

**Modernist Visual Aesthetics and *The Double Hook***

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the significant role of expressionist and minimalist visual aesthetics in the construction (imagery, structuring, language) and subsequent interpretation of Sheila Watson's The Double Hook. While Sherrill Grace's Regression & Apocalypse lays the groundwork for a literary expressionist reading of Watson's novel, this study elaborates the crucial links between literary and painterly expressionism in the novel and suggests Watson's critique of the expressionist aesthetic. A reading of the minimalist aesthetic, as both an extension of and an alternative to the expressionist reading of the text, emphasizes the relevance of noniconic painterly strategies to the novel and, by implication, of alternate forms of spectatorship that are demanded by the text. This study ultimately shows how Watson creatively synthesizes these extremes of modernist visual aesthetics and asks for the reader's imaginative and critical engagement with the modernist arts.

## Résumé

Nous examinons dans le présent mémoire le rôle significatif de l'esthétique visuelle expressionniste et minimaliste tant dans la construction--l'imagerie, la structure, la langue--que dans l'interprétation subséquente du roman The Double Hook de Sheila Watson. Alors que l'étude de Sherrill Grace Regression and Apocalypse présentait un canevas d'interprétation littéraire expressionniste du roman de Watson, nous explorerons plutôt les liens fondamentaux entre l'expressionnisme littéraire et l'expressionnisme pictural présents dans le roman, et en dégagerons la critique que fait l'auteur de l'esthétique expressionniste. Une lecture de l'esthétique minimaliste, qui se veut à la fois extension et alternative à l'interprétation expressionniste du texte, met en lumière la pertinence d'adopter des stratégies picturales non iconiques face au roman et, ce faisant, illustre les nouvelles formes de réception qu'appelle le texte. Nous montrerons enfin comment Watson synthétise ces extrêmes de l'esthétique visuelle moderniste de façon créative, amenant le lecteur à s'engager de manière à la fois imaginative et critique face aux arts modernistes.

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## Introduction

Sheila Watson's The Double Hook made its debut with a photographic enlargement of a 'double-hook'—a literal manifestation of the words—on the cover. As a result of the enlargement process of the original image, Watson said, “all the imperfections of hand work began to show. It looked like quite a smooth hook when you held it in your hand, but as it grew larger and larger you could see all these...perfections? Imperfections?” (“What I’m Going To Do” 182). Excited by its questioning of ‘perfection,’ she considered the cover to be a “sensitive and creative response to the text,” and acknowledged it as a ‘co-creation’ (“It’s What You Say” 167). In addition, the cover “makes a handy metaphor for the work of critics, examining and enlarging the text, exposing the ‘imperfections’ of its knowledge and their own; it invites the co-creator/critic to be faithful to the text *and* to make ‘something else’” (Rooke 82).

Although the metaphor is appropriate, the photographic enlargement no longer adorns the novel. Instead, the reader faces a small reproduction of Jean Dallaire’s “Chien Appocalyptique”: under an unfriendly sun, a ravenous dog drops a bone as a reaction to something beyond the framing edge.<sup>1</sup> The disparate images—on the one hand, the found object, the minimal statement, and on the other, the energetic expressionist rendering—conceivably frame one’s reading of the text. If one disregards the maxim of

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<sup>1</sup> The inversion—from enlargement to reduction—should be viewed in the context of editorial decisions dictated by a mandate of exhibiting Canadian art on the covers of the New Canadian Library series and also of standardizing the size of the illustrations across the series. Whether or not this cover would meet with Watson’s approval is unknown. However, her frustration with the ‘regionalist’ interpretation of an interim edition—a photograph of a woman pumping water—is documented (“It’s What You Say” 167).

never judging a book by its cover, the juxtaposition of surface appearances illustrates different possible aesthetic interpretations of the text. I was motivated to explore these images and the idea of two painterly aesthetics--the minimalist and the expressionist--as means of comprehending the text, of 'reading' or 'viewing' the text, and of elucidating some of the textual and thematic problems of the novel.

Watson's frequently quoted phrase--"If I had something to say, it was going to be said in these images"--provides a major impetus for this study ("It's What You Say" 158). I believe in taking Watson's idea of 'writing' the images literally: the focus of this study will therefore be on the metaphoric and metaphysical implications of both image and visual aesthetic as translated into language, and on the correlation of visual and linguistic elements of the text. This emphasis is, in essence, a critical parallel to Watson's assertion of how the "images had, in a strange way, become part of my language" ("It's What You Say" 158).<sup>2</sup>

The validity of these interartistic comparisons does, of course, involve more than a mere comparison of the various cover illustrations. One critic, Sherrill Grace, has engaged the expressionist reading of the novel as part of a larger study, Regression & Apocalypse: Studies in North American Literary Expressionism. Ultimately, I would like to reveal the inadequacies of this reading and its underlying definition of literary expressionism. This can be accomplished by providing a basic formulation of the expressionist aesthetic (and its theoretical underpinnings) and, secondly, by a comparison

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<sup>2</sup> Watson's own interest in painting is documented in her thesis on Wyndham Lewis and in her founding of White Pelican, a journal devoted to literature and the visual arts. As Neuman highlights, "Watson appreciated the extent to which the arts influenced one another" (47).



of Grace's work to other readings of literary expressionism, such as Walter Sokel's The Writer in Extremis: Expressionism in Twentieth Century German Literature, Armin Arnold's Prosa des Expressionismus, and A.P. Dierick's German Expressionist Prose: Theory and Practice. This overview will, in turn, necessitate a discussion of Wilhelm Worringer's Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style, as his theorizing greatly influenced painters and serves as the basis of the aforementioned readings of literary expressionism. Grace's misreading of Worringer, in conjunction with her model's reliance on mimetic criteria, leads her to a questionable interpretation of the correlation of the expressionist aesthetic to The Double Hook. While aspects of mimetic terminology—in particular, 'setting'—are indeed worth retaining in this study, a more pronounced emphasis on visual expressionism is necessary to an understanding of the complex relationship of expressionism (both literary and visual) to Watson's novel.

Unlike the aforementioned studies of literary expressionism, no scholarly work has been devoted to constructing a literary model predicated on the minimalist painterly aesthetic. The absence of such a model requires an exploration of how Watson transforms visual minimalism into a 'writerly ethics.' I argue that numerous aspects of the minimalist aesthetic are applicable to a reading of The Double Hook: minimalism's noniconic aesthetic is important to an understanding of the novel's structure, the novel's construction of vision, and the novel's relation to the dominant formalist aesthetic of modernist art. These aspects, or 'presentational' strategies, of minimalism include an array of theoretical, compositional, and spectatorial issues: the concepts of reduction, immediacy, materiality, monochromaticism, and enclosure/exclosure. The minimalist

aesthetic, in opposition to expressionism's foregrounding of the artist, enables the critic to explore the ramifications of a spectator-driven art and to address the question of where meaning is to be located in the work of art. This concern also figures prominently in Francis Colpitt's retrospective Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective. His study integrates the many facets of the minimalist aesthetic into a comprehensive and concise theoretical overview. As such, it will be instrumental in establishing the minimalist aesthetic's relation to The Double Hook.

Traces of a painterly vocabulary--terms such as 'minimal,' 'abstract,' 'expressionist'--surface in critical readings of the novel. Yet, with the exception of 'expressionism' in Sherrill Grace's Regression & Apocalypse, the limited applications of this terminology and its unclear overlap with a literary vocabulary show the need for a more comprehensive art-historical, interdisciplinary reading of the text. For Stephen Scobie, landscape is depicted in "an almost Cubist manner" and, "like a Braque collage, the result is both recognizably a landscape and unmistakably an artifice" (277). Barbara Godard appeals to the idea of the painter's collage in the context of "Watson's layering of different cultural patterns of narrative and language" (164). Robert Kroetsch, on the other hand, moves away from the language of collage when he describes the novel as the "necessary act of decreation: the exercise in minimal art" (207).<sup>3</sup> Finally, George Bowering refers to typography and page layout to indicate a correlation of The Double Hook to the spatial arts: "The Canadian literature of 1959 was presented with these pages

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<sup>3</sup> I will address Kroetsch's comments in more detail in the chapter on minimalism.

given to an unusual amount of whiteness. The action was seen to be, then, within the shape of the page, indicating that the book is a spatial art, unlike film or music with their passive audiences, more like sculpture or architecture” (211).

If these ideas are indeed applicable to The Double Hook, the question arises as to how Watson manoeuvres between the different modes--minimalist and expressionist--of presentation. My aim is to clarify and strengthen the use of a painterly terminology: a more thorough investigation of the theoretical foundations, compositional strategies, and imagery of minimalism and expressionism is required to make these broader claims. This approach explores the relevance and boundaries of the competing vocabularies (the mimetic and the abstract; noniconic and iconic abstraction) and provides the framework for comparing and integrating the various interartistic terminologies of Watson critics.

I would argue that the varied readings of The Double Hook can be broadly understood as belonging to one of two critical orientations--systematization or decreation--and being concerned with three principal focal points: Coyote, the human figures, and genre.<sup>4</sup> These orientations, and the ways in which they inform discussion of the three main focal points, have shaped the discourse around The Double Hook. A brief overview of this discourse highlights the extent to which a painterly vocabulary focused

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<sup>4</sup> This schema responds in some ways to Scobie's categorization of that criticism into two 'waves.' His first wave is devoted to "basic elucidation and interpretation" and to mapping the "background of the novel's allusions and imagery" (266-67); this enabled a subsequent wave, "the exploration of more detailed aspects of the book, and the search for new insights, new ways to approach its central concerns" (268). His categorization does not, however, take into account the tensions between the various readings of the text. One might also argue that it overemphasizes earlier interpretations of the novel.

on minimalist and expressionist readings of the text offers an alternate means of addressing conflicting interpretations of The Double Hook.

What I refer to as the “systematizing orientation” in Watson criticism is characterized by a comfort with the notion of inscribing meaning(s) into the text. Within the context of this orientation, critics treat the ideas of redemption, renewal, and transformation as definitive occurrences in the text; symbols are seen as fixed rather than ambiguous or changing. Systematizing critics read The Double Hook as a Christian allegory (Mitchell) or as defined by elemental and transcendental symbolic structures (Morris). One could contend that the systematizing criticism is mythopoeic in its focus, and that it emphasizes Watson’s use of “mythology as a medium for correlating multiple layers of allusion and meaning” (Scobie 263).

Many readings of The Double Hook are, however, at odds with this systematizing impulse. ‘Decreative’ criticism emphasizes Watson’s problematizing of language and the difficulties of definition. Critics working within this framework (or approach) are wary of the reductionism inherent in systematizing approaches to the novel, and question interpretations that posit a ‘transformed’ or ‘renewed’ community at the end of the novel. For these critics, the text only hints at possibilities of meaning rather than positing any distinct conclusions. Robert Kroetsch, Diane Bessai, Barbara Godard, and Margaret Turner, guided by a deconstructionist method, focus on the ‘uninventing,’ the ‘decreating,’ and the ‘play of possible meanings’ in The Double Hook, and how these possibilities “not only co-exist but contradict” (Kroetsch 13).

The tension between the systematizing and deconstructionist impulses ultimately

leads to questions of where and how the critic locates meaning (or the absence of meaning) in the text. Any critic engaging The Double Hook faces the difficult task of manoeuvring between the 'meaning' and the 'non-meaning' approaches to the text. Angela Bowering astutely defines this 'double hook': that of steering one's way "between the Scylla of appropriation and direction that would affix the vitality of the novel's imagery and syntax to a systematized symbology on the one hand, and the Charybdis of abstract and analytical reading that overreaches and obliterates the text" (7). In arguing the value of an interartistic reading of The Double Hook, I am conscious that these dangers are especially pertinent to the interartistic critic: they point to the hazards of allying the text with the aims of either minimalism or expressionism, or, on the other hand, emphasizing the aesthetic at the expense of the text.

Within these orientations, and outside these orientations as well, critics are primarily concerned with the aforementioned three aspects of the text: Coyote, the human figures, and genre. The first of these focal points aims at elucidating the role of Coyote in the text. Here, critics aim to pinpoint the specific indigenous Coyote myth(s) which are pertinent to the text. Some critics propose a folkloric reading, arguing that the novel is built on an amalgam of specific folk motifs concerning Coyote (Putzel). Others posit a more universal conception of the trickster figure without reference to a particular myth (Monkman). Beverly Mitchell's allegorical reading of the novel emphasizes the appropriation of myth and the conception of Coyote as a manifestation of the old testament God. Leslie Monkman, by contrast, addresses the convergence of myths, by placing the indigenous trickster figure within a Christian framework. Similarly, George

Bowering theorizes that Watson amalgamates the indigenous mythological figure with figures from other myths, such as the Greek Euros, to construct Coyote (213).

These interpretations indicate, as Bowering points out, how “most of the critics have concentrated almost exclusively on the experiences of the creek people, and hardly at all on the experience of the reader” (214). For Bowering, reader, author, and character are always presented with an outsider’s view of Coyote. Kroetsch goes a step further, figuratively positing the author as the trickster figure. In this way, Bowering and Kroetsch open up the discursive space in which the critic can move beyond the mythological framework and attend to the way Watson uses Coyote as an active participant in the inscription of expressionism and minimalism. Watson, I will argue, uses Coyote both as an impediment to the active visual participation that is required of the spectator in minimalism and as a means of undermining the validity of regression as a response to the expressionist sense of crisis.

Coyote is not the only contentious ‘figure’ in the text; critics generally dispute the centrality of a figure or group of figures to the text’s resolution.<sup>5</sup> The dominant reading positions James as the center of the action and Felix as the locus of the community’s spiritual transformation (Scobie, Lennox). The dominant reading of the text can, however, be challenged in a number of ways. Dawn Rae Downton, for example, elevates the centrality of William and Heinrich to the text’s resolution by focusing on the idea of

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<sup>5</sup> I concur with George Bowering that the use of the term “figure,” as opposed to character, effectively downplays the idea of character and its realist underpinnings. In addition, Watson herself uses the word with respect to the ‘characters’ in her novel. The term “figure” manifests itself in most art forms, as Bowering indicates, and, as such, easily allows one to use the language of painting with respect to the novel (189).

communication and the bearing of messages as the means of renewing the community. Constance Rooke challenges the privileging of the male figures and proposes a triad of women as the source of the community's transformation: the "visionary" Ara, the "practical" Angel, and Lenchen, "the deliverer and emancipated mother of us all" (84).

I would also suggest that Watson's critique of the expressionist hero (the individual as capable of bringing about a transformation of society) asks the reader to reconsider readings of the novel that posit James as the agent responsible for bringing about the text's resolution. I suggest that Watson has her figures come to an understanding of their predicament through an understanding of visual relations between figure and ground. In turn, the relation of figure to ground, so central to painting, can be used to re-evaluate (or possibly, to confirm) the role that these figures play in the text's resolution.

This emphasis on the painterly vocabulary of minimalism and expressionism represents a move away from the application of mimetic or realist criteria that characterize the traditional genre of the novel. Regardless of a painterly vocabulary, genre has been a third focal point of critics of The Double Hook. Genre oriented criticism can be further divided into two camps. The first camp calls into question the novel's status as novel. Readings of The Double Hook often treat the text as a prose poem (Marta, Child, Theall) rather than a novel. Critics of the second camp aim to elucidate the play of various sub-genres in the text. In this context, The Double Hook may be read as subverting the conventions of the Western (Grube, Davidson) or as modeled on the structure of theatrical comedy (Corbett).

