable, to confine it to a pre-existing pattern that the reader can recognize and identify with. The subject, Cixous argues, consists of multiple Egos, influenced by the unconscious as well as the conscious. The concept of character seeks to unify them, confining the subject into a whole, unified character, and thereby reducing and repressing what the subject can be: "If 'I', true subject, subject of the unconscious, am what 'I' can be, then 'I' am always on the

run" (Cixous 42). The unconscious is what makes the subject capable of transformation and unpredictability. It must be repressed in the construction of character, because the unconscious cannot be characterized. To characterize is to deem the subject to role-playing, to put a mask of unification on a subject that is, in fact, multiple.

Cixous compares character to a social sign existing in relation to other signs, and in the conventional sense building a literary character is to make it a recognizable sign that the reader can recognize him- or herself in. In order for the reader to recognize the sign of character, it has to follow certain norms and fulfil certain expectations: Thus, to characterize is to adhere to ideology. Here, Cixous is in line with Lyotard, who points out that we understand both the world and our selves through narrative. In the way we construct character in literary texts, we are reproducing certain ideologically based understandings that the reader has of what identity is. Cixous refers to this relationship between character and reader as a "mirror relation" (43). In line with the Lacanian vein of psychoanalysis, the literary character can be said to do for the reader what the mother does for the child in Lacan's "mirror stage", in the form of the child seeing the mother and her appearance of being unified which leads to it identifying with her and developing its own false sense of being whole and unified (Mitchell & Rose 30).

In "Self-Making Narratives" (2003), psychologist Jerome Bruner says something similar and argues that the self is a story we make up based on our memories of the past and expectations for the future, which helps us navigate the place we find ourselves. There is no inner self to be represented through words, "rather we constantly construct and reconstruct a self to meet the needs of the situations we encounter" (Bruner 210). To Bruner, the self is a mystery, and in order to understand it, we tell stories about it. The self we construct through these stories, is a way of creating a place for oneself in relation to others. We tell the stories of our selves in order to find, maintain and stabilize our place within the social world. The selves we construct are consequently also influenced by how we think others will view us and the expectations we meet. The way we recount our memories and the story of our lives is thereby influenced as much by external factors as internal, and when we tell stories of the self we don't necessarily unravel its mysteries.

Among the external factors that influence how we construct our selves through stories, is the culture we live in. As Lyotard argues, the culture we live in is constructed through narratives. Bruner elaborates on how the narratives that form our culture, also form the way we see ourselves. In "A Narrative Model of Self-Construction" (1997), Bruner argues that the way that we construct the self is culturally dependent: Self-construction happens within

"cultural genres" (147), defined as "ways in which we may legitimately conceive of our selves and others" (147). The narrative conventions of the culture we partake in are especially important for our sense of self, for the very reason that we use narratives in self-construction. The stories we choose to tell about our selves, will depend on or be influenced by narrative conventions and on the stories that are available to us in the culture. The cultural genres, and the narratives that follow, function to legitimate the story-self, to show its place in the culture, thereby providing stability to our place in the world. A consequence of this, Bruner suggests, may be that changes in narrative conventions within the culture, lead to changes in the ways we see and construct our selves through stories.

Bruner also points to other factors that tend to lead to a change in the stories of ourselves. He argues that most of the self-constructing narration we do happens in the smaller stories that we tell in everyday encounters with others. Only in special circumstances do we reconstruct more elaborate narratives of the self, for instance when the harmony of our lives is somehow disrupted, or, in short, when we encounter trouble. In Bruner's words, "the very *engine* of narrative is *trouble*" (157). Encountering trouble in our lives tend to lead us to reconsider our life stories as a whole, and to a reconstruction of the autobiographical narrative of the self: "It is when Self is no longer able to function in a fashion that relates us to others and, indeed, to our prior conceptions of ourselves, that we turn to renewed self-construction" (Bruner 158). When we face troublesome circumstances in our lives, such as marginalization or suddenly not being part of the mainstream, the narrative of the self that we have constructed ceases to make sense, or no longer provides us with a comfortable place among the people we live with or encounter. The solution becomes to reconstruct the narrative, to tell the story of one's life differently, and, in doing so, change the self.

In changing the story of our selves, we also change how we experience the world, however. Bruner argues that the story we tell of our own lives determines how we perceive our experiences, even as we are perceiving them: "The events of a life cannot be taken as givens; they are themselves fashioned to fit our growing conceptions of our Selves (…)" (147). The self that we construct also produces our reality, how we experience and make sense of events, what we consider important or unimportant. Even as we perceive events we are filtering them in order to fit our narrative selves. Changes in the narrative then, can make us perceive events differently. What is more, identity construction is an interactional process, in which the subject achieves a sense of continuity and coherence through the small narratives of everyday life.

In *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991), Anthony Giddens argues that in the age of modernity, the self has become a project. Self-identity is not something that is given, or merely a sense of continuity, rather it is "something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual" (Giddens 52). Reflexivity, the process of acquiring and organising new information and implementing it into our lives, is central in the construction of the self. In many ways, reflexivity is a consequence of living in the constant flows of new information that is part of the modern era: The vast amounts of information we encounter every day, whether we seek it out or not, becomes a part of the project of the self. Our self-identities are "reflexively organised in terms of flows of social and psychological information about possible ways of life" (Giddens 14). We evaluate, reconsider, restructure how we see and live our lives, with the goal of improving our lifestyle and self by implementing the newest knowledge on the field. Consequently, the project that self-identity is can be improved and refined by changing our way of living, or *lifestyle*.

A lifestyle is the sum of choices we make in a number of different arenas of our lives. A lifestyle gives "material form to a particular narrative of self-identity" (Giddens 81). Through what we eat, what we wear, who we spend time with, where we work, and our day-to-day habits in general, we create or reinforce our self-narrative, the story we tell ourselves and the world about who we are. Our lifestyle, and with that our self-identity, involves a number of choices. This abundance of choices (with a "plurality of options") that we are more or less forced to make, is a trademark of modernity, because in pre-modern societies these choices would be made for you depending on where and into what circumstances you were born. Making these choices is, according to Giddens, not something we can abstain from. Living in the modern era means that we are forced to make a number of choices, and thereby to follow a lifestyle. By making certain choices and thereby adopting a certain lifestyle, you express both to yourself and to other people not just what you do, but who you are (Giddens 81).

Involved in the reflexive construction of the self-identity, is the body. Giddens argues that the body's "practical immersion in the interactions of day-to-day life is an essential part of the sustaining of a coherent sense of self-identity" (99). Bodily appearance, including what we put on our body in terms of clothing, makeup etc., is involved in telling the story of who we are. This, Giddens, points out, was also true in pre-modern societies; but while bodily appearance and especially clothing was used to express only social identity, it is now used actively to express personal identity, as well as class, gender and line of work. Another aspect of the body involved in the upholding of our self-identity is our demeanour: how we use and

present our body in relation to the different settings of everyday life. Because everyday life in modernity consists of a number of different settings and social situations that one has to encounter, demeanour has to be adjusted according to the expectations tied to the different settings. Giddens points out that while others have suggested this leading to a fragmenting of the self, or to the development of a plurality of selves, he sees demeanour as an important factor in maintaining the sense of coherence in one's self-identity: in one's demeanour "the unravelling of the self is kept in check" (100). By holding on to some constants in one's demeanour even as one adjusts to the different social settings one encounters, a sense of continuity is created.

In addition to appearance and demeanour, "body regimes" are important for contemporary identity construction. The plurality of choices we face in the construction of our self-identity entails making choices concerning our body: our body regimes are the sum of these choices (they are the lifestyle of the body). The body has thus become a part of the reflexive project of the self, and new information concerning the body as new choices has to be made in terms of what to put into it and how to manage it. The importance in present society of making the right choices for one's body is due to that we are, as Giddens puts it, "responsible for the design of our own bodies" (102), and that this body that we "design" through choices, is a means of expressing and constructing a sense of self-identity. Dieting and various other health regiments are ways of taking control of one's body and thereby of one's self-identity. Giddens points out that eating disorders, which are particularly common in our modern period, are "casualties of the need – and responsibility – of the individual to create and maintain a distinctive self-identity" (105).

Like Giddens, philosopher Rosi Braidotti has found that modernity raises new issues about identity formation. In *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (2002) Braidotti argues that in this time of rapid change and transformation, we are in need of new ways of thinking about the subject. Braidotti's goal is consequently to present "a decentred and multi-layered vision of the subject as a dynamic and changing entity" (2). This entails discussing processes rather than concepts, and the subject's "becoming" rather than its being. Building on the work of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Luce Irigaray, she explores a new way of discussing and representing the subject and society as on-going processes, rather than as established concepts.

While our theoretical framework is accustomed to discussing point A and point B, Braidotti argues that we lack ways of expressing and representing the process in between, which is where we actually find ourselves. Because we are always in process, we need new

ways of talking about the subjects that we are becoming. This becoming does not have final destination point, nor is it a linear process consisting of pre-prescribed steps, it is rather an individual process that each subject does differently, depending on their material conditions and the power structures that they are embedded in. Unconscious processes play a central role in becoming. While in Freud's psychoanalysis the unconscious is associated with the darker aspects of living such as neuroses and nightmares, Braidotti argues for its positive contribution to the becoming of the subject by functioning as "the guarantee of non-closure in the practice of subjectivity" (39). The unconscious is forever and constantly flowing, changing, transforming, thereby undermining the notion of the subject as a stable and unified entity, and ensuring the dynamic, multi-layered, pluralistic becoming that is the actual subject.

Central to Braidotti's becoming is her notion of the "nomadic subject" (40). Being nomadic, in Braidotti's vision, is to not settle in one state of being, not through the refusal of all notions of identity, but through the refusal of any *fixed* identity. To a nomadic subject, no identity is permanent: being nomadic is to be changing, in transit, mobile. The nomadic subject, Braidotti says, "is marked by a structural non-adherence to rules, roles and models" (40). In other words, being nomadic is to refuse and undermine conventions in terms of thought and behaviour. This is challenging, as Braidotti points out that social and cultural norms attract us "like magnets that draw the self heavily in certain directions and stimulate the person accordingly" (40), providing a place for the subject to be visible and accepted. Being nomadic is consequently to be highly self-reflexive: To be conscious of how one engages with discourse, finding new ways of using it, in doing so "undoing the formerly dominant model of subjectivity" (Braidotti 118).

The clearest illustration of this undoing, and with that the subject's becoming, can be found in writing, and in the writing of literary texts in particular. The process of writing can be becoming, not when it adheres to established truths and norms, but when it "traces itself for lines of evasion" (Minh-ha qtd. in Braidotti 94). To write is to be in transition, it can be a way of destabilizing sedimented conventional structures, and of exploring the spaces in between the binary categories and stale concepts of traditional theoretical language. Braidotti argues that becoming is expressed in writing by writers who

> Destabilize the "I" by sabotaging the nest of negativity on which it erects itself. What is affirmed in the process is the impersonal voice of a self that is not One, but rather a cluster of multiple becomings. (Braidotti 94)

As we see here, to Braidotti and Deleuze the "I" is nothing more than an effort to unite multiple becomings and forces under a constructed umbrella we call the "I". By shaking or dislocating or even removing the structures, the conventions, that the I is built upon, this kind of writing disregards any notion of a fixed identity. What is left, is the subject's becoming.

One of the ways Braidotti describes this becoming is as "a process of peeling off, stratum after stratum, the layers of signification that have been tattooed in the surface of our body" (Braidotti 170). Braidotti emphasizes that the subject is "embodied and embedded" (62). Subjectivity is rooted in the body, the subject experiences and is located in the world through the body. The body is "embedded in multiple power-relations" (62), that is, power works on the body and through the body. All bodies carry signs, such as sex, race, class, age, etc., that are socially constructed through discourse and ideology and that locates the subject within sociohistorical structures of power. In the subject's becoming, it transcends these signifiers, refusing the coded modes of thought and behaviour that are attached to them.

2.3 NARRATIVE AND FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY

Braidotti argues in *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Philosophy* (1994) that there is particular need to rethink and represent female subjectivity. Women's subjectivity has been constructed through the categorical and phallogocentric language of philosophy and rationality, the woman has been the Other to man, or subjectivity has been seen as universal, that is, woman's subjectivity has been constructed through man's. Braidotti argues that since subjectivity is rooted in the body, there can be no universal subjectivity, as there is no universal body. It is especially important for women, then, to find new ways of thinking about the subject: "women must speak the feminine – they must think it, write it, and represent it in their own terms" (Braidotti 118).

A writer who is particularly interested in how women's subjectivity work and how it relates to the conventional narratives of our society, is Rebecca Solnit. In *The Mother of All Questions* (2017), Solnit disparages the culture we live in for its narrative on what a woman's life is supposed to look like. "We are given a single story line about what makes a good life" (Solnit 6), Solnit writes, giving literature at least partial blame. By again and again presenting different variants of the same recipe of what a woman's life should contain, that is, husband and children, literature is not only reinforcing the notion of the woman's rightful place in society, but also providing a map for the imagination of where happiness and meaning can be found, a map that is very often misleading, given that it may very well lead somewhere

entirely different. As Solnit points out, we all know that there are plenty of people who have every ingredient to this recipe, but who are still miserable.

Solnit points out how stories are central to any quest for freedom, and the cumulative power of repressive silences: “Liberation is always in part a storytelling process: breaking stories, breaking silences, making new stories” (19). In other words, stories can be traps: they can captivate both their central characters and their listeners in modes of thought and behaviour. This kind of silence that arises from threats or barriers, isolates, because it takes away the option of reaching out to others, it dehumanizes, in so much as our voices are essential to being human. To be a free person, Solnit says, is to be able to tell one’s own story. Whether one is valued in one’s society, can be determined by whether or not there is a place for one’s story.

While society in itself can make certain stories hard or impossible to tell, there are also other things that work against narratives. One of these things is trauma. Solnit writes that part of what characterizes trauma, is its inability to be integrated into a narrative of the self. While most events and experiences can quite easily be integrated into this narrative, traumatic memories cannot. Solnit quotes David Morris’ *The Evil Hours* (2015), in which Morris compares traumatic memories to wild animals. Normal memories, Morris says, “are, in a sense, like domesticated animals, amenable to control, tractable. In contrast, the traumatic memory stands apart, like a feral dog, snarling, wild, and unpredictable” (qtd in Solnit 37). In fact, traumatic memories can destroy narrative by breaking it into pieces and fractions that cannot be recognized as a comprehensible narrative.

2.4 CUSK, LEVY AND NARRATIVE

As has been discussed in the preceding parts, we use narrative to construct and understand our identities and society. It is not just that we control the narratives and use them for our own purposes, however, they also control us and how we see and construct our selves. Lyotard, Bauman and Braidotti point out that in the postmodern, “fluid” or nomadic society, the stable points that used to create coherence in our life stories, and, with that, our identities, are no longer stable. As such, identity must be constructed in new ways.

The *Outline*-trilogy can be seen as an exploration of writing the modern identity, in which Cusk uses narrative actively to explore how narratives work in our understanding of identity and society. Through interviews and essays Cusk gives further perspectives on how narratives work in our lives, that are relevant to this thesis. In an interview with *The New*

Yorker, she critiques contemporary literary writing by stating that people use literary language "the way they'd drive down Fifth Avenue" (Schwarz 2018). In other words, her finding is that they use it almost automatically – because that's what everyone does, because that's how it's normally done. As a continuation of this, she says that the underpinnings of the conventional structures of writing – and living – involves a false suspension of personal identity, and a protection of that false suspension of the personal identity. In this light, the *Outline*-trilogy can be viewed as an attempt of breaking out of conventional structures, both in terms of writing, and in terms of living. She is rejecting the conventional structures we use to construct the self, both in narrative and in life, because they are, in fact, false. Conventional narrative form in literature, or what Ricoeur refers to as emplotment, and the conventional forms through which we organise our lives, are ways of extending the self, or making it something we are able to understand and something we can show others. We are prone to think that the stories we tell about our lives, our relationships, our tastes, etc., are our selves. One of the questions the *Outline*-trilogy poses, however, is what potential consequences does this storytelling have for us as individuals and as a society? And what is left of the self when the forms, or the stories, we create or understand it through, break down?

In the same interview that was cited above, Cusk made the statement "I'm not interested in character because I don't think character exists anymore" (Schwartz, *The New Yorker*). Life, Cusk argues, is no longer lived in the form of character. In her opinion, we are becoming more homogenous in how we live and communicate, and for this reason, there's reason to question what function character actually has in our lives anymore. To Cusk, character is a notion from the past, that many contemporary novels hold on to. Rather than thinking about personal experience as related to character, Cusk describes it as "things that you can enter and leave in certain phases of your life that aren't completely determined by the fact that you're Jane and this is your life" (Schwartz, *The New Yorker*). In Ricoeur's terminology, it is the emplotted character, or character as sameness, that Cusk, like Cixous, wants us to abandon. As will be discussed, Cusk's narrator and main character Faye appears to the reader not through the sameness of character traits. According to Ricoeur, when stripping away the sameness of the character, that is, her habits and characteristics, what is exposed is the character's selfhood. Interestingly, Ricoeur's model of selfhood, is the keeping of one's word. In *Outline*, we learn that the main character Faye has recently been through a divorce, which means that a significant promise has been broken. This is only one of the ways that *Outline* demonstrates and explores divorce as a crisis of identity.

Arguably, divorce is one of the changes and transitions that, according to Braidotti and Bauman, characterizes the modern era, and consequently it is a space for identity loss. Cusk explains that Faye's passivity is a result of where she is in her life, which is nowhere, and who she is in her life, which is no one. Having had the whole structure around her life break down, she is left without identity. The crisis of identity that Faye is experiencing after her divorce, is a circumstance that, according to Bruner, tends to lead to a restructuring of one's life narrative. We can see in these novels that trouble is the engine of narrative, but the way the crisis works in the narrative, however, is not to create suspense or as a turning point in the narrative. Rather, it is subtle, understated, looming underneath the story, but without receiving a sense of resolution.

The Outline-trilogy is largely made up of conversations. Conversations, Cusk argues, are "a showing of identity to each other" (Schwartz, *The New Yorker*), and with no identity, there are not many ways of participating in conversations. Because Faye is in the middle of an identity crisis, because her own identity is currently unclear even to herself, she is often passive in these conversations. As we have seen, Bruner argues that the narration of the self is the construction of the self. *Outline* is mostly made up of conversations, as such, it is a demonstration in the ways that people use the everyday narratives that arise in conversations to establish their place in relation to others and to construct or convey their identities. It is also notable that the oral kind of storytelling that these novels consist of, has traditionally been a female form of storytelling and participation. As such, it is a more democratic form than the linear storytelling. The fragmented, oral storytelling that these novels consist of defy the linear storytelling that many novels rely on and that Cusk refers to as to "drive down 5th avenue" (Schwartz, *The New Yorker*).

The abandonment of traditional character entails that one has to find new ways of writing people in texts, or, as Braidotti points out, there is a need for new ways of representing the subject. As such, Cusk's statements on character favor a development of the novel alongside the development of society. As many of the theories above has shown, innovative ways of constructing the literary selves are not acts that only have consequences for literature, but have discursive power and contribute to widening the cultural genres that, according to Bruner, influence us in the construction of our identities. This is also relevant in relation to Levy, who explicitly states that she wants to find a new way of writing female characters. As such, *The Cost of Living* is focused on female subjectivity and female desire. In an interview, Levy reflects on the place and functions of female characters in many of the prevalent, cultural stories:

> If you think about some books or some films, and ask what the women are there to do, what they are there for, they are often there to serve everyone else's desires. What about their own desires? (…) I wanted to make three books that are all about that. You return subjectivity and desire to all the personae in the book. (Horvei)

We have seen Braidotti argue that women must speak, write and thereby create their own subjectivity, because the female subjectivity that we are often presented to in our culture, have been written by men. What Levy, evidently, is doing with these books is to create a space for female subjectivity and female desire, trying to find out what she, as a woman, actually wants, which is something else than what women have been told that they should want, that is, the marriage and the nuclear family.

Levy's novels are, more than Cusk's, preoccupied with physical reality, and in particular with the objects that we put into our homes. In the same interview that was cited above, Levy states that "When we make a home, all of us, it doesn't matter if it is very humble, but we make a kind of utopia" (Horvei). According to Giddens, our lifestyle gives "material form to a particular narrative of self-identity" (Giddens 81). The way we decorate and build a home, and the many choices that we make there, are, arguably, part of this lifestyle. As such, this utopia that Levy is trying to create out of material objects, is not just a way of constructing a home, but of constructing an identity.

CHAPTER 3: OUTLINE

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I will, through close-reading and analysis of passages of *Outline*, the first novel of the trilogy which is also called *Outline*, explore how Cusk explores and illustrates some of the ways in which we rely on narratives in order to make sense of the world, as well as the ways they deceive us. In *Outline* we meet Faye, a writer who has recently gone through a divorce. Faye is on a trip to Athens where she is teaching a writing course. We follow her as she befriends her next-seat neighbour on the plane, goes out on a boat with him, meets friends and colleagues, has conversations with her sons over the phone, and teaches her students. Through her meeting with friends, strangers and her students, we hear about their lives, and we also indirectly learn about Faye through her replies and reactions to their stories. In many ways, however, the narrator, Faye, eludes the reader. While being present as a mediator of the stories of the people around her, she herself remains partly invisible. Most of the novels are made up of conversations, and these conversations tend to be more like monologues, due to the fact that Faye does not say much. But this passivity of the protagonist is also what structures the text.

In my close reading of *Outline*, I will look at how Cusk, through these narratives, investigates some of the problems than can arise from the gap between life and language in general, and between life and narrative in particular. Because narratives are greatly involved in the construction of our identities, I will examine how the disruption of narratives can lead to breakdowns of identity. This, as we shall see, is not only valid when it comes to the little narratives that we live our lives through, but also of the bigger narratives that structure our lives, as we learn from Lyotard. Through *Outline*, I will investigate the contradictions between reality and the stories we tell about reality, and how we use these stories.

3.2 THE POWER OF NARRATIVES

As mentioned, Lyotard states that we understand the world through narrative – and the world encourages us to understand ourselves based on specific narratives. Grand narratives in our culture, such as Christianity, the narrative of the family, of the home, or of the romantic relationship, are presented to us in order to make us into citizens. In a way, we are encouraged to make our lives into miniversions of the grand narratives. Furthermore, Ricoeur shows us

that narrative identity is created through emplotment. Through emplotment, we integrate surprising elements, discordances, into the story, giving them some kind of significance by structuring a narrative around them, rather than seeing them as the neutral or random events or the fragments that they may be. In this manner, they become important to the story, they drive it on. Emplotment is not just a tool for the writers of novels, then, but something that we all do in our narrative understandings of our selves and others.

This is also true for our relationships, and maybe especially for marriages. Cusk illustrates in several ways how marriage, and other close personal relationships, can be seen as stories. On her way to Athens, Faye is having a conversation with the man on the seat next to her, who tells her about his life. He has been divorced three times, and when reflecting on his marriages, he says that

> his first marriage had been authentic in a way that nothing ever had again. (…) It seemed to him now that that life had been lived almost unconsciously, that he had been lost in it, absorbed in it, as you can be absorbed in a book, believing in its events and living entirely through and with its characters (*Outline* 15-16).

Here, we can detect a disillusionment with our narrative understanding of the world. Out of this man's three marriages, only the first one seems to have been authentic. His description of it, however, does not say that this in fact was more real than the others, rather that he believed in its authenticity in a way that he later has not been able to. When he wants to go back to the feeling of authenticity from his first marriage, what he wants back is not the marriage in itself, as he quickly discovers every time he talks on the phone with his first wife (ibid.). We can assume, then, that what he wants back is his own ability to believe in the stories he is immersed in. This is what he lost after his first marriage ended: the ability to believe in the story he was part of, to see it as completely real. This disillusionment with the stories that we are part of is something we can see throughout the novels. It seems that he, like Faye, found that when these structures broke down the reality of his married life was exposed to him as a story, and once that had happened he couldn't go back to fully believing in it.

Even if Faye's neighbour can no longer believe in the stories of his marriages, it is clear that he still uses narratives to understand the realities of his life. In an attempt to explain his first divorce, he tells her a story from his childhood, in which he witnessed a hay-cart tipping over on its way back from the field. He describes it as an inevitable and yet silly event, and says that the same thing happened to him and his wife: "We hit a bump in the road,

and over we went" (*Outline* 13). Here we see that he is using a story from his childhood, one that has been with him his whole life, to understand his divorce. Of course, the childhood story is a metaphor, but nevertheless it provides a template for the narrative of his divorce story. These are two completely different events, and yet he uses the same narrative to explain them. Stories provide templates to understand the events of our lives, although they may prove to be insufficient tools. Perhaps it is helping him in understanding, perhaps it is distorting and simplifying, perhaps both. Either way, he uses the story as a template and, in doing so, shapes reality into something he can understand, perhaps something that is easier to live with, or something that can be fixed. The story implies that, like the hay-cart, his marriage wasn't stable enough. The story, then, provides hope: If a relationship is made more stable, it may not tip over. As such, narratives can give hope and comfort.

They can also, however, obscure reality, and in fact, through much of the neighbour's life story, there seems to be some distance between what he is telling, and what can be observed as reality. For example, he is reading a crime novel, while at the same time insisting that his tastes are more sophisticated than that, shoving the book into his suitcase as if to hide it. Similarly, when Faye is about to get into his car, he is self-conscious about its lack of grandeur: "It had struck him that I might have imagined something far grander, and he was embarrassed if that was the case; but he himself didn't set much store by cars" (*Outline* 60). As we can see here, what he is saying is contradicted by the fact that he is saying it: By saying it he shows that he does, in fact, set store by cars, otherwise, why would he mention it? He is expressing his thoughts and feelings by saying that they are the opposite of what they are, as such, his narrative is full of a kind of unintended irony.

These discrepancies between the neighbour's story, and what can be observed in reality, suggests that the neighbour may, like Faye, be in a crisis of identity. The self-story that he is telling to provide a comfortable place in his social world, as Jerome Bruner has shown, he doesn't quite believe in himself. This is further exemplified by his elaborated account of the "bump in the road" that ended his first marriage. It turns out the divorce happened after his wife discovered he was having an affair. In his somewhat bizarre recount of what happened, however, the affair is hardly mentioned at all. It is his wife's uncovering of the affair, and what led up to it, that functions as the bump in the road. In his narrative, she is the deceiving one, not him: it was not the affair that led to the divorce, rather, it was his wife's actions in uncovering it. She woke him up in the middle of a nap and immediately asked him if he was having an affair. Because she caught him off-guard, he admitted that he was. In his narrative, she is the villain, while *his* deceit is brushed off as "nothing" (*Outline* 174). His

narrative severely downplays his own role in what happened, while her deceit, if it can be called that, is blown up to what really tipped over the hay cart. At the same time, the "naked guilt" (*Outline* 174) Faye observes on his face contradicts his story, or rather, makes it clear that he does not believe in it himself.