Critics in both camps dispute the classification of The Double Hook's genre and, thereby, the applicability of a genre-specific vocabulary to the text. In this paper, I suggest that questions of generic experimentation can be usefully re-evaluated in light of both minimalism and expressionism. For while the minimalist strategy of reduction asks the critic to attend to the 'essence' of a genre, expressionism consciously invites a blurring of the distinctions between genres.

As this brief survey of Watson criticism already suggests, a painterly vocabulary offers the critic a useful means of approaching the conflicting interpretations of The Double Hook. My objective is to offer such an interartistic reading, and to use that reading as a way of understanding the discourse around The Double Hook. Moreover, by attending to expressionism and minimalism, and thereby to two extremes of modernist visual art, I aim to situate this study within the modernist context that fascinated Watson.

Given his similar fascination with modernism, Charles Altieri's Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry offers me an interesting way into Watson's correlation of image, language, and painting. Altieri's aesthetic history traces the philosophical and epistemological shifts that enabled modernist abstraction which, in turn, changed notions of poetry, identity, and agency. The visual arts, Altieri argues, "freed the poets from traditional ideals of descriptive adequacy" (10) and made it possible for an author to locate the semantic force of the work in the "forming activity itself" (57). By attending to the structuring and syntactical aspects of a text, the critic can illustrate how an author transforms the "painterly roots of Modernist aesthetics" into a "full writerly ethics" (Altieri 10). As Altieri points out, a painter's method of



“composing spatial relations could allow new conjunctions among the complex attitudes language can carry, and the presence of these conjunctions could make demands on the composing intelligence that would force it to explore an ethos compatible with the powers activated by the art” (288).

For the interartistic critic, adapting the language of painterly abstraction to the literary medium of The Double Hook necessitates a return to

questions about the limits of representation; about the possibility of alternative forms of representativeness based on distinctive poetic sites; and, above all, about the intricacies of identification and judgment that emerged as poets sought to elaborate the necessary new terms on which to propose recommendations for their values. (Altieri 60)

Thus, above all, the critic must attend to what Watson’s inscription of visual arts into the text ‘activates’ or ‘proposes’ for the reader of The Double Hook.<sup>6</sup> Modernist art, Altieri argues, is able to “reject mimetic structures and still retain extraordinary semantic force by relying directly on the production of exemplary attitudes that an audience might project into extraartistic concerns” (7).

Critics of The Double Hook must therefore emphasize “the work’s foregrounding of the structuring activity of the artist: on the one hand posed thematically against ‘telling,’ or the old script, or a scenic, pictorial art, and on the other hand contrasted to Romantic notions of expressive authorial presence” (Altieri 38). Altieri is, in essence,

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<sup>6</sup> Watson, as I will argue, clearly challenges certain inherent limitations of both the expressionist and minimalist aesthetics in her inscription of these two aesthetics into The Double Hook.

asking the critic to examine the current shape of the discourse around The Double Hook and to explore the extent to which he or she can speak of Watson's text without recourse to the criteria of representational art that are characteristic of the greater part of Watson criticism.

Altieri's project is, however, predicated on the study of poetry; structuring principles and syntactic relations work differently in a novel. Indeed, I would argue that an author cannot sustain the energies of non-iconic painting (such as minimalism) in a representational art form such as the novel, especially given the substantial limitations that noniconic abstraction places on referentiality. Watson's inscription of iconic art into the text in the form of expressionism suggests that her concerns involve the broader dimensions of modernist abstract art. Watson creatively synthesizes the noniconic (minimalist) and iconic (expressionist) modes of abstraction in The Double Hook; the critic must attend to this synthesis to understand what the text 'proposes.' As I ultimately argue, the form of the novel offers Watson the means to explore, challenge, and compare these modernist visual aesthetics.

Watson's exploration of painting calls for a similar engagement with modernist visual art on the part of the literary critic. For, as Altieri notes,

Even when we run into trouble or think we have reached a limit to the analogies, we will find our own experience a plausible encounter with the problems that the poets themselves had to confront. And, more important for me, it makes sense for literary critics, who may not respond to the full visual energies of a painting, to employ their own ways of participating in

the imaginative life of paintings. Even if we miss or distort what would engage painters, we might well be following precisely the tracks that fascinated those whose business is words. (9)

What is at stake for both the writer and the critic is an endeavour of the imagination. In the context of such an endeavour, painting and aesthetic theory should act not as a constraint, but rather as a vehicle for an imaginative reading of The Double Hook.

## Revisiting Expressionism

Expressionism represented an important stage in the development of modernist visual art from both a philosophical and a stylistic standpoint. The aesthetic and commercial reign of impressionism over the art world was effectively challenged. Impressionist representation or imitation of external reality in art was supplanted by the newfound emphasis on the reality of the artist and expressionist artistic creation became the “projection of the artist’s profound self” (Richard 9). This self was, however, vehemently at odds with the prevailing social and political realities it faced. A profound sense of alienation was mirrored in the “distorted,” “fragmented,” and “violent images of humanity” that surfaced on expressionist canvases (Grace 21).

These images radically transformed the literary landscape of the early twentieth century as well. Expressionist literature borrowed and profited from the plastic arts and from art history (most notably from Wilhelm Worringer’s Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style). As A.P. Dierick indicates, painting provided the expressionist authors with a “model to emulate” (16). Nevertheless, the expressionists viewed prose as ultimately “capable of uniting life and art into a synthesis” (Dierick 89). Literary expressionism quickly formulated its own conventions and techniques aside from those borrowed from painting.

An interesting fusion of visual and literary expressionism manifests itself in Sheila Watson’s The Double Hook. However, the importance of the expressionist aesthetic—literary and visual—to the text is overlooked by Watson’s critics. The one

notable exception, Sherrill Grace, attempts to correlate the expressionist aesthetic with The Double Hook in Regression and Apocalypse: Studies in North American Literary Expressionism. Her reading of the novel, however, remains predominantly focused on literary expression. While many aspects of Grace's approach--points of convergence between the text and the literary expressionist aesthetic--are significant, the relationship between The Double Hook and expressionism is more complex than the relationship that Grace advocates. The equally significant role that the expressionist visual aesthetic plays in The Double Hook needs to be addressed. In addition, Watson retains some facets of expressionism (both literary and visual) but simultaneously inverts and subverts others. Grace's analysis of The Double Hook nevertheless offers some of the crucial terminology--regression and apocalypse, abstraction and empathy--that is needed to discuss expressionism. Her approach serves as a springboard into Watson's more critical inscription of expressionism into the novel.

To define this Canadian novel as expressionist, Grace must first transplant expressionism from its German context. Expressionism, she argues, moved easily across artistic boundaries as a "particular style, subject-matter, and subjective emotionalism in painting, poetry, drama, fiction, music, dance, and film" (Grace 20). Moreover, as an interdisciplinary and international phenomenon, expressionism easily moved across borders. In North America there emerged a "double variant on the original model, a hybrid plant combining the essential features of the expressionist vision with the indigenous materials of North American life" (Grace 25). This North American

variation “survived its severance from active political ideals--as it did in Germany--by concentrating on art, on stylistic experiment, on language as an end in itself, and on pictorial or verbal abstraction” (Grace 25).<sup>1</sup>

Grace reads expressionist literature (in Germany and in its North American counterpart) as a response to Wilhelm Worringer’s ‘misunderstanding’ of Expressionism. Her reading seeks “to explain and make sense of the many divergent tendencies--such as the conflicting pull towards abstraction and empathy--within what remained an essentially representational art” (34). In her efforts to account for these conflicting tendencies, Grace shifts the focus from the ‘psychology of style’ and ‘artistic volition’--so central to Worringer--to an emphasis on Gestalt and hermeneutics. This shift enables Grace to read expressionism as vacillating between extremes of ‘regression’ and ‘apocalypse,’ which represent “formal and thematic codes for understanding the texts” (38). Irrespective of medium, she argues, expressionism displays these tensions between regression and apocalypse, between representation and abstraction, and “between the need to document the ugliness and dehumanization of bourgeois society...and the desire to express the essences of things” (39). These “ambiguities and dichotomies” are “in themselves defining qualities of the expressionist style and vision” (Grace 66).

Regression represents a “profound yearning, a longing to return to the distant echoes of the animal past, a past free of moral restriction and restraint” (Grace 38). At its extreme, it articulates a “longing for death” and “the profoundly atavistic desire to be

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, much of modernist art represents a critical response to realism, materialism, and a ‘stultifying’ past; and, in general, modernist art emphasized stylistic experimentation and language as an end in itself.

reunited with primitive, instinctual forces” (Grace 38); in its less extreme manifestation, regression expresses “a joyful human identification with nature” (Grace 38). Its antithesis, the apocalypse, represents a “cataclysmic, purgative destruction that should lead to regeneration and spiritual rebirth for mankind as well as the individual” (Grace 38). Despite varying interpretations--“some secular, some predictive and literal, others allegorical and ethical”--Grace maintains that the expressionist artist “*generally* favours the romantic or visionary sense of apocalypse as a secular, allegorical, and ethical event leading to personal growth or transfiguration and symbolizing socio-political upheavals that may reveal the hitherto hidden perfection of the world” (38).<sup>2</sup>

Expressionist works favouring regression are “characterized by topoi of inversion, whereas the more apocalyptic works exploit topoi of explosion to inscribe their vision of the world” (Grace 38). Thus, “either the ordinary world of human relations, of cause and effect, of daytime reality is turned inside-out or upside-down, or else it explodes because of some internal conflict or pressure” (Grace 66). In either case our conception of

normalcy is displaced, thrust aside by the eruption of a dark vision stemming from a mythic underworld, a suppressed trauma, a forgotten yet universal, instinctual realm, or by a violent outburst of destructive energy: either it is a carnivalesque vision, at once liberating and regressive, or a shattering, apocalyptic one. (Grace 66)

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<sup>2</sup> As Grace points out, the extremes are often not that far apart: either “vision can image human despair and annihilation” (39). Moreover, the artists themselves responded ambivalently to the idea of apocalypse, and the apocalyptic visions “all too easily tip over into regression when the energy and hopes of the former are spent and the peace of unself-consciousness or death seem preferable to the bitterness of defeat” (Grace 38).

In addition to this fundamental tension between regression and apocalypse, literary expressionism, according to Grace, exhibits several other distinguishing characteristics. Indeed these features--treatment of character, setting, action and theme, abstracting techniques, and the 'expressionist hero'--form the basis of her subsequent textual analysis of The Double Hook. Grace indicates that these features are representative of both German Expressionist literature and the North American variant. For Grace, the distance between the two variants diminishes as each of her representative authors was "arguably influenced by and demonstrably acquainted with some form(s) of German Expressionist art" (6).

Grace's reading of Watson's novel is, however, severely limited by her model. Although her understanding of expressionism, outlined in her introduction, is acute, she is often forced to manipulate the shape of the text to fit the dimensions of her model. Moreover, the reliance on the model often forces her into contradictions. Grace's discussion of James as the expressionist hero is representative of the interpretive difficulties that arise from her efforts to append the text to the model: while maintaining the presence of the expressionist hero in the novel, she is forced to alter her terminology from hero to rebel (albeit without defining the latter) and ultimately forced to question the 'heroic' nature of his actions.

Grace's analysis of The Double Hook (and the other texts in her larger study) relies on simplifying expressionism. The apparent unity of expressionism inherent in Grace's reading of the movement is fractured by other critics. Walter Sokel's chronological treatment of expressionism outlines a variety of expressionisms--naive or



rhetorical, activist, messianic, sophisticated, surrealist, and cubist. In addition, Sokel conceived of expressionism “as a particularly German phenomenon” (2).<sup>3</sup> Dierick emphasizes the variety of artistic responses to the sense of crisis felt by the authors and visual artists to illustrate the diversity of expressionisms. It remains extremely difficult to define an expressionist poetics or an expressionist style in a literary text (or even a painting for that matter). Literary and painterly expressionism incorporate a diversity of forms and styles that complicate the attempt to discuss expressionism as categorically as Grace does. Armin Arnold’s study of expressionism—devoted to the problem of inclusion and exclusion in the expressionist canon—is a case in point. The slightest variation in criteria, he argues, radically alters the shape of this canon.

Furthermore, when one considers that most critics date the ‘death’ of expressionism to the 1920’s, I think one would be hard pressed to argue that Watson wrote a novel dictated solely by a ‘defeated’ aesthetic.<sup>4</sup> Grace is one of the only critics to give such high praise to a movement perceived by other critics to have collapsed under the weight of its internal contradictions. Sokel concludes his own study of German expressionist prose with the assertion that

German expressionism sought to be two things in one: a revolution of poetic form and vision, and a reformation of human life. These two aims

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<sup>3</sup> Grace does not go far enough in defining a North American variation of expressionism. I would argue that the shift in social context (from Europe to North America—which entails lumping Canada and the United States together) and of temporal context (the inclusion of post and pre-war texts as representative texts) necessitates a radical reformulation of Expressionism.

<sup>4</sup> I don’t believe that Watson is typically ‘Canadian’ in coming ‘late’ to expressionism. As Grace indicates, Watson discovered “expressionist painting as early as 1930” (285).

were hardly compatible. As a part of the stylistic revolution of modernism, Expressionism was too difficult and *recherché* to serve its didactic and proselytizing ambitions; as a Messianic revolt it had to be too preachy to form a genuine part of modernism. The ideal of the 'new man' clashed with the ideal of 'the new form,' and each interfered with and diluted the other. (227)

Dierick's conclusion is similar: "Expressionism, tragically, ends in contradictions and despair, in a mood of resignation and bitterness, paradoxically mirroring the initial despair and sense of crisis which gave rise to it" (271).

Problems of categorical definition, chronology, and a reliance on literary terminology inherent in Grace's reading of expressionism also cast doubt on her reading of The Double Hook as expressionist. The more critical relationship between expressionism and The Double Hook manifests itself in areas outside of her model: in imagery and in the relation of painting to text. In addition, a more thorough investigation of aspects of literary expressionism--setting in particular--will help ascertain this complex relationship between the text and the expressionist aesthetic. These areas are necessary points of inquiry into the applicability of the expressionist dichotomies of regression/apocalypse and abstraction/empathy to The Double Hook.

Expressionism is a response to a profound sense of crisis (social, aesthetic, political) experienced by the artists and mirrored in the distorted and fragmented images on the canvases. The 'dis-ease' with the world is reflected in the abstractive impulses

governing the work of art: "if the basic experience is one of catastrophe, it is only to be expected that Expressionist art would break with the tradition which sees art as the imitation of nature and which aims for 'realism' understood in terms of proximity to the perceived model in the empirical world" (Dierick 35). Expressionist art, as Dierick points out, "has a two-fold function: to express the situation of crisis (through appropriate art forms and a valid style) and to attain a solution to that crisis" (46).

The Double Hook begins with the expressionist sense of crisis and the characteristic movement away from realism. Watson adopts the distorted imagery of the expressionist painters to reflect her characters' dis-ease with the world: a world in which Ara feels "death leaking through from the center of the earth. Death rising to the knee. Death rising to the loin" (21). Watson's novel presents a world in which "humanity is 'space shy,' as Worringer would say, living alienated in ignorance and above all in fear of the environment" (Grace 193). Indeed, this sense of fear is quite pervasive in the novel: "Fear making mischief. Laying traps for men. The dog and his servants plaguing the earth. Fear skulking around. Fear walking round in the living shape of the dead. No stone was big enough, no pile of stones, to weigh down fear" (61).