His lack of belief in his own story may explain his description of his life since the first marriage ended: The neighbour describes life since as living in a series of hotel rooms, a constant feeling of "impermanence, of homelessness" (*Outline* 24). He explains this feeling as a lack of structure: "Without structure, events are unreal: the reality of his wife, like the reality of the house, was structural, determinative." (*Outline* 24). He has, of course, had other houses and other wives since, all as objectively real as the first one. Why, then, has he experienced everything since differently? Why have they not provided the structure for his life that he is looking for?

The fruitless search for structure that the neighbour has been on since, illustrates two things. One is that marriage, or a relationship of the kind, can give the story of the self a narrative identity. Ricoeur shows how narrative identity is made through emplotment, that is, through synchronising the different elements in a story, manipulating them to work together in order to achieve a certain narrative identity. The marriage can function as the foundation for the emplotment of the story of the self. It determines which elements should be regarded as significant and insignificant, important and less important, what should be emphasized and what should be omitted. The challenges that must be faced in most relationships, such as disagreements, boredom, and attraction towards other people, are dealt with by integrating them into the story of the marriage. That is how the marriage can provide structure: It structures the story of the self by giving it a narrative identity.

3.3 SHARED NARRATIVES

The other thing that the neighbour's tale sheds light on, is that it in order for a relationship to structure the self in this way, it must be believed in. As we have already seen, what separated his first marriage from the consecutive ones is what he calls its authenticity, or his ability to believe in it. Because he believed in it, it was real to him. His marriage provided narrative identity to the story of his self. This is important because any sequence of events can be told in many different ways, of which all can be true. What will make one of them truer than the other, however, is that the people involved believe in it. The importance of believing in the story is further illustrated in Faye's story about her sons. Watching two boys play on a nearby

boat, Faye recounts to her neighbour how her sons, when they were younger, would play together from morning to night, their play being "a kind of shared trance in which they created whole imaginary worlds" (*Outline* 80). One day, though, it was over, because one of them stopped believing in the game. Faye reflects that "it was brought home to me how much of what was beautiful in their lives was the result of a shared vision of things that strictly speaking could not have been said to exist" (*Outline* 80-81). In the boys' game, certain objects, events and actions had specific significance and functions that, because they shared a story, the boys agreed upon. Of course the events, actions and objects could also have been the constituents of other stories. It was the fact that they both believed in a specific version of the story, that made it real. When one of them stopped believing in it, however, there were only the material manifestations left, without the common story. As Faye puts it: "(…) there was no single truth any more, that was the point. There was no longer a shared vision, a shared reality even" (*Outline* 83).

After the common play stopped, Faye remarks, facts became more important than before: "Without their shared story, the two children began to argue, and where their playing had taken them away from the world, (…) their arguments brought them constantly back to it" (*Outline* 81). In their shared story, facts mattered less. When the shared story broke down, however, facts became very important, because when there's no common story, we have to rely on what we can actually see. Objects that existed in reality, events and actions that had been made, that had functioned as physical manifestations of the shared story, now became the physical manifestations of something else, but without the shared story, there was no longer a definitive meaning ascribed to them. There were now two separate stories, in which these same facts could mean completely different things.

Faye's description of the boys' common story is reminiscent of what Lyotard calls metanarratives: One could argue that the boys' common story became a form of metanarrative in their child world, dictating what was right and true, organizing knowledge. Like a grand narrative, it organized their identities as well, and when it fell apart, they were both grasping for a story that made sense to them and that preserved them as individuals. They suddenly had to rely on facts, because what is left when the common story breaks down, are the things that you can actually see and touch. These things had to be ascribed new meaning which would form new stories and thereby become important for the preservation of a personal identity, or even the creation of a new one. The breakdown of the common story that the boys lived by are in many ways similar to a divorce. The marriage that used to *be* the story, that provided narrative identity to the story of the self, now has to be organized into a story that is going to

be about something else. The failed marriage must be emplotted as one of the many events of the story of the self, it is no longer *the story* of the self. What used to be the narrative identity of the story, must become one of the events of the story, and one must find a new narrative identity all together.

3.4 DIVORCE AS A BREAKDOWN OF IDENTITY

In the same manner as the boys' game is reminiscent of a grand narrative, the ending of their game is reminiscent of the end of a marriage. We could argue that the marriage, or a relationship of the kind, can be said to be one of the last remaining grand narratives in our postmodern world. Although there are other ways of living and an increasing number of people are living alone, the lasting, loving relationship between two people is still an ideal that most people hold, and it is portrayed as the meaning of life, whether explicitly or as an underlying premise, in much of the discourse that surround us. In fact, while in earlier times marriage was a part of the grand narrative of Christianity, in the sense that Christianity was what legitimated the cultural practice of marriage, in contemporary times the marriage in itself can be argued to have become the grand narrative. Furthermore, in a time when the other grand narratives that held our identities together are losing credibility, all the more pressure is put on the marriage to fall back on as a site of identity construction.

As such, the breakdown of a marriage can be experienced as a breakdown of identity in a number of ways: one of which is the breakdown of the narrative that structured the self, that held it together, so to speak. An illustration of this is when Faye is out swimming in the sea outside Athens, and she watches the family on the nearby boat. She compares their confined movements on the boat deck to "little clockwork figures rotating on a jewellery box" (*Outline* 86). For some reason, the sight of them makes her feel afraid, and she swims back to her neighbour's boat. Lying on the deck with a shawl over her head while the boat is moving them towards land, she has "the sense of everything in my life having become atomised, all its elements separated as though an explosion had sent them flying away from the centre in different directions" (*Outline* 87). The passage can be interpreted as an illustration of the difference between living life invested and immersed in a culturally acknowledged story, or a grand narrative, and that of living with no story at all, with nothing to emplot the events and actions of day-to-day life, and the forces working in and on the self, into a comprehensible form. What kept the different elements of Faye's life together, what structured them, was the story of the marriage. The narrative works like a magnet holding everything together, its

breakdown is experienced as not just a falling apart, but an explosion. It illustrates the difficulty of gripping the different elements of life, their meaning and significance, after the narrative that structured them breaks down.

While lying under the shawl feeling as if the different elements of her life are flying off, Faye thinks about the family on the boat, "so mechanically and fixedly constellated and yet so graceful and correct" (*Outline* 87). Their current reality is the opposite of her own. Her description of them captures both the benefits and the downsides of living according to conventional forms. On the one hand, the family is graceful and correct seen from the outside, which is what the acknowledged forms of living look like, none more perhaps than the nuclear family. As Braidotti puts it, norms attract us like magnets, and the conventional family narrative is indeed normative. At the same time, Faye describes them as "mechanical and fixed" (*Outline* 87), suggesting that there is also unfreedom in this image, in this form that is the conventional family story. There is only a limited number of moves they can make in order to stay what they are, both in their own eyes and in the eyes of others. The narrative and form that they live in provide both comfort and security, but also limit and restrict.

3.5 NARRATIVE FILTERS

We can argue that the breakdown of the narrative of her family life left Faye with a suspicion towards the narratives we use to understand and construct the world. She also, however, experiences life and what she witnesses around her, differently than before the divorce:

> I found appearances more bewildering and tormenting now than at any previous point in my life. It was as if I had lost some special capacity to filter my own perceptions, one that I had only become aware of once it was no longer there. (*Outline* 74)

According to Bruner, our self-narratives determine how we perceive events; as we are perceiving them, we are filtering them in order to fit into the narratives that we have constructed and that constitute our selves. In light of this, Faye's statement about no longer being able to filter her perceptions, can be seen as the result of the breakdown of her marriage and with that of her self-narrative. She no longer has a story within which events can be ordered. The breakdown of the story that Faye has experienced thus causes her to perceive reality differently. A similar statement is made by Paniotis in his description of an event that took place a short while after his own divorce:

> (…) it is part of no sequence of events, it is only itself, in a way that nothing in our life before as a family was ever itself, because it was always leading to the next thing and the next, was always contributing to our story of who we were. (*Outline* 123)

Both Fay and Paniotis find that in their former lives, when they were married and part of the bigger story of family life, their perception of events was affected by the story that they were immersed in. The marriages and family lives that they both have left, can be understood to work like stories that events are filtered through, or, in Ricoeur's terminology, emplotted into. Because they lived life so fully immersed in narratives, events were always part of the narrative they lived, and organized into it, in order to preserve the narrative identity of their story. Events were recognized and understood through the narratives of their married lives. When the narratives that all events were integrated into, broke down, events became something else, standing on their own, without the meaning that they had when they were part of a narrative.

When Faye watches the family on the nearby boat, she says that she finds "appearances more bewildering and tormenting now than at any previous point in my life" (*Outline* 74). As we've seen, this is arguably because she can no longer filter events through her family narrative. The sentence is also interesting, though, because it suggests something about appearances. Cusk touches upon the topic of how things look in her essay collection *Coventry*, in which she points out the importance of appearances for families: "The families are on display – it's part of how they function. Families tend to be conscious of being looked at: they perform themselves as though in expectation of a response, a judgement" (*Coventry* 31). This performance, she supposes, is like that of an artist showing his work. Having had her family life break down, and with that uncovering a distance between what appeared to be, and what actually was, within the story that she was completely immersed in, opens up the possibility that all this distance may exist anywhere. More than that, in the place that Faye now finds herself, what her life looked like from the outside seems less important.

3.6 NARRATIVES AND THE SELF

It occurs to Faye that other people might think of her as stupid for going out on a boat with a man she does not know, but, she says, "What other people thought was no longer of any help to me. Those thoughts only existed within certain structures, and I had definitively left those

structures" (70 *Outline*). Which structures are these, and how did they make the opinions of other people less important? We know that with the breakdown of her marriage, the narrative that she and her family lived by, and the structure that it provided to their lives, broke down as well. In interviews, Cusk has pointed out that the way we structure our lives (as well as our sentences) are "false suspensions of the self" (Schwartz, *The New Yorker*). We occasionally see this attention to the self, and how we define it, in the novels as well: Watching her neighbour on the plane hide away his Wilbur Smith novel, she states that she is no longer interested in literature as self-definition. If we take away the structures that suspend the self, Cusk says to *The New Yorker*, the self is less. And when the self is less, or matters less, there is less need to defend it. If we strive to make the self as extensive as possible, if we place great value and significance on this massive thing that we call the self, if we spend time and effort defining what it is and what it is not, then of course, the opinions of others concerning this self, will be of much importance indeed. We can argue then, that the structures Faye claims to have left, are those suspending the self, that is, an elaborate narrative on what her self is. When she allows the self to be less, what other people think of it is not that important.

A comment made by one of Faye's students, Georgeou, sheds a different light on the narrative self. He says that "a story might merely be a series of events we believe ourselves to be involved in, but on which we have absolutely no influence at all" (*Outline* 137). If, as Bruner argues, the self is a story, Georgeou's comment can make us question our own role in the events that we integrate in the story of our selves, and whether that role might be exaggerated. If this is the case, then the self is something that we construct and impose on the world, which we struggle to exaggerate through our own role in what goes on around us. If it is so, if our role in the series of events that make up the stories of our selves, is insignificant, what becomes of the self? Faye touches upon this in a different remark:

> I thought the whole idea of a "real" self might be illusory: you might feel, in other words, as though there were some separate, autonomous self within you, but perhaps that self didn't actually exist. (*Outline* 105)

According to Bruner, the self is a story constructed through social interaction. In addition, the story that we tell and that, according to Bruner, makes up our self, will almost inevitably involve other people, as such, moreover, other people are part of the self. In close personal relationships such as a marriage, the role of the other person in the story of one's self may be so significant, such a big part of the story, that it may become indistinguishable from the self.

In the dissolution of a marriage, this conjunction between the self and others becomes particularly evident. Or, the story of the self becomes intertwined with the story of the other person to the extent that there are no longer two separate stories of two separate selves, rather, there is one story. When the story is no longer believed in, the self cannot be separated from the other person and the story of the relationship, which means that the self is in danger of dissolving. When the marriage or close relationship falls apart, the self does too.

Paniotis' story also shows how the same event can be experienced in different ways depending on the narrative that it is placed into. In his story, he takes his children on a vacation trip, for the first time without his wife, and he experiences it as a torment. He feels as if he is kidnapping them, but, surprisingly, the children are quite content in their shabby hotel: "it amazed him to see his children bouncing and laughing on the ugly metal beds" (*Outline* 116). Even though they are, from the outside, experiencing the same thing, their subjective experiences of it seem to differ immensely. The reason for this may be the narrative that they are immersed in. While the children are experiencing the moment as it is happening, Paniotis is experiencing as a part of story with a specific narrative identity. It exemplifies how even positive experiences can be constructed as negative in order to fit a story's narrative identity, and vice versa. The latter is exemplified in a story Faye tells about her children earlier in *Outline*. Faye describes how each of her sons, when they were babies, would drop things from their highchairs, watch them fall, begin to cry, before having the object picked up and given back. After having the object picked up, they would drop it again, only to have the whole ordeal repeated, included the suffering when the object was out of reach. "The memory of the suffering", Faye says, "had no effect whatever on what they elected to do: on the contrary, it compelled them to repeat it" (*Outline* 18). We can interpret the scene as an example of how we experience things as stories, even before we can use language to articulate them. Apparently, what her sons remembered was the sequence of events and the ending of them, rather than the isolated event of suffering. Perhaps it is their experience of it as a kind of victory narrative that makes them want to repeat it. Both of these stories reinforce the notion that we experience life in terms of narrative, and that narratives can shape how we experience each isolated event of life. We understand events through the stories we are immersed in, which is indeed practical: It would be very time consuming to stand around and marvel at each event as the unique and mysterious enigma that it arguably is. This is something that a young child might do, and young children aren't known for getting stuff done. Rather, we quickly integrate every event into our on-going narrative, and in doing so make sense of it, find some fitting meaning in it or dismiss it as irrelevant. The downside is that the wonder that

each new event could elicit is lost as they are integrated into a well-known narrative, and, as we've seen, truth may be lost as well. All the same, the stories are useful not only in terms of filtering our experiences but in terms of deciding our actions. At any given moment, an individual might feel a number of things, in fact, one might feel a whole range of contradicting feelings within a timespan of five minutes. Very few people react according to their feelings at all times, often, the feelings that are acted upon are those that fit into the narrative that we are telling about our lives and our relationships.

As such, most of our actions may be done according to some narrative, and the narrative will depend on the culture that we live in. The story of Faye's colleague, Ryan, further illustrates this. In his youth in Tralee, Ireland, he was an overweight and eczema-ridden kid living with his parents, the prospect of his future being quite dark. Unexpectedly, he gets a scholarship in America, and on his arrival in the US he finds himself in quickly realizing that "he could decide how he wanted to be and then be it" (*Outline* 38). His change of attitude is the image of Gidden's self as a project, materialized in a certain lifestyle. Ryan begins to work out, eating healthier, and by changing his lifestyle, he changes the self. It is hardly coincidental that this happened to him when he came to the US, in which one of the most important cultural stories is that of the self-made man. By arriving in a new culture with other stories, Ryan's story of the self changes, and thereby, we could argue, his self changes with it.

Ryan's experience of America shows something else as well, namely, that the stories that are prevalent in our culture not only dictate how we understand our lives, but how we live them. Although the stories that we model our lives by may be arbitrary, the effects they have on our lives are profoundly tangible, as we can see in Ryan's case. Again, it has to do with investment and belief, Ryan started to believe in the story of the self-made man and in the possibilities of self-actualization and control of your own life that that entailed, and therefore, he started living accordingly. Stories, it seems, are very much able to work as self-fulfilling prophecies, if we are invested in them.

3.7 THE NARRATIVE IDENTITY OF ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

While the usefulness of stories is hard to argue with, it comes with a cost. This is something that is evident in the story of Faye's friend Elena about her relationship to a man named Konstantin. At a dinner party Elena overhears Konstantin telling someone that he doesn't think he wants kids. Elena describes hearing his words "as though knives were being plunged

into her from all sides" (*Outline* 193). They had never discussed having children, but for her it had been a definitive possibility. After hearing Konstantin's comment, Elena is unable to conceal her distress and, eventually, she reveals to Konstantin what she has overheard. Konstantin is sad and tries to explain, saying that it was "a thoughtless comment, that it didn't mean anything" (*Outline* 195). Elena believes him, at least partly, and by the time Konstantin has to leave for his business trip the next day, they are friends again.

Konstantin's remark and Elena's reaction to it creates a crisis in their relationship, a threat to their story together. The situation is unbearable, something has to be done in order for their relationship to continue, or, for their story to maintain its narrative identity. They deal with the crisis by adapting the story. Together, they make Konstantin's comment as insignificant as possible, him by brushing it off as a thoughtless comment, her by choosing to believe him and concealing her doubt. The two of them can almost be imagined as two writers working on a script together, sitting down and tweaking a scene in order to negate the threat it poses to the narrative identity of the story. Whether it really was a thoughtless comment or did express some truth for Konstantin, or both, is less important. If their story is going to continue, the event cannot play the part that it is currently playing, it has to be synchronised into the plot, and they both do their part, sacrificing something, to make it so.

It does seem likely that there is, at the very least, a part of Konstantin that doesn't want kids. His love for Elena, his investment in their story, however, makes him push this part down, dismiss it as insignificant. The part of him that doesn't want kids is dropped from the narrative. Which doesn't mean, necessarily, that this part of him ceases to exist. Quite the contrary, the parts of us – the drives, desires, thoughts - that don't fit into the narrative and are therefore repressed – most likely play an important role in our lives at some level.

Elena explains that she, when entering new relationships, works hard to uncover every side of her new partner, of getting around his fantasies about himself and finding out the truth about him. "The worst thing, it seemed to her, was to be dealing with one version of a person when quite another version existed out of sight" (*Outline* 190). This habit has, she admits, caused almost all of her relationships to end. She says that she has often felt as if she has skipped the story, because of her tendency to dig for "the content without living through the time span" (*Outline* 191). Meeting Konstantin, a man she regards as her equal, unlike other men she has been with, has caused her to "fear these tendencies" within herself. She feels as if there is a boundary around him that she should not cross, in the same way that she wouldn't break into his house to steal his things.

Elena's account of her relationship to truth is especially interesting because it is contradictory on so many points. She says she wants to "get beyond people's fantasies about themselves and others", yet her own story seems as full of fantasies as any other. Despite her insistence on getting to know the truth about her partners, her actions in relation to Konstantin shows that there are truths she does not want to know. The comment that she overhears him make at the party may very well be true, but the pain that this truth brings to Elena makes it necessary to cover it up. Ironically, she is, in cooperation with Konstantin himself, actively covering up a version of him, despite her claim that the worst thing is to be dealing with one version of a person while another version existed out of sight. In order for a story to maintain its narrative identity, some fantasies have to be preserved, or, as Faye says in *Transit*, stories work "through the suspension of disbelief" (29).

Seen in this way, the boundary that Elena senses around Konstantin is there for her own sake, more than for his. It is herself and her own capability of committing to a relationship that she is protecting by not following her usual pattern, by not crossing the lines that she usually crosses. If you look for the unflattering truths of someone else, you will find them, and this may be where our capacity of storytelling becomes important in the act of falling in love. To be able to commit yourself to another, inevitably flawed human being, you need a story to negotiate, explain, downplay those flaws. It is said that love makes blind, meaning that we become blind to the flaws of our loved ones, but maybe it is more accurate to say that love makes us excellent storytellers. Under no circumstance are people as eager and capable of coming up with inventive narratives in order to excuse the flaws of another person, as when they are in love. Elena's tendencies to dig for the "truth" about the men she is involved with as soon as possible, could prove fatal to the relationships, if she is not invested in a story that can disarm those truths. And indeed, she proves that she is invested in the story with Konstantin, invested enough to cover up a truth that could have tipped over the relationship. Her story makes one ask: Is the story of a marriage (or a relationship of the kind), and living truthfully, polar opposites? Does truth have to be, at least partly, sacrificed for the sake of the story?

Even if Elena and Konstantin preserve the narrative identity of their love story, it comes with a cost. She says that thinking about it later it seems unreal, "as though by allowing it to be taken back I can no longer be sure that it actually happened" (*Outline* 195). The stories we tell about our lives become our reality. Ironically, truth is often secondary in the telling of these stories: harmony, stability, comfort, safety and a whole other range of feelings may be more important. As a result, our relationship to truth is distorted by the stories we tell.

We are, however, presented with an alternative to this relationship-narrative and the material reality that goes along with it. In the restaurant with Faye and Paniotis, Paniotis' friend Angeliki talks about her travels around the world as a writer. On her visit to Poland, she spent a lot of time with a journalist named Olga. In talking about her marriage, Olga described it as if were a machine, in which some things worked and some didn't, without ever attempting to hide what didn't work. For a period, Olga says, her husband moved out, because he found it hard to live without this lack of sentimentality. When he moved in again, Olga was pleased, because she knew that he knew the truth about the relationship he was re-entering. Angeliki describes Olga's marriage as devoid of romance, a marriage "in which nobody had to make promises or apologise, in which you didn't have to buy flowers for the other person or cook them a special meal or light the candles to make a flattering atmosphere" (*Outline* 127). Angeliki is fascinated by this ability and will to "live together so honestly and nakedly" (*Outline* 127).

One of the important differences between this marriage and the conventional marriage-narrative, is, as Olga says, its lack of sentimentality. In Olga's marriage, truth is more important than protecting the feelings of the involved parties, and more important than following a particular narrative and keeping up certain appearances for each other and for others. She and her husband were, she said, completely honest with each other. Although the conventional marriage narrative holds honesty as one of its highest ideals, the notion of real honesty within a marriage would contradict the image we get, through our culture, of what a marriage is supposed to be, because so many of the feelings that will inevitably occur occasionally for most human beings cannot exist within the story of what a marriage is supposed to be like. When Angeliki admits to Olga that she is jealous of her children, Olga says to Angeliki that she "has never grown up and this is how you are able to be a writer" (*Transit* 127). Olga presumably considers the act of storytelling a childish feature. In Olga's marriage, there is no need for the material manifestations of the story, like the lit candles or the flowers, perhaps because there is no need to reinforce a story that is based on truth. When a story is partly fantasy, the fantasy must be made real by those invested in the story, for example through flowers and candlelight dinners. In Olga's marriage there is no room for fantasy, and so the fantasy does not have to be "fed" with romantic gestures. We can argue that it is a marriage without the suspension of disbelief.

3.8 TRAUMA AND NARRATIVE

In the last chapter of *Outline*, a woman named Anne is sitting on the sofa in Faye's living room when Faye wakes up in the morning, eating honey straight from the jar. Her name is Anne, and she has just flown in from Manchester, as she is taking over Faye's writing class. Her appearance and demeanour are described unflatteringly by Faye, who compares her to a goose. She is a playwright, but recently an incident has happened to her that has made her unable to write. Anne notes that "as a playwright she knew that the problem with incidents is that everything gets blamed on them: they become a premise towards which everything else is drawn, as though seeking an explanation of itself" (*Outline* 232). What she believes that the incident led to, is a new habit that she calls "summing up" (*Outline* 232). Every time she tries to write something new, she finds herself summing it up before she can write much. This is a problem because "as soon as something was summed up, it was to all intents and purposes dead, a sitting duck, and she could go no further with it" (*Outline,* 232).

Her habit of "summing up" affects not only her writing and reading, but her personal relationships as well. At a dinner with a friend, she finds herself looking at her friend and thinking "*friend*, with the result that she strongly suspected that their friendship was over" (*Outline* 233). It even changes how she thinks about her own life. She is "beginning to question the point of continuing to exist day in and day out when *Anne's life* just about covered it" (*Outline* 233). She calls it a "cultural malaise" (*Outline* 233) that has she has integrated, signalling that it is something she has picked up from our culture, and the ways we tell stories within it.

Anne's habit of summing up problematizes conventional storytelling, in which everything must be emplotted into the story in order to preserve a specific narrative identity. Anne sheds light on not only how we experience everything, such as our personal relationships, through stories, but the fact that when something is emplotted to fit into a specific narrative identity, it loses its meaning. The friendship seems to be over when it is summed up, and there seems to be little point in living her life when she can just sum it up in a few words. From this, it follows that the pervasiveness of conventional stories in our culture leads to a reduction of the richness of reality. Although understanding aspects of life through stories may be necessary, the stories that we use depend on our culture, and the stories that are pervasive in our culture are those with a strong narrative identity, which, as we have seen, entails that certain realities must be pushed down in order to maintain this narrative identity. In a way, after the incident, Anne is experiencing life according to conventional storytelling infiltrating her life in an extreme way.

The incident that came before this new habit of summing up, was that she was robbed and attempted strangled by a man when she was walking down the street. Not long before the incident happened, Anne was left by her husband. After the incident, she tries to talk about it to other people. But, she says, "it had been a descent into chaos, a whirling realm of non-meaning, in which the absence of a magnetic centre so that without it nothing made any sense at all" (*Outline* 236). She is trying incessantly to understand it through words, but the words fail her. Through all her talking, she can't seem to get to make sense of what has happened: "in all her talk the thing itself remained untouched, shrouded and mysterious, inaccessible" (*Outline* 238).

The stories through which we understand our lives are in many ways maintained through talk. This is a topic that recurs throughout the novels: several of the characters who are divorced, find their former partners' silences a striking confirmation of the ending of the relationship. When Paniotis calls his ex-wife in the middle of his first vacation alone with their children, wanting and expecting the sympathy and concern that she would provide when they were married, he experiences that she, instead, meets him with silence: "while she failed to come in on time and to take up, as it were, her part in our lifelong duet, I understood, completely and definitively, that Chrysta and I were no longer married" (*Outline* 121). When Anne calls her husband after the incident, he too, fails to meet her expectations. While she considers them "bound in some indissoluble sense" (*Outline* 235), his short and formal replies to her emotional sobbing makes it clear that he disagrees.

As Cusk says, conversations are a showing of the self, and, as Bruner says, the self is a story constructed and maintained through dialogue with other people. Conversation between partners in marriage, then, is, among other things, a negotiation of their selves, and about who they are together, their common self. When one of the partners no longer wants to participate in these conversations, it is the same as refusing to keep building the narrative that was their self. When Anne's husband refuses to play his usual role in her life narrative, their story ends, and she is, much like Faye on the boat, lost, without a narrative or a structure. With this, Anne experiences two crises: being abandoned by one man and being attacked by another – but, as she says, because she didn't know who she was without her husband, she didn't know who the attack happened to. After her divorce, she discovers that she is no longer who she was when she met him: "she had become, through him, someone else" (*Outline* 237). When she lost herself, she also lost her language, which, being a playwright, had been a significant part of her self.