Reality is spatially distorted in the novel to transmit this sense of crisis. Direction is difficult to ascertain with the creek flowing "this way and that" (22) and with roads going "from this to that" (33); even the hill that "led up to the pines...fell off to nowhere on the other side" (33). These images aim to describe the sense of dislocation and entrapment that haunts these figures. To add to the discomfort of these figures, space is closing in on them. Ara looks up to see "the raw skin of the sky drawn over them like a

sack" (36).

Watson's use of compression has figures and animals fighting for space in a place where even the "land was humped to the sky" (53). Felix feels the "edge of the steps cut into his flesh" (71). The hounds are described as "jostling shoulder to shoulder, tail bisecting tail" (24) and with their backs "cramped against the side of the house" (71). Water barely covers the surface of the creek, "hardly up to the ankle" and it continues to "dry away" (20). Watson adds physical and metaphysical 'weight' to compress this world further. James feels the "weight of clay sheets" on his shoulder (44); Felix's flesh is "heavy on his bone, a cumbersome coat folded and creased and sagging at the seams" (71-72); Ara saw James's horse and she "felt the weight of nickel plate pulling its head to the earth" (35). Even the trees are denied a vertical ascent: a downward momentum shoves the cottonwoods "naked into the stone bottom" (35).

In these images, Watson transposes the imagery and certain techniques of expressionist painting to her novel to recreate the expressionist sense of crisis. This presentation mirrors the spatial arrangements of many expressionist paintings. Distortion and compression--both reinforcing the sense of anxiety--are prevalent in the painting of *Die Brücke* artists. Like an Erich Heckel painting, Watson's "figures were pressed into inadequate spaces, thereby giving an impression of restriction and hampered movement" (Selz 136). By eradicating depth, Watson makes the world of the text appear two-dimensional at times. The expressionist painters themselves characteristically dispensed with the illusion of a third dimension in painting: moving away from realism, the two-dimensional medium portrayed a stylized two-dimensional world (Gordon 15).

The movement away from realism inherent in the text's expressionist imagery is reinforced by another expressionist technique, that of 'blurring' the distinctions between genres. Although Grace does not recognize this merging of genres as expressionist, she nevertheless describes the novel as possessing some "unusual formal qualities" (203). Grace correctly asserts that The Double Hook "looks as much like a play as a novel," and that its perspective shifts continually in "a manner reminiscent of cinematic techniques" (203). Aside from Watson's obvious borrowing of the 'dramatis personae' from the theatre, there are other significant parallels. The isolation of the community--self-containment with no ties to the external world--is similar to the world of the stage (Corbett 115). Even the sun functions as a spotlight. The theatrical nature of the work, as Corbett indicates, allows Watson to achieve "an intense, transcendent quality which supports the spiritual and mythological content of the novel effectively" (115).<sup>5</sup>

Poetry also plays a role in the text's movement away from the conventions of realist novels. For Godard, the "alternating poetry and prose [in the text] fulfills a disruptive function, slowing down our perception of the text by demanding changes in our pace of reading" (171). As Jan Marta points out, The Double Hook "belongs to a genre which challenges form as the distinction between poetry and prose" (44). The novel's impact, Marta argues, "derives from the interaction and, more significantly, the

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<sup>5</sup> "The novel's structure," Corbett argues, "is that of classical comedy, concerned with the social relations of a small community and the transformation of that social order from the grip of the old regime into a more vital, life-oriented one. The fact that there are elements of tragedy contained in the transformation is quite consistent both with Aristotle's definition of comedy and with the example of Elizabethan plays of that genre" (155). Corbett, along with George Bowering, structurally allies Part IV of the novel with the corresponding act in Shakespearean comedy.

fusion of the two modes” (44).

Watson’s movement among genres--theatre, prose, and poetry--continually challenges readerly expectations and thwarts the flow of the narrative.<sup>6</sup> This jarring intensifies the sense of anxiety that Watson has established with her imagery, distortion, and compression. Thus, Watson effectively fuses literary and painterly techniques to move away from realism and to establish the sense of crisis that is so central to expressionism.

Watson then takes this sense of crisis and appropriately embeds it in the family. For the expressionists, the family is a primary source of conflict, as the patterns of “authority and power in society at large are mirrored in the family circle” (Dierick 132). The struggle between the generations is, therefore, central to Expressionist aspirations: “A liberation of mankind can only be achieved by destroying the authoritarian patterns of the family” (Dierick 131-32). While Watson locates conflict in the family, she ultimately modifies the nature of the expressionist intergenerational struggles and challenges the effectiveness of this conflict as a means of renewing society.

Even without expressionism in mind, Glenn Deer effectively delineates the expressionist conception of generational antagonism in The Double Hook. The “desires of the young are choked by the presence of the old” (Deer 36). Mrs. Potter represents the past, or tradition, that needs to be overthrown (Deer 36). The generations, not just those of the Potter family, are involved in power struggles over the control of love and desire

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<sup>6</sup> The idea of The Double Hook as a complex fusion of genres is one response to the genre-oriented criticism outlined in my introduction. This fusion offers the critic movement between terminologies appropriate to all these genres without posing significant limitations.

(Deer 36). These themes are further tied to expressionist conceptions of character: the “emotions felt by the usurping generation have their genesis in the irrational—in jealousy, desire, and fear” (Deer 37).<sup>7</sup>

Watson pits generation against generation on the first page of The Double Hook. She does, however, alter the nature of this conflict. Whereas the expressionist intergenerational conflict typically pits father against son, the antagonism in the text is between the mother and her offspring. The mother, Mrs. Potter, is now conceptualized as ‘tyrannical,’ a role usually reserved for the bourgeois father in expressionism. Watson’s inversion of the power relations clearly represents a challenge to the expressionist reduction of women “to their role as *Weib*--that is, their sexual role” (Dierick 44).

Moreover, this inversion is part of a larger pattern in which Watson undoes the overtly ‘male’ nature of expressionism. Not only does Watson eliminate the male protagonist and hero from her text, she also depicts a ‘fatherless’ community in The Double Hook.<sup>8</sup> The novel’s youth—James, Greta, Kip, Lenchen, and Heinrich—are deprived of fathers. The Widow Wagner even conceives of God as the “Father of the fatherless” (55)—but even the ‘heavenly’ father’s presence in the community is questionable. The elimination of fathers (and mothers) is necessary for Watson to challenge the expressionist supposition of the effectiveness of the intergenerational conflict in renewing society. As Deer points out, “the mitigation of this irrational

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<sup>7</sup> Deer’s understanding of character motivation is quite consistent with the expressionist construction of character. As Grace notes, characters act from “obscure impulses, intense emotions of jealousy, anger, desire, or despair” (62).

<sup>8</sup> Constance Rooke provides an insightful reading of the novel that challenges the privileging of male characters in the appropriately titled “Women of *The Double Hook*.”

jealousy, desire and fear cannot be achieved simply by the elimination of the mother” (37). The crisis continues. For once youth has displaced the old, the “conflict is transferred to the level of brother and sister” (Deer 37).

Watson plunks these families down in a place which itself “had been dropped carelessly wrinkled on the bare floor of the world” (22).<sup>9</sup> The figures themselves are partially responsible for creating this ‘abstract’ environment. Stephen Scobie describes a landscape which exists “autonomously” and which “is [also] being brought into existence: it is a landscape created, a landscape *perceived*” (280). Scobie’s comments about the relationship of figure to ground reinforce the expressionist nature of this construction: for as Sokel indicates, “expressionist character is not a fixed individual personality, but the crystallization of psychic forces, modifying the scene surrounding him. Landscapes reflect the emotional situation of the characters” (38).

The characters find themselves in a hallucinatory environment by virtue of the fact that Mrs. Potter continually appears to be fishing after her death. The “physical world” of The Double Hook is “shifting, insubstantial, unraveling into strangeness and abstraction” (Turner, “Fiction, Break, Silence” 67). Moss describes the setting as a merger of “animate and inanimate worlds, and of making the real unreal and unreal real” (127). A torrential downpour swings “into the mouth of the valley like a web. Strand added to strand” (36). The sky appears to be filled “with adder tongues. With lariats.

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<sup>9</sup> Although setting is a feature of Grace’s model, she devotes more attention to the physical geography of Dog Creek and its environs than she does to the fiction world’s topography. Nor does Grace address the novel’s secondary setting, the town. A broader examination of setting is needed to call into question Grace’s omissions and to reveal how Watson uses setting to invert Worringer’s principles of abstraction and empathy.



With bull whips" (36). As Grace points out, the characteristic expressionist settings are "usually expressions of a character's innermost terrors--an image of the state of his soul--or of what the world is actually like beneath its fashionable surfaces" (62-63). Both Mrs. Potter and the storm represent metaphors literalized--an externalization of what is "oppressive or feared"--by the other figures in the text (Grace 63).

Setting and character are, thus, intricately fused. Watson advocates this figure/ground conflation in her own comments on the text: "figures in a ground, from which they could not be separated" ("What I'm Going To Do" 183). Shirley Neuman effectively describes this merger:

Such merging is, in Watson's terms, violence and madness: this is the lesson of the transformation by which the honeysuckle growing outside Greta's door becomes the tangle of honeysuckle on her housecoat that threatens to choke Lenchen and, the housecoat soaked in kerosene and lit, becomes the purple flowers anthered with flame which consume Greta.

(46)

As an extension of the conflation of nature and bodies, nature itself appears as a body in the text. Landscape and anatomy are interfused: nature is endowed with "bones" (21), "flat ribs" (35), a "mouth" (36), an "elbow-joint" (46), and "arms" (98). The landscape as body, with its bones exposed to the naked eye, appears undernourished. Nevertheless, it is alive and breathing with the sky functioning as its lungs: "Lenchen could hear the breath of it in the pause. The swift indrawing. The silence of the contracting muscle" (41).

Watson turns Worringer's conception of anthropomorphization on its head in The Double Hook by depicting nature as a body. For Worringer and the expressionists, anthropomorphization in art is linked to the pole of empathy, to a unity of man and world (Worringer 45-48). By contrast, a "spiritual dread of space" and a "great inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world" translate into abstractive urges: a movement away from any form of organic vitality to a strict "exclusion of life" in art (Worringer 17). In The Double Hook, however, anthropomorphization reinforces the figures' sense of an alienation from the landscape, rather than indicating a fusion of man and environment; the figures' spiritual dread of space does not lead to abstractive urges, but to ways of making this landscape more 'human.' Watson's use of the metaphoric landscape as body (and thereby of life and organic vitality) in the novel clearly represents a reversal of Worringer's principles.

Watson's use of a 'secondary' setting, the town, has additional implications for the expressionist reading of the novel. Expressionism, as Dierick indicates, is predominantly urban in nature and it is characterized by a primary focus on "problems associated with urban, industrialized, and highly organized contexts, and particularly with the nature and function of the city" (48). More importantly, the expressionists construct a binary opposition between the city and nature. The expressionists depicted the urban environment, unlike the natural world, as a harsh and stagnant environment, morally and spiritually deficient. The chaos and violence of the city, rendered most effectively in the paintings of Ludwig Meidner and Otto Dix, stand in stark contrast to the lushness and tranquillity of expressionist renderings of the natural world.

The alienating environment of the city leads to the expressionist revolt “against the detailed mimetic reproduction of reality and the complementary materialist conception of human beings” (Grace 18). But Watson undertakes her critique of the urban environment, not by moving towards abstraction, but rather, paradoxically, towards empathy. Unlike the expressionist artist, Watson presents the ‘material world’ of the town with descriptive precision rather than with the characteristic distortion of this reality.

Such critique is reserved for the fourth part of novel where, in contrast to the rest of the novel, materiality is prominent. In the town, the landscape as body literally puts on clothing: in the new setting the landscape is defined by the “seams” and “pockets” that cover its protruding bones (109). The new dramatis personae offers the reader an introduction to the town and its inhabitants. Unlike the initial dramatis personae, however, it delineates the roles that this new set of figures play in the local economy rather than the family: store manager, bank manager, clerk, bartender, and game warden (92). James is also defined by his role in the new setting: the text provides an indication of his ‘net worth’ and of his role in the annual “beef sale” (97).

In contrast to what George Bowering calls her “refusal to describe” in earlier sections of the novel, Watson emphasizes accuracy in her description of objects and events in the town (189). The cans that are behind the counter in the shop are catalogued: “Behind him on the shelves crowded tinned meat and pain killer, scent and rat poison, rivets and cords and nails” (96). Purchases are tallied to the penny. Money is counted repeatedly and the denomination of each bill given to the reader. Time is also

treated with precision: James has ridden for exactly ten hours. He stables his horse at “almost three o’clock” (93) which only gives him a few minutes to get to the bank. He withdraws his savings to pay for the train, the next step in his escape, that leaves “some minutes past one o’clock” in the morning (99).

George Bowering considers this section of the novel to be “trifling” with “conventional regional mimesis” (221). “Myth,” he argues, “fades in favour of cause-and-effect” and the landscape “becomes something against which people are clearly marked” (219). Despite the foregrounding of material objects, I do not think that the novel slips as far into realism as Bowering argues. The material landscape (having put on clothes) is only an extension of the mythical landscape: Mrs. Potter makes an appearance in the town and, significantly, on the “arms” of the river (98). Furthermore, spatial distortion of the hill country manifests itself in the town as well: “Houses and sheds in a waste of sand and sagebrush. A crisscross of streets and alleys leading out to nothing” (92).

Indeed, time and material objects are described so precisely that the reader must question their relevance. In the empty hotel lobby, “The calendar marked the month. The clock the hour. It was quarter to five” (100). The first two sentences, in essence, define the function of these objects: calendars exist to mark the months and clocks to indicate time. The final sentence seems to illustrate an understanding of these definitions, rather than a testimony to the fact that quarter to five has any direct relevance to the unfolding of events.

James’s inevitable return homeward points to the failure of empiricism—the

precision of time, currency, materiality—to meet his ‘needs.’ James comes to the realization that an individual’s net worth is hardly quantifiable in monetary terms when he sees Traff counting his newly acquired ‘wealth’ (109). A person’s needs and desires, regardless of wealth, are not always readily available on the shelves of the general store. Pockett, whose name appropriately reinforces his materialist bias, naturally misses the irony when he informs James that “I never had the pleasure of meeting your mother all this time. I guess she never needed anything bad enough to come down” (97).

Watson’s treatment of the urban center—her emphasis on accurate description and time—represents a departure from her description of the hill country. While Watson uses the town to critique the “materialist conception of human beings,” she makes it clear that there is no intrinsic moral superiority to the hill country (Grace 18). Violence and insensibility are prevalent in both settings. Watson dismisses the expressionist antithesis of town and country by emphasizing the fact that these two settings are qualitatively not that far apart. The light which “defined the world” and “picked out the shattered rock, the bleached and pitted bone” of the hill country defines the town as well: “It would edge the empty bottle on Felicia’s table, James thought. It would lie congealed in the unwashed plates. It would polish Traff’s head and count the streaked tears under Lilly’s eyes” (126).

As a juxtaposition of the two settings indicates, Watson collapses the expressionist distinctions between the urban and the rural and inverts Woringer’s hypothesis of abstraction and empathy in both settings. The text suggests that abstraction and mimetic representation can function effectively in tandem. Indeed, Watson’s limited

application of mimesis serves to strengthen her abstraction. Despite the inversion of expressionist tenets, Watson is able to maintain and reinforce the expressionist sense of crisis by emphasizing the qualitative similarities (and the continued presence of violence and insensibility) in both settings.