Anne has had a profound experience on the plane over to Athens, in which she sat next to a man who told her his life story. As she was listening to him, "she felt that something fundamental was being delineated, something not about him but about her" (*Outline* 239). She finds that in his descriptions of his life and his self, she sees the distinction between him and herself, and through this distinction she can form an outline of herself in contrast to him. "Yet this shape, even while its content remained unknown, gave her for the first time since the incident a sense of who she was" (*Outline* 240). In a way, Anne is describing something that we as readers also experience during Cusk's novels: Faye becomes known to the reader through her meetings with others, and through her responses to their stories. The people she meets have relatively clear forms that they express themselves through, while Faye's own narrative remains obscure, one might say non-existent. We only know that she gets married because someone congratulates her: it is as if she has no interest in telling the reader about her self, or, as Cusk herself has said in interviews: "I have lost all interest in having a self" (Thurman, *The New Yorker*). Although Faye's self is not shown to us in the way we usually understand it, that is, through storytelling, we get a sense of who she is through her interactions with others. After her double-crisis, Anne cannot reach or understand her self the way she is used to, through her own narratives, and she too, must find her sense of self in a different way. With Anne's story, *Outline* closes with a problematizing of conventional storytelling and the way we rely on language to understand the world and our selves.

3.9 STORIES AS TRAPS

The stories we are invested in can in many ways determine our behaviour, and thereby reduce our freedom. On the writing tour, Faye is talking to a woman who before her tour was on a writer's retreat in a castle in the remote Italian countryside with other writers, arranged by the rich widow who owns the castle. Despite the luxury of the situation, she is miserable, unable to write, longing to escape. One of the other writers decides to leave, despite the protests of the widow, who refuses to help him get a cab. He therefore ends up walking the three miles to the bus station. She watches him from the window, walking away "with a light, bouncing stride, carrying his small knapsack over his shoulder" (*Kudos* 47). She, too, wants to leave, but she can't: "The reason appeared to be the enormous size of her suitcase. Also, she wasn't sure she could have walked three miles in her shoes" (*Kudos* 47).

This explanation for not leaving seems insufficient, shoes and suitcase seems like an insufficient reason to stay in a place in which one is miserable. At the very least, it seems silly

to surround oneself with things that restricts one's movements and freedom. Why does she not carry a small knapsack and comfortable shoes in which one can walk long distances? Of course, her reasoning would have been much more surprising if it had come out of the mouth of a man. Hence, it is her womanhood that legitimizes or necessitates the excessive luggage and unpractical shoes. It is not, however, because big suitcases and unpractical shoes are detriment for the physical wellbeing of women, as opposed to that of men, rather, the reason is constructed: There are certain expectations or norms attached to a woman's appearance and self-presentation that require a larger arsenal of tools, as well as a certain kind of shoes. The wording "the reason *appeared* to be" (*Kudos* 47, my italics) signals, although it is unclear if it is Faye or the storyteller who uses this phrase, the constructed-ness of the situation, moreover. It is her (and other's?) conviction of the importance of these norms, rather than their importance in and of themselves, that is the reason for their, in this case, constricting function, preventing her from walking away "with a light, bouncing stride" as the other, male writer did. This is also something that Cusk has spoken about in interviews, stating that "if there is a reckoning in middle age, it's the tragic sense that you have been formed by things, and sent hither and thither by those things, (…) and they were not real. They were the product of your upbringing or conditioning or gender or social class" (Heti, *The Paris Review*). In this woman's case, it is tied to her gender. As such, she too is, in Solnit's language, trapped in a narrative. In this case we can say it is the narrative of femininity.

Another example of how narratives can entrap, comes from Faye. While attending a dinner party at the country house of her cousin Lawrence, Faye tells a story from a few years back, when she was still married and living in the family house with her husband and kids. This evening, she is at her house with her sons, waiting for her husband to come home, and the atmosphere is tense. For some reason, they keep looking at the time, wondering when he will be back. It feels to Faye as if their ability to believe in the life they were living, and who they were as a family, depended on his return: "I remembered the pressing feeling of reality, just under the surface of things, like a secret I was struggling to contain" (*Transit* 233). Faye realizes she doesn't want to be where she is, she wants to be somewhere else, "anywhere where the compulsion of waiting wasn't lying on me like lead. I wanted to be free" (*Transit* 233). After some time, the boys start arguing, and the older boy unexpectedly performs an act of violence towards his younger brother unlike anything Faye has seen him do before. Faye believes the act of violence was a concrete reaction to something she knew, but hadn't admitted to herself, and that the boys could sense. The way she sees it, "They had been driven to enact something that they themselves didn't realize or understand" (*Transit* 233). Later,

despite the fact that it took another year before her husband moved out of the house, this scene of violence is the moment Faye thinks about as the ending of her marriage.

One of the things that Faye's story illustrates is how a narrative can, like Solnit says, trap you. To Solnit, narratives have the potential both of liberating, and of captivating. In Faye's description, both she and her boys are trapped; not in terms of physical circumstances or external coercion, but in the way that they all find themselves stuck in a situation, or a mode of thinking and behaving that they don't want to be in. In a way, they are trapped in themselves, in the roles that they have inside the narrative of the family. Faye is thinking that she wants to be free from "the compulsion of waiting" (*Transit* 233). *Compulsion*, interestingly, can mean at least two things, that is, to be forced, and to have an irresistible urge. In this case, the two meanings need hardly be separated from each other, they are often one and the same because outside forces can be internalized into inner urges. Faye is trapped in the mode of wife waiting for her husband, mother waiting for the father of her children, and though she desperately wants to be somewhere else, both the circumstances (her sons) and her own urges hold her there.

Another aspect of the scene is the unexpected and severe violence that takes place between the two boys. Faye describes it as an enactment of something they didn't understand, something she has known, but has not yet admitted to herself. As such, it can be described as something that has been suppressed from the narrative, that did not fit into the narrative identity of the story of the marriage and the family. Rebecca Solnit shows us how traumatic events cannot be integrated into the narrative of the self. Quoting David Morris, she explains that a traumatic event "stands apart (…) wild, and unpredictable" (qtd. in Solnit 37). Because it isn't integrated into the narrative, the traumatic event may affect you in surprising ways. In light of the scene Faye recounts here, we can also make the argument that not only trauma, but all the things we leave out of our stories – whether it is because they don't fit the narrative identity of the story we are telling, because we are blind to them, or for some other reason – may end up acting, in the same way as the traumatic memory – like a wild animal: they are unpredictable, and while you may never see them again, they may also turn up in unexpected places and act violently and aggressively. Erasing something from a narrative does not necessarily erase it from reality, and although it may be out of sight and mind and narrative, what is omitted and suppressed still has potential for mischief, like a dog on the run. This evening in Faye's family house, the reality that has been suppressed, omitted from the story, mysteriously and violently makes an appearance, through the uncharacteristic violence of the older boy. To face uncomfortable truths and allow them a part in the narrative of a life and of

a self can seem dangerous, as it might lead to change of some manner. Ironically, integrating even the most uncomfortable realities into our narratives, despite their potential consequences for the narrative identity of the story, may actually be a far less dangerous thing to do than to pretend they don't exist.

3.10 NARRATIVE ROLES

At the dinner party, both the event and the attendants are often described by Faye as a performance, a play of some kind. Watching Lawrence stand in front of his house, Faye compares her to cousin to "an actor in some drama of bourgeois life" (*Transit* 212). Further on, when admiring his impressive house, she wonders "how Lawrence had created it all so quickly, as if it were a stage set" (*Transit* 213). Meeting the other guests, Faye reflects on the high heels and elaborate outfits and makeup of the other women, noting that "it looked like they were all waiting to go out to some grand party" (*Transit* 214). In reality, the people gathered on the dinner party are all parents of small children, whom they grapple with as the night develops. A woman that Faye talks to is being throttled by her own kid as she is talking, and instead of trying to stop or address what is happening, merely keeps talking as if nothing is happening. In a way, what she is doing is to hold on to a certain role, that of the elegant and poised partygoer, even as the reality of her child is literally choking her. The will to hold on to one's role, even if the play changes, is demonstrated further by Birgid, one of Lawrence and Eloise's close friends. Birgid and her husband Jonathan waited as long as they could, biologically speaking, to have a child, because, as she says, "we were very happy as we were" (*Transit* 219). They live pretty much the same life as before they had a daughter. Birgid and her husband still eat at restaurants almost every night, and she tells Faye that she works so much that she hardly sees her daughter at all. As does Jonathan.

Birgid's description of their family life is unconventional. Both because of her own place in it, which fails to meet the common expectations society holds a mother and wife to, and because she speaks about it unapologetically and unashamedly. There is, we could argue, an act of rebellion both in her lifestyle, choosing work and restaurants over time with her child, and in her unfiltered telling of it. She has apparently freed herself from the burdens of being a mother and homemaker, not by leaving it to her husband, who, like her, works a lot and eats out most nights, but by outsourcing child rearing and home making to a nanny. As such, the choice of not sacrificing her own desires in order to tend to and spend time with her daughter must be said to come at an enormous cost for them both: as she says, they hardly see

each other at all. Meanwhile, her husband, who will probably not be as severely judged for following his own desires, seems to be making an attempt at homemaking, by continuing the tradition of his parents and making steak for lunch every Sunday. His attempt seems to be failing, however, given that he every Sunday "ends up eating most of it on his own" (*Transit* 223).

3.11 NARRATIVES AND DESIRE

What desire is, how it is formed and the role of narratives in this forming, is something Lawrence reflects on in his relationship to food. At the dinner party, he tells a story about sitting in his office, about to eat his usual cheese sandwich, he realises he could have had something better for lunch. For the next six months, he replaces his cheese sandwiches with smoked duck and other refined foods, paying close attention to his own desires. Surprisingly, after six months of this new lifestyle, he finds himself craving the same kind of cheese sandwich that he abandoned half a year earlier. He buys one, then throws it in the garbage, realizing that he is in a "process of shaping his own desires" (*Transit* 237). His desire for the cheese sandwich was, he says, mindless, sensory. To desire the smoked duck instead, he had to actively and deliberately decide to change the narrative of who he is and what he likes to eat. "To desire something better required self-control, (…). He had to decide to be a person who preferred smoked duck to processed cheese: by deciding it, he by increments became it" (*Transit* 238). He could have gone on eating cheese sandwiches for ever, in unlimited supply, never needing to investigate his desire for them.

According to Giddens, lifestyle gives "material form to a particular narrative of self-identity" (81). Lawrence's deliberate change in eating habits is, we could argue, an attempt to change his identity, to make himself into a person that appreciates fine food. By attempting to change his desires concerning food, he is telling a different story about who he is. In this light, Lawrence's harnessing of his own desires seems like a minor personal change on the level of an individual and his own personal narrative, and can be written up as nothing more than an individual's vain attempt to become a person with more acquired tastes. We can, however, also argue that our desires are not just connected to our individual self-narratives, but also to what Lyotard would call the grand narratives. Solnit shows us how narratives can trap us in modes of thinking and behaving. We can argue that one of the ways they can do that is through shaping our desires. Questioning, investigating and challenging one's own desires is to question the narrative of one's life, of one's society, and may be a part of a process of

liberation, of attempting to break free from the traps that narratives can be. Lawrence's effort to form his own desires and thereby changing the story of who he is might, in this light, not be so insignificant. His refusal to want what he can have in abundance, might actually be a challenge to what we may argue is the grandest narrative of them all, namely capitalism.

While capitalism can be defined as "an economic system in which private capital or wealth is used in the production or distribution of goods and prices are determined mainly in a free market" (OED 2012), it is far more than that, we can in fact argue that it is a grand narrative that shapes our language games, and with that our thoughts and desires. It is a grand narrative so pervasive, its mechanisms and consequences reaching out to such vast lengths and depths within society, culture, and the psychology of the individual that its effects can probably never be fully known. What is commonly regarded as valuable, desirable, and important, is to a great extent determined by what is valuable within the system, or the grand narrative, of capitalism. As with the most powerful narratives, it is often seen as natural. Similarly, its values and mechanisms are commonly regarded not so much as a way of seeing the world, as the actual world. We think that what we learn to desire is what is actually desirable. However, because it is both an economic system that is based on want, and a grand narrative that shapes our thinking, the grand narrative of capitalism has particular interest in generating and shaping desire. It tells us what we should want and what will make us happy in a thousand different ways every day, in doing so it is shaping our desires.

Because this whole narrative is dependent on the shaping of desire, on telling people what they want, Lawrence's attempt to form his own desires is significant in that it refuses one of the ways capitalism works in our lives. It is not to want smoked duck sandwiches rather than cheese sandwiches in itself that undermines the mechanisms of capitalism, of course, as smoked duck is also a saleable product. Rather, Lawrence's reflections around his own desires defy the notion that desire is necessarily something natural or inevitable. It is the act of critically examining one's desires, or trying to shape them according to one's own values, rather than letting the narrative that one is part of decide them for you, that has the potential of undermining narratives, in this case, the grand narrative of capitalism.

3.12 THE NECESSITY OF NARRATIVES

The necessity of storytelling is further illustrated at the same dinner party, when Faye is driving to Lawrence's place in the countryside and encounters thick fog on the road in front of her. We learn that "The road unfurled with an apparently inexhaustible slowness and

monotony, only ever showing the part of itself that lay immediately ahead. It was entirely possible that I would crash at any moment" (*Transit* 211). The danger of living, the fact that anything can happen at any moment, that we never can know with any certainty what is around the next corner – all of these things are true of life, but they are also things that are obscured by the stories we tell and live by. The drive can be seen as a description of what life is like without narratives, without stories, and describes the impossibility of living life without a story: in which every step must be carefully considered and in which anything can happen at any given moment. This, to a certain degree, is true, but it is also impossible to integrate into one's life. Because of the stories we live by, we think we know what's going to happen next, and so the dangerous fact that anything could actually happen, is suppressed. Likewise, the monotony and slowness of life can be lived with because we can choose to see it as part of a narrative that is heading towards something better. Without stories, both the monotony and the excitement of life would be engulfing.

An illustration of our dependence on pre-existing patterns, whether they are in the form of stories or not, can be found in the story of Eduardo, whom Faye meets at a writer's conference. Eduardo tells the story of when he and his friends were vacationing in Italy. They drove from their home in Holland all the way down to a remote area in the south of Italy using a satnav, and easily finding the way down to the holiday house where they spent two weeks "marvelling at their own freedom and autonomy" (*Kudos* 167). After the two weeks were over, however, they found that the satnav was no longer working, and they realized that they didn't have a clue as to where they were. They started driving around, hoping to find a way out of the "unpopulated wilderness" (*Kudos* 168) that they were lost in before running out of petrol and food. It turned out, then, that their freedom was something else entirely: "All that time, he said smiling, when they thought they were free, they were in fact lost without knowing it" (*Kudos* 168).

What is it that makes them mistake being lost for freedom? Why do they think they are free in the first place? The reason they feel free and autonomous is because they can find their way, navigate the world so to speak, without the help of anyone. What they have seemingly forgotten to think about, however, is the role of the satnav. They are completely dependent on the tool they are using. It was the satnav that helped them navigate, that told them where they were at any given moment, and where to go next in order to get where they wanted to go. They thought they were free, but every road they followed was dictated for them by the satnav. Without their navigational tool, they are lost. Arguably, their trip is a metaphor for living through conventional stories and structures. Because we have our tools, the satnav or

the narratives we live by, we think we are in control and that we know where we are and where we are going. Without the tools, however, we find that were do not know where we are going, that we are driving on a road, or living in a reality, that we haven't seen before, that is unknown and strange and uncontrollable, that we don't know how to deal with or navigate. We are lost and we don't know how to navigate it without these scripts telling us where to go next.

CHAPTER 4: THE COST OF LIVING

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The Cost of Living was published in 2018 and is the second book of the trilogy that Levy wrote in the years following the divorce from her husband, starting with *Things I Don't Want to Know* (2013) and ending with *Real Estate* (2021). The trilogy, written in first person from the view of a narrator that Levy has said is both "myself but not quite myself" (*Real Estate* 256), is written in an essayistic style, through which Levy reflects on themes such as what it is to be woman, what it means for a woman to live inside, and outside, of the nuclear family, and the notion of female characters in our culture. While *Things I don't Want to Know* takes place mostly in South Africa, *The Cost of Living* follows Levy in her hometown of London, living on a scholarship in Paris, and on travels in India and Berlin. Like Cusk's Faye, Levy is in a period of transition, rebuilding her life as a single woman after getting divorced and having her daughters move out. Also similarly to Faye, she is in the midst of an identity crisis, and like Cusk, she is experimenting with writing and living. While she gives little detail as to what exactly led to the divorce in her own marriage, a big part of *The Cost of Living* is dedicated to what narratives such as motherhood, femininity and the family home entail, how they have been shaped and what consequences they have for the women living them. She is focused on how female characters are portrayed in culture, and, for instance, discusses the lack of female characters who are not "likeable". This is a problem from Levy because she is in search of a new way of living, and looks to the stories around her for scripts and inspiration, but finds that the only female characters that are valued in society are those who are what patriarchy wants them to be, and who are present to fulfil someone else's desires rather than their own. In lack of narratives to turn to, she is constantly looking for tips and clues concerning how to live as a female character approaching 60, finding inspiration in the people she meets and the objects that surround her, as well as in literature. The text is littered with references to writers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Marguerite Duras, who represent perspectives that Levy actively engages with in her quest for finding a new way of writing and living as a female being and character.

4.2 THE FEMALE CHARACTER

The Cost of Living opens with the main character, Deborah, sitting and eating in a bar in Colombia, while listening to an older man and a young woman having a conversation at a nearby table. Deborah and the unknown man both listen to the young woman telling a story about going out diving under a sunny blue sky, only to resurface a while later to discover that there is a storm raging. Levy then uses the story as a metaphor for the ending of her own marriage. Levy describes her life as a wife and mother as "swimming in the deep" (*The Cost of Living* 7) in a calm ocean under a shining sun. Returning to the surface after twenty years in the deep, however, she, too, discovers that she is in fact in the middle of a storm. She thinks she might not be able to swim back to her boat, in other words, to her marriage, before realizing she doesn't want to swim back to it, and that if she does, she will drown. As a conclusion, Levy argues that we think we are scared of the storm, of chaos, but in reality we might also want it. "If we don't believe in the future we are planning, the house we are mortgaged to, the person who sleeps by our side," Levy writes, "it is possible that a tempest (long lurking in the clouds) might bring us closer to how we want to be in the world" (*The Cost of Living* 7).

As we have seen with Cusk, a crucial aspect to the narratives that we live by, is our belief and investment in them. We can argue that to Levy, swimming underwater illustrates what it is like to be immersed in a story, to believe in it and be invested in it. Twenty years ago, her marriage to a man she loved threw her into a narrative that she has been immersed in ever since, the story of the nuclear family. To be a wife and a mother in a nuclear family is to be under water, to be immersed in a story that provides safety and protection. Like water, the story surrounds her on all sides, and because she is immersed in it, she doesn't think about it, that is, until she no longer believes in it. In the quiet of the deep, in the narrative of her life with her nuclear family, the storm that was beginning to rage above could pass almost unnoticed for a while. It might be that her daughters growing up and needing less from her allowed her the space and time to look at the story they were living and her own place within it. It allowed her, per se, to come up for air, and there she finds that things are not calm. Looking at the boat for safety, she sees that it is leaking. She finds that she is in danger of drowning, but looking at the marriage, she is certain that she will drown. She decides to stay in the unruly water, rather than swim back to her marriage.

Levy writes about the years following her divorce, and the struggle to find a new way of living outside of the nuclear family. The difficulty, she says, is partly in finding a way of living as a woman, and writing female character, outside of the role of the mother and wife, of stepping out of this narrative society has constructed for her and finding some way of being

subject rather than object. In order to do this, the challenge lies in making a female character who can "find a language that is in part with learning how to become a subject rather than a delusion and in part to do with unknotting the ways in which she has been put together by the Societal System in the first place" (*Things I Don't Want to Know* 39). One of the ways that women have been put together by society, says Levy, lies in the construction of their desire: "You never know what a woman really wants because she's always being told what she wants" (*Real Estate* 164). The female characters that can be found in literature often lack desire. Levy wants to write the female character as a thinking, acting, feeling subject with her own desires, as opposed to being the object of someone else's. A woman, Levy writes, is "put together by the Societal System", in other words, what she values, how she lives her life, even how she feels may not necessarily be true to her, but to the society that has formed her. As Levy points out, this voyage requires some canniness, because even what she thinks she desires, values, wants, may be the result of the conditioning that she has been subject to from birth. It is about uncovering and throwing away the lies that she is telling herself, as much as the lies she is being told by others, about who she ought to be and what she ought to want. As we have seen, Rosi Braidotti argues that the subject is, through its body and its sex, race, class, etc., embedded in sociohistorical relations of power, and that the subject's becoming involves "peeling off (…) the layers of signification that have been tattooed in the surface of our body" (170). Braidotti argues that the subject must transcend its bodily signifiers by refusing the coded modes of thought and behaviour attached to them. It is especially important for women to do this, and to thereby create a subjectivity on their own terms. We can argue that this is what Levy is attempting to do. "The phantom of femininity", she says, "is an illusion, a delusion, a societal hallucination. She is a very tricky character to play and it is a role (sacrifice, endurance, cheerful suffering) that has made some women go mad" (*The Cost of Living* 87). To Levy, femininity is not constructed based on the subjectivity of women, rather, on the desires that a patriarchal society wish women to have. In the institution that Levy has lived in for the last twenty years, the nuclear family, she, like many women, had the role of homemaker, and found herself living a life of serving to everyone but herself. As such, the family house is a testament to the invisible but significant labour that has traditionally fallen upon the wife and mother.

4.3 THE FAIRY TALE OF THE FAMILY HOUSE

Levy compares the family home to a fairy tale. She argues that the task of making a home for a family is immense, and that it is a job that is largely put on a woman, and that mostly goes unnoticed. Behind the "fairy tale of The Family House", Levy says, you will find an "unthanked, unloved, neglected, exhausted woman" (*The Cost of Living* 16). We can argue that the fairy tale is both in what The Family House means and in how it is made, in the things that we assume happen within it when we see it from the outside, or expect will be in it when we are about to acquire one. The Family House carries with it many assumptions and expectations about what life inside of it should look like. In *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tale* (2014), Marina Warner argues that one of the characteristics of fairy tales is that they are "generically recognizable even when the exact identity of the particular story is not clear" (xviii). For something to be recognizable, it must live up to certain expectations. That is, it must follow a certain pattern. The fairy tale is a story with a very clear template, that can be recognized from a number of features. The same can be said of the narrative of the family. This is something that is also reminiscent of a scene in *Outline*, when Faye watches the family on the nearby boat, describing them as "clockwork figures rotating on a jewellery box" (*Outline* 86). Her description illustrates, among other things, how strict and limiting the norms of the family narrative can be. There is a blueprint for what the narrative of a family is supposed to look like, its members follow certain pre-prescribed patterns. We can argue that Levy is demonstrating the same thing in using the fairy tale genre to describe the family house.

The other fairy tale we can note concerning The Family House is in how it comes into being: the Family House does not, as can be easily assumed, become a home when you put a family into a house. Making a well-functioning home requires so much "skill, time, dedication and empathy", in other words, it requires for someone to dedicate a big portion of their time and energy, of their life, to the happiness and comfort of someone else. This will inevitably require sacrifice of the other things that one might wish to spend one's time and energy on. The work it takes, the portion of a life it takes, is immense but somehow also invisible. Gifting your life to a man, Levy says, "is not something to be tried at home but it is usually where it happens" (*Real Estate* 17). Interestingly, in the fairy tale, the woman's life *is* gifted to a man, that is, the woman is the prize that the hero gets at the end of the story. Her life is passed from one man, her father, to another, the new husband. If she is not tied to a man, if a woman is alone in a fairy tale, she is usually a witch: isolated, evil and ugly. It is also interesting to note that in fairy tales, The Family House does not exist, in fact, when the prince and the princess get each other and the making of The Family House is supposed to

start, the fairy tale ends. The end of the fairy tale means the beginning of the woman's hard work of making a home, but that, evidently, is not a part of the story that is worth telling.

One of Levy's central points is that the woman's sacrifice is integral to the institution of Motherhood. Even someone like herself, who always wanted something more than a family, found that she was trapped in a role that she eventually had to break free from, as someone for whom "the happiness of men and children have been the priority" (*The Cost of Living* 15). She remembers wearing her first self-bought shoes at the age of seventeen, feeling as if they will transport her away from suburbia and the women there, the housewives and their limited lives, regarding the shoes as her "exit sign from everything women were supposed to become" (*Real Estate* 152). But after 20 years of child rearing, Levy too finds that she had suppressed her talents and desires in order to please her family. As such, she shows that the sacrifice of her own freedom and her own desires does not come down to the choice of the individual woman, but is entrenched in the institution and narrative of Motherhood. It is reflective of how the world works, of the patriarchy that still exists and its expectations and requirements of women. This is why society hates single mothers, Levy says: "if she can create another sort of household, she can create another sort of world order" (*Real Estate* 164).

It follows that to Levy, the act of getting divorced and breaking out of the nuclear family, is in a way also to divorce from society: "Now that I was no longer married to society, I was transitioning into something or someone else" (*The Cost of Living* 31). We can argue that Levy's point is that for a woman, to go into the structures of the nuclear family, is also to enter specific societal structures. Becoming a mother within a nuclear family is not just to be the mother of one's children, but to go into the narrative of Mother, a narrative that contains an ocean of expectations and requirements that have to a large extent already been shaped by society. While the roles within a relationship, such as the role of the mother, theoretically can be negotiated by each individual couple, they can probably never be negotiated freely, that is, detached from history and society and all the ways that we as individuals carry these forces within us. Braidotti shows how the subject is "embodied and embedded" (*Metamorphoses* 62), that is, how we experience reality through our bodies, which places us within sociohistorical power-structures. Motherhood, Levy says, is designed by men, it is "an institution fathered by masculine consciousness" (*The Cost of Living* 24). It is a narrative formed under patriarchal structures, in which the woman is expected, and also come to expect of herself, to repress her own desires in order to tend to the desires of the husband and the

children, or to desire something different altogether, something that fits into the narrative of what it is to be a Mother.

The narrative of motherhood, and the expectations and desires that comes with it, is something Levy also reflects upon in relation to her feelings towards her own mother. Looking at an old picture, she notices a certain "introspection in her expression" (*The Cost of Living* 118) in her mother's face. Although she now appreciates this side of her mother, Levy thinks about herself as a teenager, feeling sure that she did not like this version of her mother back then, as "we do not want mothers who gaze beyond us, longing to be elsewhere" (*The Cost of Living* 119). As children, what we need from our mothers, their presence, support, care, attention. "What do we need dreamy mothers for?" (*The Cost of Living* 118), Levy asks. Many things do not fit into the narrative of motherhood, and so for a woman to enter this narrative, something else must probably be suppressed.