The persistence of the sense of crisis, I would argue, is in turn linked to the fact that Watson is unwilling to subscribe to either regression or apocalypse as a solution to this crisis. Grace, on the other hand, considers The Double Hook to be the only novel in her study to “carry through the movement from violent *Aufbruch* to apocalyptic destruction (and a narrowly missed regression) and then on to rebirth and renewal” (208). The text, however, offers formidable resistance to a reading of a seamless transition from *Aufbruch* to destruction, and subsequently from destruction to renewal.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the potential for regression is equally present at the end of the novel as it is at the beginning. Watson acknowledges this possibility but uses the text to illustrate the ineffectiveness of a potential regression. She does not treat the concept of regression as an ideal, but rather as a naive response to crisis. Her resistance to the concept of regression manifests itself in two forms: in her treatment of Coyote and in the characters’ relationships with nature. These two manifestations of resistance incisively address the extremities of regression—the longing for death and the joyful identification with nature.

Grace defines regression, in its less extreme manifestation, as “a joyful human identification with nature” (38). For the expressionists, nature was uncontaminated by human intervention and, thereby, purer than the urban environment. But images of death

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<sup>10</sup> A more thorough examination of the role that the pattern of apocalypse, *Aufbruch*, and renewal play in The Double Hook will follow my discussion of regression.

and containment, normally reserved for the urban environment in expressionism, abound in the 'natural' world of The Double Hook. The birds, an important location of the figures' identifications with nature, are invariably trapped, domesticated, cooked, and/or dead. James has "gamebird ways," according to William (34). He was "like a gay cock on the outside in his plaid shirt and studded belt," but inside, "there's something cooked James's fibre. He's more likely white and dry and crumbling like breast of pheasant" (34). Angel relates Greta to an "old hen pheasant...Never bred. Looking for mischief. Trying to break up other birds' nests" (54). Lenchen feels "Exposed in the white light like a hawk pulled out and pinned up on a barn door for all to see" (59). As these identifications reveal, the figures in the text are unable to view nature as innocent and distinct from destructive human activity.

For the expressionists, regression was a means of escaping the human world to a more innocent one. The artists longed "to return to the distant echoes of the animal past" (Grace 38). Watson, on the other hand, continually negates entry into this supposed world of innocence: humanity can never be innocent, nor can significant human interaction be modeled on this form of regression. The parrot's mimicry of human speech disrupts the boundaries between humans and animal and makes the reader aware of how important speech is to cultural formation. As Turner reveals, the "usurpation of a human faculty by an animal threatens to undo the structure and meaning of the world: if human beings allow the perilous freedom of their language to be diminished in this way, they will be unable to construct or inhabit any discursive formation" (Imagining Culture 73).

In addition to denying her figures a joyful identification with nature, Watson

paints a picture of a landscape that differs from expressionist renderings of nature. Watson's depiction of the hill country--the parched ground, burnt grass, shallow creeks--opposes the lush, rich application of colour in expressionist paintings of the natural world (especially of Otto Modersohn and Franz Marc). The 'abounding vitality' of the expressionist painting stands in stark contrast to the "thin mean place" of The Double Hook (58). If figures are depicted in these paintings, they appear tranquil and comfortable in the thick vegetation of these landscapes. *Die Brücke* painters "unified the nude human figure with the landscape. This absorption of the figure into nature was carried to a point where hands or feet of the nudes often became indistinguishable from the surrounding foliage" (Selz 98-99). This tranquillity is inverted in the novel: the figure/ground conflation can only be described as violence and madness (Neuman 46).

On one level, Coyote might be read as the novel's advocate for the more extreme form of regression. The "Coyote's song" extols "the peace of passivity and death" and his language negates the idea of moral responsibility (Monkman 67). His regressive sentiments are multiple: "In my mouth is forgetting/ In my darkness is rest" (29); "Happy are the dead / for their eyes see no more" (115). When Greta commits suicide, or 'regresses,' Coyote articulates his victory: "I've taken her where she stood / my left hand is on her head / my right hand embraces her" (85).<sup>11</sup> Angel clearly disapproves of Greta's actions: "what sympathy could one have for Greta. Angel'd asked. Since Greta never thought of anyone. Not even herself. Only what had been done to her" (54).

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<sup>11</sup> What constitutes regression for one figure might constitute apocalypse for another. As Leslie Monkman indicates, "In the destruction of Greta's suicide, Are sees new hope for an end to the purgatorial existence of the community" (67).



By aligning the forces of regression with the trickster figure--continually the source of his own undoing--Watson further undermines the strength of regression as a response to the expressionist sense of crisis. Coyote's equation of 'darkness' and 'rest' is a faulty proposition. Mrs. Potter, a figure Coyote claims to have put to 'rest,' continues to haunt the landscape. Her continual appearances--"Still the old lady fished" (20)--undermine both Coyote's assertions and the idea that regression results in the desired 'tranquillity.'

Nor does the idea of a 'trickster' fit into the expressionist aesthetic. The artists tended to portray the world as an opposition between good and evil and they tended to "eliminate all nuances and shades of interpretation" (Dierick 45). Coyote defies the logic of the absolute: he is simultaneously "giver and negator, creator and destroyer, duper and duped" (Bowering 191). The novel commences with the possibility of collective regression--"under Coyote's eye"--only to deny this possibility. Coyote's attempt to reassert his dominance at the end of the novel--"I have set his feet on soft ground / I have set his feet on the sloping shoulders / of the world" (134)--is problematic. On the one hand, his presence indicates the constant threat of a possible regression; on the other, his 'sham' has been exposed and the validity of the regressive option is negated.

The concept of the apocalypse, on the other hand, initially appears to resonate in The Double Hook. The purgative destruction of the apocalypse--murder, blinding, suicide--is indeed present. Yet the text invites questions as to whether this violence is strategic, dictated by a conscious desire for renewal, or whether it is indeed random and misguided. In an attempt to answer these questions, Arnold Davidson raises the issue of

Mrs. Potter's death. The text, Davidson argues, does not definitively indicate whether her death was an "unfortunate accident" or premeditated murder ("Double Hooks" 31). James does not have an answer to his own question of "what he'd really intended to do when he'd defied his mother at the head of the stairs" (98).

Furthermore, the attainment of renewal usually follows an explicit pattern in expressionist literature. The Double Hook, on the other hand, problematizes this pattern of "an abrupt awakening from a previously insensate condition, followed by violent acts of rebellion against social constraints in an effort to express the subjective, individual will, and then *Aufbruch*--the breaking free, departure, and search for rebirth" (Grace 195). Arnold Davidson questions the applicability of this pattern to The Double Hook by pointing to a substantial misreading of the character of James--the attribution of agency to this figure--on the behalf of other critics. James, rather than initiating this pattern, "let himself be carried away and let himself be carried back" (Davidson 72). Glenn Deer offers a similar reading: "James actually stumbles from one act to another, purposeless and blind, unaware of why he does anything at all, getting by on pure instincts, luck, and some external guidance" (32). Ara substantiates these critics' claims: James, she comments, "never in all his life had strength enough to set himself against things" (123). As the "price of his escape lay snug in one of Traff's trouser pockets," one could even argue that James really did not have much choice in the matter of his return (109).

As Watson indicates, without art, tradition, and ritual, people are "driven in one of two ways, either towards violence or towards insensibility" ("What I'm Going To Do" 183). The persistence of both violence and insensibility appear to negate the notion of an

expressionist awakening in the text. Indeed, the novel is practically complete before James questions the motivations for his actions (only to find that he does not have the answer). Angel also casts doubt on Felix's awakening: "I doubt whether he ever knew the difference between what just happened and what other people did" (132). As the text suggests, Watson dismisses the "sudden and miraculous" *Wandlung* (transformation) of the expressionists (Dierick 150). For Watson, a more complex notion of ritual and tradition is required to substantially alter the structure of the community and to eliminate violence and insensibility.

Even if the 'apocalyptic' destruction is considered accidental, the question still remains as to whether or not the community is qualitatively transformed or whether the apocalypse has revealed "the hitherto hidden perfection of the world" (Grace 38). Ara does indeed have a vision of this transformation: "Now her tired eyes saw water issuing from under the burned threshold. Welling up and flowing down to fill the creek. Until dry lips drank. Until the trees stood knee deep in water" (114). In the water, "she saw a great multitude of fish, each fish springing arched through the slanted light" (114). Ara's vision does not, however, become a reality. The landscape is not qualitatively altered at the end of The Double Hook. Ara looks up to see the sky still "stretched like a tent pegged to the broken rock" (134) and Coyote is still up to his mischief as he tries to claim the novel's last words.

Watson rejects the utopian revolution as a resolution. The text's apocalypse does not lead to a radical transformation of society, but rather to a perceptual shift and the acceptance of life's 'double hooks.' Communal responsibility is required if violence and

insensibility are not to be repeated. Grace also argues that the text moves away from the prototypical expressionist resolution: the “rebirth envisaged in the final tableau of the novel is not a transcendence, in either the Christian or Kantian sense, of chthonic forces but a reminder that ‘a person only escapes in circles no matter how far the rope spins’” (209). Individual escapism is the object of Watson’s critique: communal responsibility is necessary to break the circular patterns of history (of violence and insensibility repeating themselves). “To regenerate the wilderness,” Morriss points out, “affirmation and belief, awareness and submission, must unite in a transcendent compromise for the good of the community” (91).

Thus, The Double Hook undermines the possibility of a single figure as the source of transformation. The characteristic Superman or New Man of expressionism is absent from the novel. Watson refuses to privilege the male hero and replaces this figure with the community (which one might postulate as the novel’s ‘collective’ protagonist). Watson’s notion of community (indicated in the few comments she made on the novel) involves collective ritual as opposed to individual action. Sokel’s comments on the ‘myth of the superman’ are directly relevant here. This figure, he argues, potentially “deprives the work of genius of any real effectiveness, since what is true of the superman cannot be true of the lowly crowd, and his thoughts can have no real relevance to ordinary men” (Sokel 145).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The concept of the hero is problematic in other readings of the text as well. Davidson argues that Watson undoes that “central tautology of the classic Western whereby the lone hero proves his manhood which validates his independence which reaffirms his aloneness” (59). Davidson asserts that “Watson pervasively insists that the paradigms of the popular American Western do not fit the Canadian West” (59).

As the text suggests, Watson is critical of both the expressionist notion of an immediate transformation of society and, significantly, the individual as the source of this transformation. The Double Hook does not privilege one character “who can experience the different stages of an ordeal and thereby unify the pattern” (Grace 203-204). More importantly, Watson has each move to express the “subjective, individual will” in the text end in failure: James returns, Greta dies (Grace 195). Grace is reluctantly forced to the correct conclusion that “the expressionist position seen in a violent assertion of self (James) or an outburst of inner torment (Greta) is inadequate or impotent” (200).

As the text suggests, artistic outbursts of inner torment are also inadequate. Watson makes her reader aware of the insufficiencies of art that is merely self-expressive. Watson, I would argue, moves away from an expressionist use of colour--colour which serves solely expressive purposes--in her novel. By contrast, Grace uses the depiction of Greta's suicide to read Watson's artistry as expressionist. Watson, she argues, “creates an image directly paralleling an expressionist canvas (the green, purple, and gold bringing Nolde to mind), with the aggressive, short strokes of repeated participles and syntactic fragments” (206). Grace forges an effective and eloquent correlation of the text with painting, but she misinterprets Watson's intentions. Watson indeed links Greta's outburst of inner torment with a violent juxtaposition of colours so characteristic of expressionist painting. But by aligning Greta's suicidal inner torment with the expressionist use of colour, Watson challenges the validity of extreme self-expression in both art and action. This critique is made possible by the fact that this

energetic and explosively colourful image is not characteristic of the text. Textual manifestations of colour are presented predominantly in isolation and, as such, Watson's depiction of Greta's suicide presents a radical departure from the monochromaticism that characterizes the majority of the text.<sup>13</sup>

I would argue that the expressionist woodcuts play a more important role for Watson.<sup>14</sup> They allow Watson to portray the expressionist "distorted," "fragmented," and "violent images of humanity and the world" without having to diffuse the important interplay of darkness and light with colour (Grace 21). Whereas Grace does not forge a connection between the expressionist woodcuts and the novel, her reading of the novel does substantiate the correlation. Scenes, as Grace points out, succeed each other like "tableaux sharply etched in contrasting areas of light and dark" (207). The woodcut, like the text, is a balance of absence and presence--what has been literally cut away and what remains. The balance of black and white (positive and negative space) constitutes the form of the work: much in the same way that the delicate balance of darkness and light (the negative and positive aspects of life) characterizes the world of the novel.

Dierick's reading of expressionist art as a two-fold function--to "express the situation of crisis (through appropriate art forms and a valid style)" and to "attain a solution to that crisis"--is, as I hope to have revealed, an effective approach to the expressionist aesthetic and also offers a means of addressing its role in The Double Hook

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<sup>13</sup> A more substantial discussion of monochromaticism will be presented in the chapter on minimalism.

<sup>14</sup> I am referring to the woodcuts of Ernst Barlach in particular.

(46). This reading of expressionism, by no means unique to Dierick, has the added benefit of being applicable to both expressionist painting and literature. Thus, it effectively allows one to address both painterly and literary expressionism as a means of understanding The Double Hook.

Indeed, Watson expresses the situation of crisis through significant forms, literary and visual, but ultimately questions expressionist solutions to the sense of crisis (through violent self expression, regression, and/or apocalypse). Watson's complex inscription of expressionism involves the adoption of certain expressionist strategies and concurrently offers a meta-artistic commentary on expressionism. The naive utopian aspirations of the apocalypse and equally impossible 'blissful' return to nature are seriously called into question by the text. In addition, Watson exposes the rather arbitrary expressionist dichotomies of abstraction/empathy and of city/nature in The Double Hook.

Ultimately, the text indicates the fact that a cultural apocalypse--the complete abolition of tradition--is not necessarily beneficial: unless existing traditions are replaced with other viable rituals, violence and insensibility will only be repeated. The expressionists firmly believed that the solution to the crisis lay in dismantling every thing that came before them--a complete abolition of prior artistic, political, cultural traditions. But even the expressionists overthrow of tradition exists in theory only. As Donald Gordon bluntly points out, the "most that can be said from a formalist point of view is that expressionists were borrowers from other styles of art and that Expressionist style is thus, in this sense, eclectic" (70). Despite their rhetoric, expressionists "used existing forms rather than inventing new ones" (Gordon 70). These forms were not imitated, but

transformed by a “process of simultaneous acceptance and partial modification or rejection” (Gordon 70).

Rather than dismiss the tradition of expressionism, Watson retains the valuable core of the aesthetic. I have tried to argue that Watson inscribes expressionism into The Double Hook through a similar process of modification, rejection, and simultaneous retention of various facets of the aesthetic. The Double Hook is asking the reader not to dismiss the energies of the expressionist experimentation, but rather to focus on some ‘middle-ground’ between the expressionist extremes of regression/apocalypse and abstraction/empathy.

Expressionism is, however, only one component of the tradition of modernist visual art. Watson’s concern with the broader tradition of modernism manifests itself in the inscription of minimalism into the novel. My ensuing exposition of minimalism as an alternative aesthetic reading of The Double Hook--one which shifts the focus from iconic to noniconic modes of abstraction and other means of addressing this sense of crisis--will hopefully underscore the assertion that expressionism is not the sole interartistic paradigm useful for understanding the novel.



## **Minimalism and The Double Hook**

As Stephen Scobie indicates, to “speak of Watson’s ‘tradition and milieu’ is, in effect, to speak of the whole culture of modernism, which was obsessed equally by the impulse to order and the desire, in Ezra Pound’s phrase, to ‘make it new’” (262-63). Within the modernist context, minimalism represents the antithesis of the expressionist aesthetic: whereas expressionism is considered crucial to the early development of modernism, minimalism is often conceived of as modernism’s ‘last stance’ as painting; minimalism is thoroughly noniconic in comparison to expressionism’s retention of iconicity; and finally, the minimalist aesthetic, in opposition to expressionism’s foregrounding of the artist, enables the critic to explore the ramifications of a spectator-driven art and the question of where meaning is to be located in the text. Peter Schjeldahl concisely articulates the opposition between these two modernist aesthetics as a “reversal in the polarity of artistic intention: from the expressed, expressive self of the artist to the effected, effective entity of the art work” (207).

In addition to the relevance of expressionism to a reading of the text, numerous aspects of the minimalist aesthetic are applicable to a reading of The Double Hook. These minimalist strategies, as I indicated earlier, include an array of theoretical, compositional, and process issues. I wish to explore how Watson uses the minimalist concepts of reduction, immediacy, monochromaticism, and materiality—and their ramifications for spectatorship (enclosure/exclosure)—in her novel. As I will suggest, Watson’s inscription of minimalism into The Double Hook works on a variety of levels.

The text asks the reader to entertain the notions of minimalist spectatorship and to observe the minimalist structuring of the novel. On another level, the figures illustrate an 'enactment' of minimalism: they act as minimalist spectators in a 'world' of monochromatic imagery.

While Watson does not invert and subvert the minimalist aesthetic (as I have argued she does with the expressionist aesthetic), she nevertheless injects into the narrative of The Double Hook an exposition of the limitations of minimalism: the minimalist artists' unwillingness to accept metaphoricity or any other form of spectatorship beyond that which the artists prescribe for their viewers. It appears that Watson treats minimalism only as a precursor to more meaningful art forms, and not, like the visual artists, as an end in itself. As I hope to reveal, Watson's questioning of an aesthetic (either minimalism or expressionism) is always as important to the text as her inscription of this aesthetic.

Furthermore, the inscription of a painterly aesthetic into any given verbal text, such as The Double Hook, is always contingent on one's definition of the aesthetic. The inherent difficulty in this act of definition, as I experienced in relation to expressionism, recurs with respect to minimalism. Gregory Battcock's Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology illustrates the profound diffusion of ideas and articulations of the minimalist aesthetic.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the myriad of critical interpretations of minimalism, the movement's practitioners were concurrently avid 'theorizers' of their own work. Thus,

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<sup>1</sup> Despite the numerous articles and positions to be found in art journals, there are surprisingly few larger critical works and anthologies available on the movement as a whole. Scholarship devoted to a specific artist or to a particular facet of the aesthetic is however readily available.

canonization of minimalist works is problematized by the abundant and conflicting voices of the critics and artists. The minimalist canon, as Edward Strickland argues, “is itself reduced to minimal form, if not erased, by a rigor of categories that exceeds the technical rigor of the art” (8). Virtually every painter, Strickland continues, has “been explained as not really minimalist on some grounds or other (Newman’s rhetoric, Reinhardt’s temporality, Kelly’s chroma, Martin’s personal touch, Ryman’s painterliness, Marden’s intuitive process, Tuttle’s fundamentally post-Minimalist sensibility)” (8).

Francis Colpitt quite readily acknowledges the problematic nature of constructing a capital ‘M’ minimalism. Instead of attempting to define the aesthetic rigidly, Colpitt astutely emphasizes various points of entry into the minimalist aesthetic. Colpitt’s analysis works through minimalism from the concrete (physical materiality) to the theoretical and philosophical dimensions of the movement. This approach is quite successful in synthesizing the prolific array of voices into a comprehensive overview which, one might argue, is contingent on the retrospective nature of the study.

Given the study’s depth (both scholarly and with respect to its inclusiveness of relevant issues), Colpitt’s work provides a solid foundation for the interartistic comparison I want to pursue. Indeed, I think the interartistic critic would benefit from adopting a similar strategy to that of Colpitt. Rather than attempting to categorically define Watson’s novel as minimalist, I will explore various dimensions of the minimalist aesthetic, beginning with the concept of reduction, as points of entry into The Double Hook.

## Reduction

Reduction was the quintessential element of the minimalist movement, as the appellation “minimalism” made readily apparent. This reductive thrust represented a continuation of Clement Greenberg’s ‘law of modernism,’ which stated that “the conventions not essential to the viability of a medium be discarded as soon as they are recognized” (qtd. in Colpitt 113). Minimalism, for many, constituted the terminus of Greenberg’s law: painting could no longer be reduced without losing its status as painting. Despite resistance to the idea of reduction as a historical process—Greenberg’s dominance was often challenged—and reticence in labeling their works reductive, most painters “agreed to an interest in what was essential rather than inessential in art” (Colpitt 101). Furthermore, the works themselves indicated that “the intellectually clearest, most practical, and formally economical means did tend to prevail” (Colpitt 116).

Thus, minimalism entailed a return to basics in an attempt to reanalyze colour, surface, and structure. The predominant features of conventional painting—“internal formal relationships, illusionism, representation, and narrative content, gesture, and inflection”—were removed from the works of art (Colpitt 115). What remained was a variation and combination of interdependent basic elements that constituted the work of art. “Simplification or reduction,” as Colpitt reminds us, were “conceptual, as opposed to literal descriptions of process,” since “physical labor or handicraft” were beside the point (115).

The appearance, both textual and physical, of The Double Hook is clearly the

product of a reductive thrust. Reduction, in this context, implies the 'essentialization' of certain elements of textual production--plot, character development, theme, action, and setting--that shape and define the genre of the 'novel.' The reductive process forces the reader to question what is essential or, inversely, what is inessential to the genre (if we try and extend Greenberg's law to the literary medium). A variety of other critical voices delineate the reductionism at work, albeit without any relationship to the minimalist aesthetic. More importantly, Watson's own statements help substantiate the reductionist reading of The Double Hook.

To create this 'object,' Watson felt that it was necessary to eradicate the traces of authorship: "somehow or other I had to get the authorial voice out of the novel for it to say what I wanted it to say. I didn't want a voice talking about something" ("It's What You Say" 158). Watson's desire for anonymity and movement away from the 'subjective' voice is distinctly minimalist: "I've wanted the page to speak for itself" ("It's What You Say" 167). As Watson points out, this desire manifests itself in the physical dimensions of the work: "In designing the original cover Frank Newfeld had drawn attention to the title not to my name. He knew I wanted to disappear from the book" ("It's What You Say" 167).

The dominance of the "Victorian prototype" of the novel in Canadian fiction of the first half of this century is invoked by Robert Kroetsch to indicate Watson's departure from this model. Regardless of content in this earlier fiction, Kroetsch argues, "Concepts of character, theme, setting and structure derive from the great models of the nineteenth century" (207). The author adhering to this prototype of the novel is "not creator but

created--by genre, history, convention" (Kroetsch 206). The "true enemies of the novel" and of the "creator," Kroetsch argues, are the conventional aspects of literary production: "plot, character, setting, and theme" (207). Watson's writing against convention and history (which is equatable with reduction) entitles her to the desired status of creator. Once Watson abandons these "enemies of the novel," Kroetsch argues, her sole emphasis becomes the "totality of vision or structure" that remains in the novel (207). Kroetsch therefore considers The Double Hook to be the "necessary act of decreation: the exercise in minimal art: the writing of the skinny novel" (207).

Watson's statements do indeed reinforce Kroetsch's ideas. Watson articulates her resistance to traditional conceptions of character: "I wasn't thinking of these figures, or whatever one calls them, as characters in the conventional sense" ("It's What You Say" 158). She also formulates a similar resistance to setting: the desire to "get away from an idea of setting" ("It's What You Say" 159). Conventional notions of setting are indeed absent from the novel. Geographically and temporally the novel remains in the abstract (as opposed to 'concrete'). Scobie accurately points out that the reader is offered "not so much a landscape as the *signs* of a landscape" (277).

In addition, Watson acknowledges her aims of writing against regionalism--against a 'referentiality' of place--that is typical of much of Canadian literature. Watson aimed at, and succeeded in, avoiding "the trap of regionalism as that term is understood" ("It's What You Say" 167). In the movement away from referentiality and regionalism, Watson did not construct The Double Hook as "an ethnic novel--not a novel about Indians or any other deprived group" ("It's What You Say" 159). Rather, she describes

her aim of writing a “novel about a number of people who had no ability to communicate because they had found little to replace the myths and rituals which might have bound them together” (“It’s What You Say” 159).

Margaret Turner relates this sense of reduction of referentiality to the larger body of Canadian literature: Watson, she argues, “avoids the distinct historical and social framework to which the Canadian imagination is so often leased and the public language so frequently used” (“Fiction, Break, Silence” 77). As Neuman adds, Watson “refused to exploit any detail of speech, landscape or custom for its ‘local colour’” (47).<sup>2</sup> I would agree with Margaret Turner’s assertion that “Watson’s language is not referential, but with it she creates a world that was not previously visible and that cannot usually be seen in Canada or in Canadian literature” (“Fiction, Break, Silence” 77).

Referentiality is indeed quite drastically reduced. But unlike paint, words have no choice but to refer: in the context of a novel, the concept of reduction cannot be exercised to the same degree that is available to the painter. Flahiff nevertheless points to Watson’s efforts to limit, or reduce, referentiality in the final draft of the novel: “the name of a cow, the type of chair Ara and William have in their parlour, the pieces played by Felix on his fiddle” (Flahiff 122). As these names served merely descriptive purposes, and could thereby be considered ‘inessential,’ Watson dispenses with them in the final draft of the novel.

Thus, description—which might semiotically equate with ‘gesture’ or ‘inflection’ in painting—is, necessarily, also minimized. Scobie concisely argues that it is “not so

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<sup>2</sup> The “kinnikinnic bushes,” as Godard points out, are the one possible exception (168).

much description” that Watson presents, but rather “the semiotic conventions of description reduced to their most basic forms” (277). Like the minimalist, Watson renders description “in its essentialist terms, its ‘bare bones’” (Scobie 277). In the text, we are left with a language devoid of linguistic ‘flourishes’—the verbal economy of the text mirrors the physical austerity of the canvas. Essentialist art requires, as Moss indicates, that Watson eliminate “all emotions, feelings, and details extraneous to her purpose” (124).

Watson’s reductive thrust is quite successful, as The Double Hook clearly questions the ‘essence’ of a novel. Kroetsch asks whether it is “possible to define a Canadian novel, not in terms of content, but in terms of structure or form” (208)—a question he tries to answer by minimizing content (for he can’t quite avoid discussing it). As mentioned in the introduction, many critics read The Double Hook not as a novel, but as a prose-poem. Watson, in her elusive manner, is also unwilling to categorize her work: “It has been said that technically it is not a novel and perhaps it isn’t. It is a narrative structure of some kind” (“It’s What You Say” 166). Moss offers a similar interpretation: “Because of the unusual form of Mrs. Watson’s novel—for I would persist in calling it that—I am inclined to consider it primarily as a structural unit within the context of my discussion and forego esoteric interpretations of meaning beyond what is implicitly revealed in such an approach” (169).

### **Colour & Monochromatic Painting**

The minimalist artist’s use of colour can be considered an extension of the



reductive process, although it is always treated as distinct from reduction by art historians. Watson's particular use of monochromaticism in The Double Hook suggests that the critic of the novel treat colour as a separate issue from reduction. In addition, it is worth considering Watson's application of monochromatic strategies as an extension of her resistance to the expressionist artist's use of colour for distinctly expressive purposes.

Unlike expressionist artists, colours were not selected for decorative, expressive, or symbolic purposes by minimalist artists. Rather, colour was "an integral aspect of formal definition" (Colpitt 29). A single color always identified "a single shape, element or surface," as this "self-imposed restriction" promoted the "articulation of form" (Colpitt 28). This structural use of colour stemmed from a desire to make the work appear "inevitably colored, unimaginable without its particular hue" (Colpitt 26). In opposition, colour contrast, or the division of a surface by multiple colours, disrupted the "unity of the object" and 'fractured' the form (Colpitt 28). Colour also tended to be 'neutral' to limit the possibility of "natural or emotional associations;" alternatively stated, colour was chosen for its resistance to interpretation (Colpitt 29). Yet, many minimalists resisted these ideas about colour in their work. Colpitt is forced to acknowledge the fact that certain painters such as Robert Mangold and Brice Marden intentionally employed colour because of its 'allusive' properties.

It is worth pointing out, as Wendy Steiner does, that one of the perils of interartistic criticism is the problematic nature of direct parallels. Colour, for example, carries more semantic significance in the language of painting than it does in the

language of writing. Nevertheless, manifestations of colour in the novel adhere to the non-decorative and non-expressive purposes of the minimalist artists. Colour is always presented as absolute: shades of a colour—something which we might associate with a precision of description—never appear in the text. Expressive manifestations of colour exist only to make us question their validity. As mentioned in the expressionist reading of the novel, Greta's suicide scene is intricately fused with exploding colour contrasts. One might compare The Double Hook to "And the Four Animals," where colour is intrinsic to the construction of landscape: "The foothills slept. Over their yellow limbs the blue sky crouched. Only a fugitive green suggested life which claimed kinship with both and acknowledged kinship with neither" ("And the Four Animals" 73). This violent juxtaposition of colour in the depiction of landscape in the short story has not been carried over to The Double Hook. Watson presents a world where colour almost always appears in isolation—alternating between monochromatic fields of black and white.

When minimalist painting was not entirely monochromatic, it was "generally composed of close-valued hues" or "single color panels in multi-panel configuration" (Colpitt 30). This colour construction carries over to the novel. In The Double Hook there are numerous examples of light on light, of yellow on yellow, or of a combination of the two. The hounds appear as "yellow forms in yellow sunlight" and Traff's yellow head "gleams in the lamplight" (106). James is also in a 'yellow phase.' He shifts his attention from Lenchen to Traff and back again. James is conscious of the reasons for his attraction to Traff: he "knew then why he was drawn to Traff. It was the cap of hair, straight and thick and yellow as Lenchen's" (106).

As mentioned, a formal oscillation between darkness and light pervades the novel--two monochromatic fields that resist each other. Nicolas Calas's interpretation of the binary division between black and white across a series of Barnett Newman's work--a division that is related to seeing and not-seeing and a sense of dislocation (or being out of place)--seems equally applicable to The Double Hook. "Suspended between life and death," Calas argues, "is an experience that can be communicated to others in terms of an insoluble black and white contradiction" (114). In the world where the painter (or, in this case, character in the novel) feels "out of place," everything has to be "reduced to an immediacy felt in the tension between lines and planes, raw canvas and/or white and black surfaces" (Calas 114). Life, in the novel, encompasses an understanding of these planes of absolute colour, of how to come to terms with the tensions between the darkness and light.

### **Immediacy**

Calas importantly invokes the idea of 'immediacy' in his discussion of the tensions between monochromatic planes. Indeed, immediacy was the logical outcome of the reductive process: "the impact on the spectator was more immediate as fewer details were presented for scrutiny" (Colpitt 47). Sheldon Nodelman illustrates the fact that immediacy--"a single, immediately graspable principle of arrangement"--resulted from "the coincidence of image and shape" (Colpitt 94). The minimalist "work that cannot be read directionally hits the spectator wholly and at once, requiring no Kantian 'spatial and temporal ordering in the imagination'" (Colpitt 47). Robert Mangold, an artist rather

than critic, reiterates these sentiments: “What interests me about flat images is the fact that you receive all the information...at once...Somehow, in one snapshot you can get all the information that the painting has to give” (qtd. in Colpitt 94). Thus, a central thesis of minimalism was the “instantaneousness of the Gestalt” (Colpitt 97). Form was “completely given at once. What unfolds in time is the experience: a series of changing perceptive states based on the relationship of the viewer’s body to the object” (Colpitt 97).