The mother-child relationship, is, however, not the only one in which some part of its inhabitants must be supressed. In fact, one of Levy's central points is how, when we live in long-term loving relationships, the individuals within the relationships are reduced. Levy states that she "will never stop grieving for my long-held wish for enduring love that does not reduce its major players to something less than they are" (*The Cost of Living* 8). She notes that all major players, not just the woman, is reduced within a long-term romantic relationship. Reflecting on her own relationship with her husband of 20 years, she says that "It was as if we had made a pact, from the moment we met, to know less about each other rather than more" (*The Cost of Living* 184). We can argue, then, that to uphold the narrative that a relationship is, or is supposed to be, each of the parties within it is given a role. In terms of the story they are telling, it is important that each of them acts according to their role, otherwise, the storyline might be jeopardized. Levy is describing something similar in her relationship to her daughters. When they visit Levy in Paris, each leaving their new lives at universities to meet up with their mother, who is also living a new life, Levy is excited about meeting them "as adults who had things to do in the world (…) we were getting to know what we were all like" (*Real Estate* 176). The three of them have only been separated three months, and prior to that were used to living with each other and seeing each other every day for more than two decades. Still, meeting each other again, they are discovering that there is more to the people they have lived with, than the role that the person has inhabited within the narrative of the family.

We have seen that Ricoeur uses the fairy tale as an example of a literary genre in which identity as sameness prevails, that is, the identities of the characters are created through

them remaining the same over time. In fairy tales, the characters remain the same throughout the whole story, if not, the narrative identity of the story would fall apart, and it would not be a fairy tale at all. In order for a fairy tale to "work", both characters and plot must be emplotted into a specific narrative identity. Levy has shown us how The Family House is a fairy tale in several ways. For one, as in a fairy tale, it is an instantly recognizable story. We all know the story and we know the elements that might exist within it, and which elements do not fit into it. The other way that The Family House can be called a fairy tale, is in the assumption that it appears from nothing, when in fact there is most often an invisible woman spending much of her life maintaining this structure. In light of Ricoeur, we can argue that a third way in which The Family House is similar to a fairy tale, pertains to the characters within it, the expectations attached to these characters, and that the narrative identity of The Family House, like that of a fairy tale, to some degree relies on the characters remaining the same. Ricoeur also shows that when the narrative identity of a story falls apart, so does the identity of its characters. This can be compared to what happens during a divorce, the narrative identity of the story falls apart.

Having met her ex-husband to plan their children's Christmas, Levy notes that something is different in the way they look at each other, as opposed to when they were husband and wife. "The societal mask that we had worn for so long, had slipped, and we could see each other again. Perhaps what we saw was too human to bear" (*The Cost of Living* 185). We have seen how in *The Character of Character*, Helene Cixous criticizes the conventionally constructed literary character. According to Cixous, forcing the character to remain the same throughout the story is to limit and reduce everything that a person can be. Arguably, then, losing one's identity as sameness is also to be free. In a sense, we can see this freedom in Levy's writing. The narrative identity of the conventional nuclear family is no longer applicable to this woman, her ex-husband, her grown daughters, and with it the characters that they were in that story, that they were in a sense trapped in, also fell apart. They are living a new narrative together, perhaps one in which they can be more than they were within the constricts of the family unit.

4.4 UNLIKEABLE FEMALE CHARACTERS AND NAMELESS MALE CHARACTERS

In her writing, like in her life, Levy is interested in female characters who, in one way or another, do not adhere to societal expectations of what a woman should be. Throughout the trilogy, Levy gives space and attention to women who, within mainstream culture, are not

given space and attention. One of the women she meets and writes about is Maria, the owner of the hotel Levy stays at while travelling on her own to Mallorca. Unlike most of the other women in her Catholic village, Maria is unmarried and has no children. She runs the little resort and is designing and creating its water systems and lemon gardens, chopping logs into wood, grinding coffee beans, and designing systems, while her brother takes care of the finances. Most of the guests at the resort are solo travellers, as such Levy speculates that Maria has created a "refuge from The Family". Much like herself, Levy notes that Maria is "on the run from myths about our characters and purpose in life" (*Things I don't Want to Know* 158).

Another woman that plays an important part in Levy's life is Cleila, an 80-year-old woman who rents out a shed in her garden for Levy to write in, fiercely making sure that no one disturbs her during the writing process. Cleila, Levy says, does "not fit into patriarchy's idea of what an old woman should be like: patient, self-sacrificing, servicing everyone's needs, pretending to be cheerful when she felt suicidal" (*Real Estate* 124). At one point, Cleila has a stroke that leaves her somewhat physically disabled, and one of her great concerns is how her blind dog will get into her bed with her at night, so she buys a slide that she attaches to the bed. This image, Levy notes, of the old woman and her animals and the slide attached to the bed, "had no societal value at all, but it was of tremendous value to me" (*Real Estate* 123).

A third unlikable character shows up as Levy's neighbour, Jean. Jean seems intent on making life harder for Levy. She is, for instance, always watching over where Levy is parking her e-bike, reprimanding her for parking it the wrong place while unloading her groceries, "saying nasty things in her sweet voice" (*The Cost of Living* 59). Jean is a middle-aged woman living alone, Levy wonders if Jean is ashamed of living alone, and tries to transfer part of that shame onto Levy. "If she had reluctantly stepped outside the societal story that offered her symbolic protection, how was she to protect herself?" (*The Cost of Living*, 65), Levy asks.

All of these women live outside of "the societal story" that offer "symbolic protection", that is, they are not mothers or wives. Bruner points out that we need cultural stories to legitimate our own. We can argue, then, that to a large degree it is our culture that decides which stories are worth paying attention to, which kinds of characters are interesting and valuable. Levy demonstrates that she as an individual needs stories that are not available or valued by society. In her comment on Cleila she demonstrates that there is a gap between what is valuable to her, versus what is valuable in society. The lack of value placed on certain

female characters within society is also demonstrated when Levy meets with several film producers who she is trying to sell film ideas to, some of whom in their reply to Levy's reflections around the kind of female character that she wants to create, meets her with the question about whether that kind of female character is "likeable". The question of the likability of female characters is pinpointed in Levy's description of Jean, describing her as "saying nasty things in her sweet voice" (*The Cost of Living* 59). The sentence is peculiar because it is almost an oxymoron, while "sweet voice" is an incredibly feminine thing, as such it is a positive thing in a female character, "nasty" is the opposite of what we want from a woman, it is an incredibly unflattering thing to be called. The language Levy uses is her description emphasize that they are, in fact, unlikable, don't fit in.

When Levy airs her frustrations to her friend, the friend suggests that Levy should write a "likeable female characters who marries the male lead by the end of the film" (*Real Estate* 82). After yet another failed meeting with film producers, Levy sees how her "potential real estate had turned to dust before my eyes" (*Real Estate* 80). The irony is that if Levy is to have what she desires in her new life living outside of the nuclear family, she has to create a character who conforms to the image of what patriarchy wants women to desire. Her ambitions must be abandoned, either in terms of material reality, or in terms of her artistic ideals. In these novels, she is pointing at "unlikeable" women and saying that their stories are interesting and valuable.

While it is female characters and their experiences that get most of Levy's attention, a number of male characters also show up in Levy's life and writing. Notably, almost all of the male characters that are part of Levy's novels, are nameless. This is hardly coincidental, as at one point during *The Cost of Living,* Levy reflects on how men often omit or forget the names of women. On a walk with a male colleague, the colleague tells Levy as story about his wife. Throughout the whole story he refers to his wife as "my wife", rather than using her name. His wife, Levy notes to herself, "does not have a name. She is a wife" (*The Cost of Living* 11). Levy wonders why the colleague seems to consistently forget the names of the women he has met on social events, and refer to them as someone's wife or someone's girlfriend. "If we don't have names, who are we?" (*The Cost of Living* 11), Levy asks.

The answer to this may be found in Levy's portrayal of the men she encounters. Many of the men that turn up in Levy's life seem to demonstrate the worst of masochistic behaviour. In these men's encounters with Levy and other women, the men act as if they are the main characters of the story, treating the women as if they are merely someone to help the man's story along. The text is littered with this dynamic. In the bar in Colombia for example, the

man listening to the woman talk about the tempest asks, “You talk a lot don’t you?” (*The Cost of Living* 2). Levy notes that “it had not occurred to him that she might not consider herself to be the minor character and him the major character” (*The Cost of Living* 3). Another situation Levy observes takes place on the on the Eurostar between London and Paris, where a young girl is using her computer to learn French, while an older man insists on her moving her computer from their shared table so that he can spread his newspaper out on it, leaving the girl to place the computer awkwardly in her lap.

Levy observes or experiences similar dynamics throughout the novels, experiences that seem to demonstrate that men have a way of naturally taking up space and claiming their desire, while a woman who acts in the same way has “unsettled a boundary, collapsed a social hierarchy, broken with the usual rituals” (*The Cost of Living* 3). As such, we can argue that in these novels, women are the main characters and the men that appear are there to illustrate the challenges that the protagonists and her fellow women meet. In most narratives, the characters who don’t get names are those whose individuality is not important for the sake of the story that is being told. We can argue that that is the reason for Levy’s colleague forgetting or omitting women’s names from his narrative, their individuality doesn’t matter. For the purposes of this man’s narrative, they are someone’s wives or girlfriends. What is more, it is not only in this man’s conversations that women’s names are omitted, in fact, in some settings it is still the norm that they are. If a woman is not married, she formally goes by ms. “Father’s name”, and if she is, she goes by mrs. “Husband’s name”. The name demonstrates not who she is, but who she belongs to.

We can argue, then, that Levy’s omitting of the names of the male characters has a purpose, as does the portrayal she gives of these men, which can be said to mainly consist of selfish and entitled behaviour. Of course, these are not the only things men do in the world, and her description of them is reductive. Like Faye, Levy the narrator sees the world through a certain lens, the lens of male entitlement and female subjugation, and so the names and individual complexities of these men are not important to illustrate the dynamic that Levy sees in the world. In these novels men are the minor characters, for the purposes of the story Levy is telling, it is their role as men and, as such, as perpetrators of stereotypical masculine behaviour, to claim one’s desire at the expense of others. Even if Levy is making it very clear, through their lack of names that they are not the main characters of this story, it is all the more fascinating that they continue to act as if they are. They represent the man as constructed by patriarchy, but in this story, created by a woman’s subjectivity with her own desires, they don’t get to be the main characters.

The man who gets most room in her book, is her oldest male friend. He is married to a woman named Nadia, but while in Paris he starts up an affair with an acquaintance of Levy, Helena. This man too, although he is one of the more central characters of the novels and clearly of importance in Levy's life, visiting her in Paris etc, his name, too, is omitted. Instead, she refers to him as her "best male friend" (*Real Estate* 178). Here, "my best male friend" brings associations to popular culture's tendency of dividing talent into categories such as "best female artist". While "my best friend" would mean they have a very important and profound relationship, the word "male" reduces its meaning significantly. In fact, because we don't know how many male friends Levy has, this man might in fact be her only male friend, in which case, "my best male friend" means nothing at all.

4.5 THE NARRATIVES OF MATERIAL OBJECTS

Throughout Levy's living autobiography, she is very preoccupied with and interested in material objects. She acquires several electrical bicycles, so that her friends can have their own when they come to visit, and they can cycle around London together. Moving into an empty Paris apartment, she stocks up on kitchen plates, because she is "superstitious about a home that lacked the most basic implements to gather new friends around the table" (*Real Estate* 148). She goes to flee markets and thrifts stores. "I was collecting things for a parallel life, or a life not yet lived, a life that was waiting to be made. In a way, these objects resembled the early drafts of a novel" (*Real Estate* 226).

We have, through Cusk, seen some of the ways that physical objects can matter in relation to narrative. For one thing, material objects can be the tangible and real consequences of socially constructed stories, as demonstrated by the woman who was trapped in the castle in Italy because of the shoes and luggage attached to the narrative of femininity, a narrative that she then found herself trapped in. We have also seen how objects can be the material manifestations of a certain narrative, and how their significance can become points of debate in instances where there is no common story or where the common story breaks down. This was the case in the matter of Faye's sons in *Outline*, in which, when her sons were friends, physical objects played an important role in maintaining their shared narrative, and when they started arguing and their shared story broke down, the same physical objects became sources of argument.

We can argue that Levy further illustrates the role of objects in the narratives we live by. They are the material manifestations of a narrative, but in Levy's case, not so much of a

narrative that yet exists. Like the early drafts of a novel, they are the potential beginning of a narrative, they give clues as to what direction the author wants the narrative to take. They are full of potential, but they can also turn out to nothing, and not lead to the life one wanted to lead, or the novel one wanted to write. More than anything, the objects she surrounds herself with contain potential narratives of hope. Her fleet of electrical bicycles are practical preparation for having friends over, but they are also the first pieces of a story, a story of a life full of friends and physical activity. The objects she acquires are, like the early drafts of a novel, full of dreams of what is to come. As such, they are filled with illusion, as, we can argue, all stories are.