In The Double Hook, Watson’s emphasis on the ‘presentness’ of the figures’ predicament augments the sense of immediacy (and of urgency) for both the reader and the figures within the text. The figures feel ‘trapped’ in the world of the present without a sense of their future or past. James tries “to get away. To bolt noisily and violently out of the present” and to “attach himself to another life which moved at a different rhythm,” only to discover that this is not possible (91). As Flahiff indicates, the characters “have no alternative but to *be* in their time and place” (125). Watson, as an extension of her reductive thrust, eliminated the “scraps of personal and family history and the details of national and racial origins by which the characters sought to locate and understand themselves” (Flahiff 123). In Flahiff’s words, Watson

“moved against such guarantees that are provided by *possibility* and *causality* and *memory* in order more fully to realize that spareness and immediacy that come to characters when they have no alternative but to *be* in their time and place—when they are characters who have no history apart from the experience of their readers. (125)

Time is of less importance than the immediate spatial relationships between the figures: time is “irrelevant except as a necessary context” (Moss 187). The text, by denying the possible escape from time, proposes that the solution to this threatening immediacy entail a re-conceptualization of spatial arrangements.

While the process of reading necessarily unfolds in time, Watson nevertheless aims to capture this sense of immediacy and gestalt. On the grammatical level, Watson dispenses with conjunctions (a grammatical unit whose function it is to relate) to keep the sentence to the minimum. She often reduces the sentence, the fundamental building block of the novel, to its minimal construction, that of subject-predicate, and often offers only sentence fragments to her reader. Deer points to a significant factor of the language of the text: “The *effect* of these [sentence] fragments is the unnatural isolation of the verbal element, the act, as it hovers unattached to the agent” (Deer 27). Watson clearly prefers simultaneity to sequentiality, as it reinforces the ‘presentness’ of the novel. Indeed, reading becomes more immediate as relations are dispensed with: “The plate on the table. The knife. The fork. The kettle boiling on the stove” (55).

In addition, the spatial configuration (the shape or form) of the community is given almost before the reading process actually begins. For the reader of The Double Hook, the opening lines of the novel define the limits of the universe by a literal list of its inhabitants, and by a “visual typography that abruptly circumscribes the personal relationships it contains” (Morriss 56). This framing device is not an isolated occurrence. James’s entry into town—a new community with a distinct shape or form—also requires its own roster. The emphasis that Watson attributes to the material

relationships in this subsequent roster indicates that the town is qualitatively different from the community. Again, these differences between settings are given prior to the reader's excursion into new territories by virtue of the *dramatis personae* that precedes one's entrance into the territory.

The image of the double hook which structures the work is similarly 'given to the eye' in earlier editions of the novel. The presentation of this visual image and text in The Double Hook is almost emblematic in nature. In the earlier editions of the book, the illustration of a double hook occupies much of the cover. The reader is also presented with this image before each part and each episode of the novel: the novel itself may be considered textual gloss, as it continually reinforces the message of life as a double hook. One could easily argue that in the novel's quest for immediacy the presentation of theme is given prior to rather than ascertained during the reading process: "What unfolds in time is the experience" (Colpitt 97). The frequently invoked epigraph provides a rather definitive interpretation of the double hook: "That when you / fish for the glory / you catch the / darkness too" (17); and, by doubling the scale, "That if you hook / twice the glory / you hook / twice the fear" (17). This epigraph (presented as prose in the original edition) is, however, a source of contention for many critics, as it was appended to the text as an editorial decision rather than a conscious decision by the author. Nevertheless, its existence immediately frames one's reading of the text.

### **Materiality and the Minimalist Readymade**

As a discussion of reduction, monochromaticism, and immediacy reveals,

minimalist artists--in stark contrast to expressionists--opted for clarity, simplicity, and formal economy in their work. In a conscious effort to further avoid expressionism, minimalist artists chose materials that made their works appear anonymous. For this purpose, commercial, industrial, and/or prefabricated materials (readymades) were avidly employed. Industrial materials were important to the artists as they contributed to the "sheer abstractness or nonreferential quality of the objects" (Colpitt 11). Anonymity was further reinforced by the fact that the artists' interaction with materials was often "more a case of transference than transformance" (Colpitt 9). Thus, anonymity was paradoxically the outcome of the artist's complete control over the material (Colpitt 8).

Whereas expressionism tended to locate meaning in each artist's unique language or unique manipulation of materials (each artist's response to the sense of crisis), minimalism aspired to move away from this interpretation of the work and treatment of material. Rather, minimalist painters broke with the "notion of private language" as "the core of their enterprise" (Zelevansky 8). The readymade provided minimalism with the means to resist a private language: these objects were neither unique, nor did they require the artist to manipulate the material. As Kenneth Baker indicates, these artists often exhibited works that were "indistinguishable (or all but) from raw materials or found objects, that is, minimally differentiated from mere non-art stuff" (9). The artist's intentions were often, like those of Marcel Duchamp, to "throw into relief the perceptual and institutional terms of art's validation" (Baker 9).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, if materials were to "mean anything," it was "function or utility" (Colpitt 10).

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<sup>3</sup> Baker qualifies his statement by pointing to the fact that "not everyone is willing or able to see those terms laid bare" (9).

For Watson, the cliché is one of language's versions of the 'readymade.' Shirley Neuman and Barbara Godard articulate the centrality of the cliché in The Double Hook. For Godard, The Double Hook encompasses "an inventory of ritual ways of expression detached from their original emotional and spiritual meaning" (164). For the figures in the novel, the "fragments of experience" have "hardened into cliché, have become mechanical gestures and taken on a sinister aspect" (Godard 160).<sup>4</sup> Turner adopts a similar position on the language of the text: "The clichés that saved both face and time when common meanings were understood now damn: they obstruct human communication and drive people further into themselves and silence" ("Fiction, Break, Silence" 75). Godard acknowledges the larger ramifications of Watson's use of the cliché. Watson examines the "generally stereotyped nature" of language in an attempt to find "words with more potential as vehicles of meaning" (Godard 167). As Godard points out, one of "Watson's aims is to try to ignite some of the fossilized psychic energy to be found in the cliché" (164).

Neuman also emphasizes Watson's "alertness to the original force of the cliché and allusion: that thoughtfulness, that alertness, [which] recharges the expression with meaning. As wornout a phrase as *to be fishing for (information, clues, answers)*, in Watson's use, symbolically structures a novel" (49). Felix fishes for his own dinner while Mrs. Potter fishes "for something she'd never found" (20). At the end of the novel,

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<sup>4</sup> Godard ties the use of clichés to the revitalization and establishment of women's language: "from Stein too comes reinforcement for Watson's awareness of 'political space.' The 'anarchic breaking up and rebuilding of sleepy familiar words and phrases' is a result less of time than of space, originating in her acute sense of 'woman's particular (alienated) way of seeing'" (163).



the cliché is transformed: it is now Felix, and not Mrs. Potter, “moving ‘down the creek a little,’ ‘play[ing] his line’” (Neuman 49). His motivation for fishing has also altered: “When a house is full of women and children...a man has to get something for their mouths” (133). Neuman appropriately points out that Felix’s words are another cliché, “but one transformed and revitalized by the events of the novel and the reassembled community” (49). As Neuman correctly concludes,

As Watson’s characters and her plot expand on the original force of the clichés in which they speak, the reader becomes aware once again of meaning even where it seems most faded in the language. Recovery of meaning through the ‘mediating ritual’ of language represents, in all of Watson’s writing, recovery of our *human* sensibility. (49)

Thus, meaning does not lie within the clichés themselves, but in the interaction of the figures with the language of clichés. The clichés, as both Neuman and Godard point out, lack resonance in the town. For Neuman, “The Widow’s ‘Dear God’ or Paddy’s ‘Drinks all round’ remain cliché; they never achieve that ‘mythic transformation’ which would revitalize them” (49).<sup>5</sup> Godard acknowledges that there is “no distinctive human feature to speech that is not shared by the parrot, a fact which disconcerts the characters” (166-67). In the parrot’s ‘speech,’ “we find the objective correlative of the cultural insensibility of this community as revealed through its limited language” (Godard 167).

Both Godard’s and Neuman’s comments on the cliché, made without reference to

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<sup>5</sup> While I agree with Neuman’s treatment of the parrot, I am prone to agree with Margaret Turner, however, that the Widow’s “lamentations come to be directed outward, signaling determination and action rather than despair” (*Imagining Culture* 74).

minimalism, do however reinforce the minimalist aims of the text. Indeed, these critics illustrate the fact that the linguistic found object serves an important formal function in the work. Thus, Watson, like the minimalists, questions the conditions whereby the readymade (visual or literary) can serve artistic ends. While minimalist artists ask the critic to rethink the potential of industrial fabrication and materials, Watson's text invites its readers to contemplate language and to "think deeply about the absurd conventionalities they hear" (Godard 163). As Neuman's example of Felix indicates, the clichés are not altered, but revitalized through an engagement with both language and communal action.

Godard also reveals the fact that "In Felix's utterances, we see how Watson has generated meaning for clichés by juxtaposing one against the other. By her selection and placement of words, she has refreshed them for us" (167). Watson, like the minimalists, illustrates the potential of transference rather than transformance of materials: "To exhibit words afresh and dissociate them from a conventional context and stale association and then to display them with more of their power and capacity for vibration--more, in short, of their being--is Watson's aim" (Godard 168). Baker makes us aware of the similar intentions of the visual artists: "Minimalism was (and arguably still is) the project of disclosing and exploiting the contingent, contextual aspects of making--and of instituting something--a work of art" (20). Reinvigorated, the clichés can again function as ritual, or art, according to Watson.

## Spectatorship

Until this point, I have emphasized various material and conceptual strategies that were involved in the process of fabricating the minimalist 'object.' For the minimalists, however, the spectator assumed a significant role in the completion of these objects. I wish to shift my emphasis from the object itself to the interaction of spectator and object, to the 'space' surrounding the object, and, ultimately, to illustrate how this notion of spectatorship applies to The Double Hook.

Minimalist spectatorship invariably involved more than the audience's interaction with the paintings. When "painting becomes totally flat, it necessarily begins to relate to the wall. By eliminating relationships within the picture itself, relationships are (must be) established between the painting and its surroundings" (Colpitt 32-33). Thus, rather than projecting "inward into pictorial space," minimalist works "projected outward into the viewer's space" (Colpitt 33). Important relationships were established between the works and the surrounding architecture or environment. While traditional painting was "inwardly directed and self-contained, Minimal objects activate[d], without actual or implicit movement, the space that is not enclosed by the pieces themselves—that is the space inhabited by the viewer" (Colpitt 82). The eye gravitated to the painting's context: wall became ground, the painting itself stood as figure. Thus, minimalist artists called into question the configuration of actual gallery space and lighting (Colpitt 86). The same work in different environments provided "startlingly different experiences," even though the work itself remaining unchanged (Colpitt 86). This in turn led to 'site specific' work: works whose existence depended on the specific space in which and for

which they were created. Because of the close relationship between viewer and object, Minimalist exhibitions “seemed to fill the gallery space, in a sense defining that space, making spectators actually aware of their own ‘space’” (Colpitt 86).

Furthermore, the minimalist experience involved temporality. It is necessary to reiterate that it was the ‘form’ of the work that was “completely given at once”: what “unfolds in time is the experience: a series of changing perceptive states based on the relationship of the viewer’s body to the object” (Colpitt 97). An awareness of the duration of this experience was “especially pronounced” since the spectator did not “give him- or herself up to the object,” but retained a persistent awareness of self as separate from the object of contemplation” (Colpitt 95). Minimalist works were thus designed to “evoke in the spectator an awareness of his or her body within the space shared by object and viewer” (Colpitt 96).

This relationship between viewer and work was intricately related to the work’s presence. Presence was “felt, *responded to*, rather than *recognized*” (Colpitt 70); it referred “to the way in which the work of art imposes itself on the perception and experience of the viewer...the *ability of a configuration to command its own space*” (qtd. in Colpitt 71). For Robert Morris, practitioner and critic of minimalism, the work of minimalism was “not so much a metaphor for the figure” as it was “an existence parallel to it,” and, as such, shared “the perceptual response we have towards figures” (qtd. in Colpitt 71). Presence was “the obdurate force of Minimal art,” which linked “the spectator to the object, in lieu of anthropomorphic gesture or the multiplicity of viewpoints” (Colpitt 71).

Presence was therefore tied to the “confrontational response” that minimalist works elicited from the spectator, due in part to a recognition of the object’s “self-contained otherness” (Colpitt 72). The lack of “expressive content” induced “the outerdirectness of the object, forcing the spectator to locate the meaning of the work within the experiencing self rather than within the object” (Colpitt 88-89). The work was to be conceived of as a “thing apart from the spectator, but equally palpable and spatial” (Colpitt 72). Spectators were asked to pay attention “to what the work of art actually does rather than what it communicates about its creator—that is, what its creator ‘put’ into it or intended it to do” (Colpitt 72). For Colpitt, the work’s ‘presence’ was “ever so much more powerful than the presence of its creator” (72). Yet, despite this apparent resistance to anthropomorphization, the autonomy and abstractness of these objects resulted in their personification. Although these objects were not “formally similar to human beings,” their “complete self-sufficiency encouraged the critic and spectator to treat them as other beings” (Colpitt 72). Thus, unlike earlier works, the minimalist paintings were not “peered into” but were “confronted and ‘looked at’” (Colpitt 72).

In The Double Hook, Ara is obsessed with answering a crucial question of minimalist spectatorship: when does a fragment become a contained whole? She tries to make sense of the human figures in isolation, to “fit the pieces into a pattern” (65); she also endeavours to assess “the weight of nothingness” upon them, as ‘sense’ emerges from the supposed ‘empty’ space in which they live (84). This space is haunted by a pervasive silence which spatially separates the figures: “This is the way they’d lived. Suspended in silence” (43). Theophil’s comments to Angel—“a man would be hard

pressed to wedge a word into the silences you leave”—apply to the community at large as well (73).

As Watson reminds us, to be self-centred is an oblivion. Watson demands that her figures (and her audience) transcend the self: they are asked to ‘look,’ literally and figuratively, beyond themselves. The type of ‘looking’ that is required of the figures in the text is an enactment of the spectatorship demanded by the minimalist canvas: seeing beyond the confines of the frame to the space or environment around the work (from object to context). Initially, the figures experience an inability to see the ‘beyond.’ They embrace the one monochromatic field of darkness and fear offered by Coyote and relentlessly endeavour to resist the active responsibility of the light. The widow “pulled up the covers over her eyes to shut out the moonlight” (61). Greta, unable to look beyond herself, tries to “cram the empty space with hate” (85). Metaphorically, Greta is unable to see the framing edge—“outside was night...outside was floorless, roofless, wall-less”—and this failure to look (and to contextualize) ultimately leads to Greta’s demise (66).

Greta even chastises her mother for “looking for something even the birds couldn’t see. Something hid from every living thing...Holding the lamp and looking where there is nothing to be found. Nothing but dust. No person’s got a right to keep looking. To keep looking and blackening lamp globes for others to clean” (31). However, as Angela Bowering points out, Angel’s “response to bitter negation of the value of ‘looking where there’s nothing to be found’ makes it clear that looking into empty spaces is precisely how one might find things that have been lost” (21). Greta, on the other hand, is unable to engage in this form of spectatorship: “It’s emptiness that

can't be borne" (66).

These notions of enclosure (the space within the canvas; the limits of self) and exclosure (the space beyond the canvas; that which exists beyond the self) are figuratively mirrored in the fences surrounding the properties. Ara, as mentioned, was one of the first to start asking questions—"Ara looked over the fence" (22). Felix describes his own inward focus: "If they had walked out his gate like Angel, he would not ask if they had hay to lie on. His own barn was often empty" (24). Heinrich advocates erecting a fence "so James Potter's mother can't go up and down here anymore" (26). Morriss appropriately describes the activity of fence-building as an "impulse to isolation" (96). Kip, who is often regarded as possessing the gift of second sight, focuses not on the fence (on boundaries) but on the gate: "Every one of his gates hung well on the hinge" (55). And Kip is able to articulate the community's problem: "All the time, he thought, people go shutting their doors. Tying things up. Fencing them in. Shutting out what they never rightly know" (58).<sup>6</sup>

Heinrich gives us the first example of the needed perceptual shift, of understanding the monochromatic planes and putting an end to the activity of fence building, which he expresses as "seeing light in the way I've never noticed it before" (29). James also metaphorically voices his desire to extend beyond the confines of the picture frame: "This bed is too short for a man to stretch himself in. The covering's too narrow for a man to wrap himself in" (99). As the text progresses, the figures in the novel examine and re-evaluate their relationship to the space they occupy as their

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<sup>6</sup> Greta is also described as having "inherited destruction like a section surveyed and fenced" (113).

perception of their environment changes.

Turner illustrates the correlation between this form of spectatorship and language: “The eyes create the world; the speaking voice only brings into language what the eye has already seen. Images of the world sustained by language are de-authenticated: words and ways of seeing are forced into re-evaluation” (“Fiction, Break, Silence” 66). Without recourse to personal histories, memories, mythology, and communicative language (accepting Turner’s interpretation), these figures come to an understanding of their predicament through an understanding of visual relations between figure and ground. Morriss, in turn, posits a logical progression from the renewal of ‘vision’ to community: “Sight gives knowledge, motivating the impulse for communication which is necessary for the social and spiritual integration of the community” (86). Nancy Corbett also emphasizes the significant nature of vision (of spectatorship) in the text: central to a figure’s understanding of ground (and our understanding of the figures) is the scrutiny of “how he sees, what he sees, and perhaps more importantly, how he feels about seeing” (116). But ‘plain’ seeing, as opposed to Corbett’s ‘mystical’ variation of vision, is equally applicable to The Double Hook. Corbett correctly links sight to responsibility—a position advocated by the minimalists—and the denial of perception to fear.

Within the text, the possibility of ‘renewal’ hinges on active visual participation: the figures must become the surveyors rather than surveilled. Surveillance involves active participation which contrasts to the passivity of being surveilled. Watson continually reinforces this opposition in the novel. Intimidation, fear, and passivity are manifested in the images of eyes that threaten the figures; and the text, significantly,



unfolds under the 'scrutiny' of Coyote's eyes. Greta, adamantly unwilling to engage in active visual participation, acutely feels the threat of surveillance: "Eyes everywhere. In the cottonwoods the eyes of foolhens. Rats' eyes on the barn rafters. Steers herded together. Eyes multiplied. Eyes. Eyes and padded feet" (43).

In order to assist them in their move away from this condition of passivity, the narrator initially directs the reader and figures to look: "If Lenchen had been looking down from the hill just then, she would have seen James saddling his horse" (30); "If she [Ara] had gone up to the old lookout she might have seen something to think about as William saw things when he was coming and going with the post" (33). These moments of narration are similar to the conventional 'gestures of demonstration' in Renaissance painting--the representation of the hand with the index finger pointing to an aspect of the canvas the painter wishes us to observe. The narrator's interjections--always given in the conditional, as if the figures should be seeing for themselves--disappear when the figures begin to 'see' for themselves. The dynamics of sight have changed at the end of the novel, with the characters taking responsibility for their visual activity: Coyote's voice cries out at the end of the novel, but he no longer retains "visual control" over the narrative.

Thus, The Double Hook works, on one level, as an exemplification of minimalist spectatorship, or as a parable of the virtues of minimalist spectatorship addressed to the reader. More importantly, the experience of reading The Double Hook involves its own form of minimalist spectatorship. Minimalist paintings, as mentioned, are not "peered into" but rather "confronted" (Colpitt 72). I think it is fair to argue that the reader is also

'confronted' by Watson's text. We are not drawn into the text through empathy, but, as readers, we remain emotionally distant from these figures and the narrative. The text agitates; the reader is clearly not a passive participant in the experience. Indeed, the language of confrontation is used by many critics to describe their relationship to The Double Hook. George Bowering even suggests that the reader is "made aware of almost a kind of threat" (211).

For George Bowering, even the physical appearance of the text is austere; the reader is "presented with these pages given to an unusual amount of whiteness" (189). His reading of the novel is akin to notions of minimalist spectatorship:

The action was to be, then, within the shape of the page, indicating that the book is a spatial art, unlike film or music with their passive audiences, more like sculpture or architecture. So the reader stays aware of his own movement, aware that he is not at the end of the line, that he is continually looking at the material from his point of view. (211)

As Bowering points out, there is a constant awareness of the "reader reading" (96). Marta also substantiates Bowering's arguments concerning the 'minimalist' spectatorship of the text: "The reader experiences the book as a process, not simply as a product" (150).

For the reader, this process of spectatorship involves viewing the minimalist work as a "blank or empty stage, an environmental work of art upon whose surface light and shadows were reflected" (Colpitt 30). The significance of shadows and reflections is evident in the text. Angela Bowering acutely describes The Double Hook as a minimalist

canvas which is activated by light and shadows: “A light, deft hand sketches in a few sharp lines of colour on a canvas-like ground that is, for the most part, a flatly lit wrinkled and folded earth-coloured surface across which light and shadow play from time to time” (30). Turner also emphasizes how the reader attends to the shadows that “float through a landscape that is darkened during the day and suffused with light at night” (“Fiction, Break, Silence” 74).

The Double Hook activates the space (for lack of a better word) that surrounds the novel in much the same way that the minimalist canvas (figure) activates the gallery space (ground) in which it is located. In Watson’s case, the linguistic object is surrounded by silence. The relation of object to context is best exemplified by Turner: “*The Double Hook* is an activity of language reflexively moving in on its own energies, moving out from them along channels of liturgy and ritual, floating inside a medium, a surround of silence” (“Fiction, Break, Silence” 66). Minimalist art offers the visual equivalent to Watson’s language/silence dichotomy: these works effectively question the boundaries between absence and presence and implicitly the possibilities of art. Watson continually make us aware of the tensions between language and silence, absence and presence, and how silence (a form of negative space) can itself be activated by language: “Not until this silence is perceived for what it is—a kind of naming—can a language appropriate for speaking of it become possible” (“Fiction, Break, Silence” 66). As Turner points out, the “danger in moving into silence is one that Watson and the novel share: such a radical questioning of the possibility of human language implicates human being and human culture as well” (Imagining Culture 64).

Ultimately, The Double Hook is a metaphor for 'seeing' reality for what it is: glory and fear in tandem. Minimalist spectatorship of the text engages the possibility of meaningful language emerging from a change in the spectator's perspective, both linguistic (clichés) and visual (monochromatic fields). Minimalist art, according to Baker, is a "plea for commitment to values--such as the clear, contemplative vision, the recognition of illusions for what they are, and the love of physical reality for its own sake" (22). Minimalism "aimed to confront people with the cold perceptual facts of art, making them scrape bottom, so to speak, rather than inviting them to immerse themselves comfortably in aesthetic reveries" (Baker 24). This form of spectatorship, as I have tried to argue, is equally applicable to The Double Hook.

### **Minimalism, Metaphoricity, and The Double Hook**

While minimalist strategies and minimalist spectatorship serve as valuable points of entry into The Double Hook, Watson is ultimately asking more of her spectator and of art itself. The text suggests that minimalism's denial of extraformal content ultimately poses a problem for Watson. A number of minimalist artists and critics demonstrated a similar resistance to minimalist art's lack of content and expressed their desire for something 'more' from these works of art. Watson's use of minimalism ultimately reveals that a reinscription of the 'human' into art is essential if art is again to function as 'ritual.'

For the majority of the visual artists, minimalist art was an attempt to rid the surface of the canvas of signs, symbols, allusions, metaphors, representation, and/or

personal expression. The unadorned surface of the work, the artists argued, was the work itself. David Batchelor concisely summarizes the artists' aspirations: "When the surface of the painting is looked at, it is just that: a surface. Not a metaphor of a body or a space within the picture, but an object within the world of other objects" (16). With the advent of minimalism, "the conventional idea of the painting as a transparent screen opening onto an imaginary space" gave way to "the idea of painting as an opaque surface occupying actual space" (Batchelor 17).

As Barbara Rose indicates, there was "no wish to transcend the physical for either the metaphysical or the metaphoric" and the object was, thus, "presumably not supposed to be suggestive of anything other than itself" (291). Resistance, on the part of the artists, to any form of transcendence is partially attributable to the fact that it would have aligned the minimalists with their predecessors, the Abstract Expressionists. Artists also consciously attempted to avoid the possibility of 'subject' in their work by leaving paintings untitled or by titling them numerically, as recourse to language in titling the works invariably resulted in critics attributing subject matter to the works.<sup>7</sup> Rose articulates the 'matter-of-fact' nature of a minimalist work's 'content' or 'subject': "The content, then, if we are to take the work at face value, should be nothing more than the total of the series of assertions that it is this or that shape and takes up so much space and is painted such a color and made of such a material" (281). As Rose astutely points out, the works were "described but not interpreted," and artists' statements with regard to

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<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Watson adopted the numeric 'titling' strategy for sections and episodes of The Double Hook, despite Frederick Salter's suggestions of names for each of the sections (Flahiff 121).

'content,' 'meaning,' or 'intention' were "prominent only in their omission" (281).

This 'literalness' of the American works was a stark "contrast with the 'humanism' of European painting in which the presence of something beyond the painting was always implied within the painting" (Batchelor 17). Yves Klein, the foremost European practitioner of the monochrome, discusses the content of one of his blue monochromes as invariably involving more than a description of the factual, physical attributes that define his 'object.' For Klein, space and colour always point to 'something beyond' the painting:

I had left the visible, physical blue at the door, outside, in the street. The real blue was inside, the blue of the profundity of space, the blue of my kingdom, of our kingdom!...the immaterialisation of blue, the coloured space that cannot be seen but which we impregnate ourselves with.

(Klein 41)

With the exception of Klein and a few other practitioners, minimalism was excessively preoccupied with addressing formal problems--which I would argue they did quite well--at the expense of any 'extraformal' content.

The minimalists' unwillingness to go beyond aesthetic questions led to criticism for the lack of a human(e) element in the works. Harold Rosenberg, whose hostility to minimalism is well documented, indicates that the "exclusion of images or textures likely to stimulate feelings and associations" was "intended to produce a response that is exclusively aesthetic" (303). For Rosenberg, minimalism's novelty did not lie "in its reductionist techniques but in its principled determination to purge painting and sculpture

of any but formal experiences, and even of resonances of experience" (304). Lawrence Alloway supplements Rosenberg's critique of the artists by reprimanding minimalist critics for their "formalistic positivism," which he defined as the "exercise of formal analysis...at the expense of other properties of art" (60). For Alloway, "Formal analysis needs the iconographical and experiential aspects" if it is to be useful (60).

Despite the artists' intentions and certain critics' acceptance of these intentions, the audience and a number of other critics were often unwilling to accept the supposed 'blankness' of the canvas or the physical attributes of a work as the key to its meaning. An empty surface could not do away with the audience's tendency to treat the works metaphorically or to 'see' beyond the literal object or surface as a means of making sense of minimalist works.<sup>8</sup> Although Rose is able to articulate the 'desired responses' to the artists' works with precision, her own interpretation of the work actually makes reference to expressiveness: "I have often thought one had a sense of loss looking at these big, blank, empty things, so anxious to cloak their identity that they were masquerading as objects. Perhaps, what one senses is that...the hollow, barrenness of the void has a certain poignant, if strangled, expressiveness" (281-282).

Nicolas Calas argues in fact that a "Minimal Art statement need not be minimal in terms of subject matter" (109). Significant minimalist artists, agreeing with Calas's statement, acknowledged the spiritual dimension of their work. Agnes Martin, for instance, describes her work as "emanating a light that dematerializes the surface,

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<sup>8</sup> Other minimalist critics, such as E.C. Goossen, attributed this desire for meaning to what he calls "the romantic prejudice" which "seeks everywhere to find 'subject matter'" (167).

creating an immaterial, ethereal--spiritual--aura" (qtd. in McEvilley 95). Brice Marden articulates the spiritual significance of his geometry: "The rectangle, the plane, the structure, the picture are but sounding boards for the spirit" (qtd. in McEvilley 95). As artists sanctioned a metaphysical vocabulary for discussing their works, certain critics started to follow suit. William Seitz, speaking of Jo Baer's paintings, argued that "it is easy to associate these large paintings with religious and mystical states. The contemplation of nothingness, which they invite while retaining their identity, quickly goes beyond purely visual sensation" (qtd. in Plous 80).

Christianity, as opposed to abstract spirituality, was invoked in the context of Barnett Newman's work, especially the "Stations of the Cross" series of paintings. In tandem with the overt referentiality of the title, it was Newman's own rhetoric that led critics to interpret the work as essentially Christian. Calas does however warn that "Perhaps Barnett Newman's poetic dissertation on the theme could be dismissed, since he freely acknowledges the relation of his works to the Passion of the Cross occurred to him only after he had started painting the Fourth in this series" (110). On the other hand, Newman's process of discovery does reinforce the notion that minimalist spectatorship (in this case involving the artist and his own work) also involves metaphoric (even mystical or religious) potential in the minimalist work or in the process of spectatorship.

For Watson, minimalist concerns with 'content' naturally become questions of how absence and presence take on metaphorical and symbolic significance in the novel. Watson's monochromatic planes of darkness and light must ultimately be recognized as metaphors by the figures in the text; the physical absence, or blank space, that confronts



these figures must be conceived of as metaphysical. Altieri also suggests that Frank Stella's, and implicitly minimalism's (as Stella is considered the quintessential minimalist painter), resistance to metaphor and mysticism need not necessarily be taken at face value:

But even here, accepting a language of pure presence for the work exacts a substantial price, which I do not think we need to pay. If we treat their work as autonomous, in its self-enclosed presence, we also make it vulnerable to claims that it is only beautiful or only optical. (486)

Watson, I would argue, is unwilling to pay this price. Watson's reading of minimalism as more than 'only optical' is closely aligned with this small camp of critics who are willing to argue that these works possess 'subject' or 'content,' and metaphoric or metaphysical potential. Watson makes us aware of the fact that metaphors reintroduce the human dimension into art and spectatorship; with metaphoric resonance, art becomes more than a purely formal or aesthetic experience.

Watson attests to the powers of language and its speakers: identification of these powers enables the figures to transcend minimalism and return to ideas of content and expression. Once the figures and the readers recognize the metaphoric significance of their surroundings, reduction (and minimalism) ultimately becomes redundant. For metaphoricity, broadly conceived of, is both an epistemological tool and/or spiritual force; simultaneously, it orders the universe (physical, textual, critical). In Watson's language, metaphors are necessary to clarify the relationship between figure and ground, and between spectator and art; metaphors help shape the rituals that bind figures

together.