This is particularly evident in a new pair of shoes that she buys in Paris. In a story, she finds a pair of shoes she remembers were once called "character shoes", and she buys two pairs, one in black, and one in sage-green. Their names and their appearance make Levy feel like she is, indeed, going out of one character and into another in buying these shoes. "Could I step into a sage-green kind of female character?" (*Real Estate* 150), she asks, looking at the sage-green pair she has bought. Like the shoes she bought when she was seventeen had given her a new sense of identity, making her "feel like I was wearing a tattoo that marked me out for a meaningful life" (*Real Estate* 151). At nearly sixty and divorced, she is again buying shoes that are not just shoes, they are a potential future, a story about who she wants to be. The new character shoes have a different narrative, "another vibe altogether" (*Real Estate* 152), than the shoes she bought at seventeen. She states that the trainers are "*Real Estate* not cool at all" (152), but that she loves them. "Now you have some new character shoes, why not take a breather from making yet another home and step into another sort of character?" (*Real Estate* 149). They provide her with a new way of seeing herself, giving her clues about new ways of being. Wearing these particular shoes, Levy buys four chairs from a (nameless) man who offers to help her carry them to her apartment. On their way, they stop at a café, and the seventy-year-old man tells her about his sex life and "the effect of Viagra on his body" (*Real Estate* 173). Pointing to her shoes, he says that they make her look like a woman who could be one of his lovers. "I never wore the sage-green character shoes again" (*Real Estate* 175), Levy concludes.

One of the things that the passage illustrates, is that the narratives of objects are fragile, and their meaning may change. We can argue that the chair-salesman is acting in the same way as many of the nameless men throughout these novels, he is acting as the main character of the story, casting the woman he is interacting with as a minor character in a story that is really about him. To him, too, the shoes contain a narrative, that is, they make the

woman wearing them particularly suited to cater to his needs. She desired to be someone else, through the shoes, and a man came along and defined who it was that she became. He hijacks the narrative of the shoes, and interestingly, Levy lets him, she never wears the shoes again. Why, we might ask, does Levy allow him to decide what the narrative of the shoes should be, why does she not insist that her narrative is as valid as his, and that she herself gets to decide what the shoes will make her?

One way of answering that, would be to consider the stories that are powerful in our society, who makes those stories, and to what degree the individual can separate herself from those stories. When looking at the different stories that these two people put into this pair of shoes, there is little doubt which one is culturally acknowledged as an interesting story, and which is not: an older man finding a younger woman who then becomes his lover is a story that is told through a ton of movies, for example, while the somewhat vague story that Levy is telling, of a sixty-year old divorced woman finding a new way of living, is not a typical Hollywood-topic. To leave the shoes behind, and in doing so let someone else have the power to construct their narrative, might be the demonstration of a lesson learnt, that is: that some narratives are too powerful to change, and they might have to be abandoned all together. In a way, to insist on putting her own narrative into the shoes would be to struggle against the same thing that she has been struggling against for the last 20 years, that is, the power of the strong societal narratives. To continue to wear the shoes would be the same as continuing to live within the marriage, insisting that her version of the story of marriage, the way she once imagined it could be, is more real than society's version of the story of marriage. Leaving the marriage was to admit that her own narrative of what she wanted a marriage to look like, is defeated by the societal story of what a marriage should look like. In a way the shoes show that Levy has learnt her lesson, that some the narratives of society cannot be changed by the efforts of the individuals living within them. As such, there is some resignation in Levy's text, an acknowledgement that we exist within certain structures, or narratives, that can crush the individual, its desires, and that some individuals are much more likely to be crushed within these structures, than others. Ironically, these are also often the same narratives that provide a kind of safety. Levy leaves behind the shoes as she left behind the marriage, accepting that someone else had written the story for her, and that attempting to change it was to fight against society itself. Both her marriage and the shoes has her caught in a story that she herself does not have the power to change.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

We have seen how Lyotard characterizes the postmodern age by the decline of grand narratives in the form of overarching belief systems that dictate language games and societal practices. In my thesis, I have argued that the narrative of the long-term, romantic relationship can be seen as one of the remaining grand narratives of our society. Both of the novels that I have close read in this thesis, in my view, strengthen this argument, as they both, each in their own way, show how stepping out of a marriage is also to step out of a socially acknowledged story. Furthermore, they show how for these women, life, or more specifically, the story one tells about one's life, has to be restructured and almost reinvented after a divorce. The challenge of finding a comfortable and truthful way of living one's life, which involves telling the story of one's life, is something both of these protagonists grapple with.

As a consequence, both of these novels are preoccupied with the narratives that surround us, whether it is the mainstream cultural narratives or the ones relayed to us by the people we meet (the two are, of course, influenced by each other). They both expose and problematize the inadequacy of these narratives. Cusk, in particular, shows how we often prioritize comfort, safety, self-justification etc., rather than truth in the narratives we construct in our everyday lives. Levy, on her part, shows the lack of cultural narratives that legitimizes or gives clues on how to navigate the place where she now finds herself, as a divorced woman of nearly sixty. The inadequacy of the narratives that concern women specifically, is something that we have seen Rebecca Solnit problematize. Solnit argues that our culture keeps telling the same stories about women, with marriage and children being the preferred ending to most of these stories. We can argue that this is one of the ways in which the grand narrative of the romantic relationship demonstrates its power.

We can also argue that both Levy and Cusk, with these novels, defy this grand narrative. It is the other side of the marriage and of the nuclear family that is exposed in both of these novels. Levy, in particular, shows how what is supposed to be the happy ending of a fairy tale, The Family House, is the beginning of a different story for the woman, that is, a story of homemaking, which is a story of sacrifice and invisible work. Levy shows that the fairy tale of The Family House is a narrative that can trick us, and that it can be a liberation to escape from. As such, Levy is deconstructing the narrative of what a family is, and of what a mother is. She also makes it clear that the nuclear family is not a goal for her anymore: In *The Cost of Living*, what Levy wants is to build "an extended family of friends and their children, an expanded family rather than a nuclear family" (*Real Estate* 25). When a man tries to make

her part of a narrative that we have heard many times before, and that is part of the grand narrative of the romantic relationship, that of a man and his younger lover, she abandons both him and the shoes that prompted the story. Faye, on her side of the fence, does get married again, but the event is hardly mentioned. Only when one of the people she talks to, briefly congratulates her, does the reader learn that she has gotten married. In conventional narratives, the new marriage of a divorced protagonist would represent a turning point or a happy ending, in the *Outline*-trilogy, it is merely a parenthesis.

Rather than focusing on marriage as a goal, these novels show some of the ways the narratives of the marriage and of the nuclear family work on the people within them, and what happens when these stories fall apart. Both of the novels, and *Outline* in particular, demonstrate a number of ways in which divorce, and the dissolution of the nuclear family that follows, can mean a breakdown of identity. For one, because a marriage can structure the identity of someone by giving structure to the story of the self, the narrative identity of the marriage decides what is important and unimportant, valuable and not valuable. After a divorce, the story of the self must be structured towards some other narrative identity. Secondly, the story of the self can become so intertwined with the story of the marriage, and the other person within it, that when the story of the marriage falls apart, the story of the selves within it cannot stand on their own, and so these self-stories, or identities, break down too. And thirdly, we have seen Ricoeur argue that identity can be divided into selfhood and sameness. Sameness is demonstrated through habits, while selfhood, he says, has to do with the self relating to the self, and can be demonstrated through a promise. With the breakdown of the marriages of these women, old habits are abandoned and new ones integrated, and a significant promise, the wedding vow, is broken.

Lyotard argues that the grand narratives should be replaced by a myriad of little ones, that then will function to introduce new language games. As the identity of the individuals are formed within these language games, it will allow for new kinds of identities. The replacement of a few grand narratives by an infinite number of small ones means opening up for different ways of being. It is the purpose of art, Lyotard thinks, to form these little narratives. We can argue that that is what both Cusk and Levy are doing. They are both, each in their own way, challenging and investigating some of the most prevalent narratives of our time, that of the marriage or long-term romantic relationship, and that of the family. Furthermore, we have seen Solnit point out that women, in particular, need a broader range of stories that legitimate different ways of living. Both Levy and Cusk can be said to contribute to this.

While we can argue that divorce has been an identity-shattering experience for the protagonists of both *Outline* and *The Cost of Living*, the state that they find themselves in post-divorce, and their approach to building a new life and identity, differ. Levy's project is clearly articulated, and consists partly of constructing a new identity for herself, and partly of finding a new way of writing female character. We have seen Giddens argue that in the modern world, identity is a project. One way of looking at Levy's living autobiography, is to see is as a demonstration of the project that identity construction has become. Levy finds inspiration and information in the people she meets and the texts she reads, using them in the attempt to be her new self, or, as Giddens would say, she is constructing her identity through reflexivity. Although according to Giddens, in the modern world we are all faced with the task of creating our identities every day, the identity project that Levy is working on in this novel is somewhat more extreme, both because of the divorce she has been through and the changes of life surrounding it. Comments like "Life was hard and I had no script" (*The Cost of Living* 83) and "I had no idea how to be a nearly sixty-year-old female character" (*Real Estate* 188) illustrate the lack of useful narratives available to guide her in her new way of living life. Thus, she demonstrates that the society and culture we live in, and the art that is valued within it, is neglecting to provide useful narratives for some ways of being. In Lyotard's terminology, we can say that Levy is demonstrating the tremendous effort of constructing her own little narrative, having left the structures of a grand one. We can argue, however, that *The Cost of Living* is also about freedom, because there is freedom in not being chained to a narrative, as is demonstrated in how Levy, her daughters and her ex-husband can see each other differently outside of the narrative of the nuclear family. Her many experiences and encounters, and the way she is picking and choosing what she wants to integrate into her new life, demonstrates the privilege of being free from the "societal story" of the marriage, and, we could say, of living in the fluid society, as Bauman calls it, where she in many ways is free to forge her own identity.

Cusk's Faye, meanwhile, appears to be in less hopeful place. We have seen how she displays a scepticism towards the ways we often understand life, which is through narratives. Faye can be said to refrain from the project of constructing an identity in a number of ways. As Cusk herself points out, Faye does not participate much in conversations because to do that is to show the self, and Faye does not have a self to show. Giddens argues that we make our identity through a number of choices. One of the most striking characteristics of Faye in *Outline* is her passivity, that is, her reluctance to make choices for herself. Moreover, Giddens sees the body central to the identity project, through it, we express who we are. Faye's body is

not present in the text, it is hardly mentioned at all. Because Faye appears to the reader more as a mediator of, or outline against, other people's stories, her identity remains somewhat opaque. Her own lack of investment in using a familiar narrative to construct an identity, is contrasted by the people surrounding her and the way they use narratives in a number of ways related to presenting and understanding their selves. As such, one way of understanding *Outline* would be to see Faye's way of being as more "evolved" than the people she encounters, who sometimes deceives with or are deceived by their own narratives. Faye comes off as clear-sighted and neutral, mediating these people's stories while at the same time exposing inconsistencies and contradictions with her intelligent questions and comments. We can, however, argue that her perceived neutrality is deceiving. She is using the stories of other people to understand what has happened to her. She sees their stories through the lens of her own experiences, and though she appears to see things clearly, we can make the argument that she is an unreliable narrator in that she only sees herself.

There is also a difference in the clarity of these two projects. Levy spells out what she is doing with these novels, stating her opinions and reflections clearly. Cusk, on the other hand, packs everything that she wants to convey into riddles. Cusk's trilogy can be read all the way through without the reader seeing it as anything more than a fascinating collection of personal stories related to a very quiet woman. This difference in the clarity of their projects, can be said to be concretized in the titles of the novels. *Outline* is a vague title that cannot be understood without reading the book. Like so much of the novel itself, it is kind of a riddle, that is, we could argue, explained by Anne in the text, who after experiencing a traumatic event was unable to access the said event through using her own language, but found that she could access it through the stories of others, thereby appearing as an outline to the stories of the people she met. We have argued that Faye is appearing to the readers of *Outline* in the same manner. Levy's title, *The Cost of Living*, is in contrast concrete, it is a sentence that we all know. "Cost" is a specifically economic term, it is a term that a housewife would use. It is a reminder that "there's no such thing as a free meal", nothing is free, that everything comes with a cost, but there is also positivity in it, in that it emphasizes living as something good, something worth paying a cost for.

We have seen how Cusk, in interviews, have commented on how we suspend the self, that is, how all the things that we say are the self, actually, are not the self. Arguably, all the people that Faye encounters, who seem to be showing their selves through conversations, are merely showing what Cusk calls "false suspensions of the self". As such, we may learn as much about the self of Faye as we would learn if she told the story in a conventional way,

because those kinds of narratives are not the self, they are the false suspensions of it. In the interview with *The New Yorker*, Cusk describes personal experiences as not related to character, but as things you flow through. We can argue that through *Outline*, what we get is not the deep understanding of one or a few characters, but rather a number of different narratives that illuminate aspects of life that, arguably, we all share. In a way, we can find, as Braidotti says, "the impersonal voice of a self that is not one" (*Metamorphoses* 94).

This thesis has shown how *Outline* and *The Cost of Being* illuminate the profound impact that narratives, and conventional cultural narratives in particular, have on our lives. With these novels, Cusk and Levy are opposing aspects of this storytelling. Cusk is, with her innovative way of constructing her protagonist, breaking out of conventional ways of writing character. Levy is, by dedicating *The Cost of Living* to the desires of a woman of nearly sixty, opposing many stories that either omit female desire or make the female character desire something that someone else wants her to desire. Together, they illuminate some of the problems of narratives, both in how we use them, which is often in self-deceiving ways, and in how they work on us, which can mean shaping our desires and trapping us in modes of thinking. The novels also, however, demonstrate how we need narratives. Both Cusk and Levy are, after all, using narratives for their own purpose in these works. Arguably, these narratives are part of a liberation process. Through the creation of these stories, the protagonists are liberating themselves from one story and entering another.

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