Watson's awareness of the limitations of minimalism—the danger of art that posits reduction as its ultimate goal—surfaces in her earlier work as well. “The Black Farm” illustrates the insufficiencies of an art form, like minimalism, that resists metaphoricity and the human element in art. As this short story reveals, the minimalist “world without fragmentation, a world of seamless unity”—art which denies metaphor and the human dimension—is severely limiting (Colpitt 135). Puss describes Daedalus's (and the minimalists') attempts “to persuade the world that he's made it jab-proof and hole-proof and scratch-proof, that it's crunch resistant and head-resistant and stainless” (“The Black Farm” 24). Daedalus exemplifies minimalist “attempts to reject all colours, all impurities, all paradoxes, all complexities, [by] reducing his world to a perfect black, the absence of colour” (Scobie 274).

In his quest for purity, his attempts not to let anything creep into the world of the monochrome, Daedalus “ignores lemon juice and the Siamese cat. He forgets the catechism and original sin” (“The Black Farm” 25). Thus, Daedalus's reductive strategies carry a substantial price: he too is preoccupied with ‘formal’ problems at the expense of ‘extraformal’ content. Indeed, life and its imperfections are denied a place in his art. As Scobie correctly asserts, the “later novelist would say that Daedalus had fallen victim to Coyote” (274).

In this short story, Watson suggests that reduction is a dangerous end in itself, but that it makes one acutely aware of what is missing in both life and art. Daedalus, at the end of the story, concludes that “All black is white. There are no eternal verities” (“The

Black Farm” 40). Watson has Daedalus realize “that at the level of the absolute there is only impurity, paradox, complexity and white—the presence of all colours” (Scobie 274).<sup>9</sup> The presence of all colours offers Daedalus the opportunity to move beyond reduction to a more ‘colourful’ and human world..

Thus, in The Double Hook, as in “The Black Farm,” minimalism serves as a necessary decreative gesture, or as an “enabling act,” that makes the reader aware of the necessity of imaginative and metaphorical language.<sup>10</sup> With the figures’ recognition of the powers of metaphoricity, absence can become presence. In The Double Hook, Turner speaks of the figures initially being “threatened with annihilation in this space where words mean nothing because they do not mean more than they say” (Imagining Culture 74). As Watson suggests, more is required of minimalist spectatorship than Frank Stella’s thoroughly factual “What you see is what you see” (qtd. in Glaser 158).

The necessity of metaphor becomes readily apparent when readers and figures realize that factual responses to the community’s predicament prove insufficient. At the onset of The Double Hook, “Speech in any register other than the mundane and the concrete has stopped. The sense of the metaphorical is inaccessible; the sense of loss is acute” (Turner, Imagining Culture 71). Conversations among figures in the novel are only concerned with the formal, rather than extraformal, content of the space they occupy: “When they spoke they spoke of hammers and buckles, of water for washing, of

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<sup>9</sup> Toby Mussman also speaks of the monochrome and the monotone as ‘potential’ or as a beginning: “White, of course, is the one color carrying in it the potential for all other colors, just as the use of programmed sound by John Cage in his ten-minute piece of silent music carries in it the potential for any sound” (246).

<sup>10</sup> Robert Kroetsch views “the text not as artifact but as enabling act. Not meaning but the possibility of meaning” (208).

rotted posts, of ringbone and distemper” (43).

The reader realizes that, without metaphors, the figures will inevitably remain in the state of insensibility that Watson views as dangerous. While the other figures lived waiting, “suspended in silence” (43), Theophil only “played patience” (58). In contrast to the views held of him by other figures, Coyote represents an empirical entity for Theophil: “There’s no big Coyote, like you think. There’s not just one of him. He’s everywhere. The government’s got his number too. They’ve set a bounty on him at fifty cents a brush. I could live well at his expense” (57). “In naming the coyote rather than the Coyote,” Turner argues, “Theophil shows that he does not inhabit the new world of imagination and metaphor” (Imagining Culture 74). Given his resistance to metaphor, Theophil “remains isolated, obstinately *outside* the community” (Scobie 307).

William also attempts to provide ‘factual’ answers to questions the other figures ask him in the text. His answers, however, fall short: “William would try to explain, but he couldn’t” (20). He creates wonderful metaphors, only he is blind to the metaphoric implications of his own statements: “he makes no attempt to transcend his limited, factual experience in order to deal with them” (Downton 140). William does not “recognize that his description of the landscape is an analogue for the spiritual condition of the community, nor that the ‘great cow’ he describes, failing to protect her young from the elements, suggests Mrs. Potter, who is the matriarch of the community without providing for it a moral centre” (Downton 140-141).

For the reader, however, William’s blindness becomes insight: metaphoricity is required to “transform this space of nothingness and absence, with as much significance

as an apron carelessly dropped wrinkled like the earth on the bare floor of the world, to a meaningful place filled with a powerful presence where reduction on all levels is no longer demanded” (Turner, Imagining Culture 74). The reader realizes that “if the metaphoric nature of the text’s language is not recognized, roads will continue to run from this to that, hills fall off to nowhere, and water rise in drought to kill” (Turner, Imagining Culture 69).

The figures gradually move to an awareness of the limitations of reductive factual responses and silence. When the figures begin to relate the experiencing self to the absence, to locate themselves metaphorically on the monochromatic planes, language can become more meaningful to them. A recognition of their own participation in creating this absence through silence and meaningless communication also makes the figures conscious that they are able, through metaphor and language, to create presence.

At the end of the novel James thinks of “nothing but blank smouldering space” (131). But here the empty space is charged with meaning; James is aware of the present and future potential of the space: “In his mind now he could see only the seared and smouldering earth, the bare hot cinder of a still unpeopled world” (131). Ara’s vision is also important in this context. Although it remains just a vision, it engages the possibility of moving beyond minimalism and populating the physical starkness of the landscape: “Now her tired eyes saw water issuing from under the burned threshold. Welling up and flowing down to fill the dry creek. Until dry lips drank. Until the trees stood knee deep in water” (114). Ara, with a recently discovered awareness of the metaphoric potential of language, is able to envision movement (fishes), growth (trees), flow (water). Ara

imagines how the initial stasis, silence, and absence that haunted the community can be replaced by presence.

Thus, Watson addresses the ambivalence of the various artists and critics toward minimalist works and insists that the metaphoric nature of these works be recognized. In the novel, renewal and 'ritual' are possibilities that hinge on an awareness of metaphoricity. Absence points to the necessity of presence: with a recognition of this need, artists, and figures in the novel, can discover new ways of reintroducing life into the "blank smouldering space" (131). Watson's use of reductive strategies illustrates the necessity of an enlarged human presence in art; this presence, in turn, enables art to function as ritual.

### **Conclusion**

Minimalism's location on the modernism/postmodernism continuum continues to be actively debated. Although it currently appears that the balance of critical positions favours the interpretation of minimalism as modernist (in its method and in its aspirations), critics are still divided on this issue. Central to this debate is the issue of whether minimalism is to be read as a continuation of Greenberg's formalist project and thereby implicitly adhering to modernist aspirations. Craig Owens and Hal Foster argue that minimalism was an early manifestation of postmodernism, or, at the very least, critical to the formulation of the postmodernist position (Colpitt 134); others, including Peter Schjeldahl, situate minimalism at the end of modernist idealism (Colpitt 134). Robert Morris suggests that minimalism holds some intermediary ground between

modernism and postmodernism. With the shift from “phenomenological to linguistic concerns,” he argues, minimalism had “a foot in both camps as it simultaneously opened onto the body from the side of appearance and onto language from the side of theory” (344).

Situating The Double Hook on this modernism/postmodernism continuum is also a contentious issue among critics of the novel. Glenn Willmott, for instance, concisely argues both the modernist and postmodernist interpretations of the novel. The Double Hook can be read either as a modernist, mythopoeic romance with conservative values or as a postmodernist deconstructive comedy with radical values (Willmott 45). Willmott effectively links the reader’s interpretation of Coyote to this debate: the modernist approach treats Coyote negatively, whereas the postmodernist interpretation considers the figure to be a positive force (45).

Scobie similarly presents both the modernist and postmodernist interpretations of the text. On one hand, he argues, the text “displays, in its individual way, many of the characteristics of modernism. Its theme is essentially conservative--the need for social traditions and religious rituals as the means by which moral value may be given to community life--while its form is experimental” (263).<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, he considers Watson to have “anticipated much of what we are forced to call, for want of a better word, post-modernism” (269). As Scobie indicates, the “traditional elements in Watson’s vision, such as her Roman Catholicism, or her scholarly devotion to Wyndham

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<sup>11</sup> Willmott, however, argues that “the conservative interpretation ignores the violence and inadequacy of represented traditional social forms to bring about the *communitas* which is the supposed *telos* of *The Double Hook*” (45).

Lewis, T.S. Eliot, and the writings of 'high modernism,' have to be balanced on the one hook, against, on the other hook, the 'revolutionary' concern with self-reflexive language poised on the knife-edge of silence" (270). This leads him to the conclusion that

any study of Watson must continually return to the paradoxical nature of her vision, her insistence on combining opposites, on seeing opposites always as existing in necessary correlation. Even this habit of mind itself may be described in modernist terms, as duality, or in post-modernist terms, as duplicity: it is what is summed up, ultimately, in the image of the double hook itself. (270)

Arnold Davidson similarly argues that the reader cannot escape the paradoxical nature of Watson's novel: The Double Hook "perpetually demands and precludes 'other words'—the reader is caught on the double hooks of the text (living/dying, articulation/silence, God/Coyote, meaning/meaninglessness, even, if one wishes, construction/deconstruction)—as firmly at the end as at the beginning" (Coyote Country 73). Minimalism also occupies a perilous position between presence and absence (which might alternatively be defined as the aggregate of Davidson's articulation/silence, meaning/meaninglessness, and construction/deconstruction). One might hypothesize that the text forms a similar balancing act owing to the Watson's inscription of minimalism into her text. 'Other words,' or language, are required of both minimalism and The Double Hook if they are to be defined by presence as opposed to absence. Owens points out that language serves a necessary "compensatory role" for minimalist works as the



artists' writings restore "to the work everything that has been eliminated from it" (125).<sup>12</sup> Artists were propelled toward language "which was either incorporated into the work itself, or deployed in explanation of it, in response to absence at its heart" (Owens 125). Thus, Turner's comments on The Double Hook are pertinent to minimalism as well: "The interdependent association of language and meaning that she insists on is double-hooked: if the presence of language gives meaning to people and place, its absence withdraws the meaning, totally" (Imagining Culture 66).

David Batchelor appropriately brings attention to minimalism's double hooks, many of which are also applicable to The Double Hook. As he argues, the "co-existence of contrary states may be exactly the kind of experience that can be shown in art, but cannot be stated in language without apparent contradiction" (62). Despite minimalism's "apparent simplicity and uniformity," as Batchelor points out, the works are "replete with contrary relations" (62). His list of oppositions includes the "contemporary and archaic," "conceptual simplicity and perceptual complexity," "blandness and beauty," "literalness and resonance," "austerity and sensuousness," "directness and allusion," "singularity and multiplicity," "purity and hybridity," and "the material and the uncanny" (62). Interpreting these pairings as duality or duplicity, modernist or postmodernist, is an issue in minimalism as well.

As Batchelor ultimately suggests, minimalism is "made in the spirit of inquiry: inquiry into the real nature of apparent contradiction; inquiry into the relationship between art and non-art, between painting and sculpture, between the monochrome and

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<sup>12</sup> Colpitt concisely summarizes this point: "Theoretical discourse expanded in proportion to the diminishing amount of interesting formal differentiation" (116).

the readymade, and between the object and institutional space it occupies” (62-63). Inquiry and experiment resulted in an art “which didn’t retreat from the modernity within which it was made, but which turned the materials and methods of modernity to its own ends” (Batchelor 63). At the risk of allying myself with the modernist interpretation of minimalism and the novel, I think the same can ultimately be said of Sheila Watson and The Double Hook.

## Conclusion

The co-existence of expressionist and minimalist strategies in the text might be considered yet another 'double-hook' facing the critic. Although my primary motivation was not to illustrate the paradoxical combining of opposites, the unavoidable conclusion of a 'necessary opposition' between minimalism and expressionism rears its head. A comparison of the attributes (philosophical, imagistic, compositional) of these visual aesthetics--the co-existence of iconic and noniconic abstraction, fragmentation and order, and the narrative and non-narrative forms of visual art--all point to yet another 'double-hook' in the text.

I would, however, argue that it is more valuable to refer to the inscription of both the minimalist and expressionist aesthetics into The Double Hook as a 'collage,' a merger of modernist visual art that transforms the text, as opposed to another 'double hook.' Rather than viewing the text as an oscillation between the extremes of modernist art, the idea of the collage foregrounds a creative synthesis of the visual aesthetics in the text. I would argue that The Double Hook is by no means a work of pure abstraction (either expressionist or minimalist), but rather a hybrid form of abstraction, symbolism, and representational content. Indeed, I think it is valuable to view abstraction and more concrete representation in The Double Hook, not as opposites, but as elements of the text that reinforce each other.

Barbara Godard, as mentioned previously, appeals to the idea of the painter's collage as a point of entry into The Double Hook. Her application of the term 'collage'

refers, however, not to visual art but to “Watson’s layering of different cultural patterns of narrative and language” (164). For Godard, this synthesis is a “collage of dead languages that, in this new context, have been given fresh meaning” (168). I think that one could broaden Godard’s definition of language, both oral and written, to include the language(s) of painting. Watson’s inscription of the two visual aesthetics into her text aims to revitalize the energies of painterly languages; it illustrates how visual aesthetics in the context of a literary work, and thus in language, can be given fresh meaning. For, as Godard correctly points out, Watson’s text emphasizes the transformation of language and the transformative powers of language (168). As I have argued, the transformation of the languages of painting and the transformative powers of visual arts are equally important to Watson’s project.

Whereas Godard considers Watson’s novel an attempt “to free language from the burden of the past,” I would argue that Watson, rather than treat the past as a burden, effectively modifies the language of the past (and, implicitly, tradition) into significant forms. In The Double Hook, Watson sifts through earlier modernist experiments (visual and literary) in an attempt to extract their valuable cores, to revitalize the energies of these visual aesthetics, and, thereby, to both reinforce the value of tradition and ‘make it new.’ Watson’s text actively engages these painterly languages of the past in an effort to reveal that a critical understanding of tradition is necessary to a revitalization of the contemporary (language, society, culture).

Watson’s construction of the novel as a collage of visual aesthetics can be linked to the fact that an author cannot sustain the energies of noniconic painting in a

representational art form such as the novel.<sup>1</sup> Noniconic abstraction, pursued at the expense of representational or iconic content, severely limits an author's use of language. As Altieri points out, "If abstraction need not reject all uses of representational imagery, its devices become available for a wide range of linguistic effects" (45). Minimalism on its own could not sustain the novel: the limitations it places on language, referentiality, and narrative would have inhibited Watson's undertaking in language.

The limitations manifest themselves most clearly in the fact that the formation (or re-establishment) of community, so central to Watson's purpose, necessarily involves narrative and the representational form of the novel. Rituals, as the organization of community, are complex constructs that cannot be exemplified by noniconic abstraction. A fictitious world, or what Scobie would call the "scale of human beings living in society," and therefore the novel, is required by Watson to exemplify the notion of community formation (287). Minimalism and expressionism serve as important factors involved in the construction of community by revealing the problems of this process and also by signifying what is at stake in the activity. Yet, they are not in and of themselves capable of 'illustrating' Watson's conception of community formation on their own.

Thus, the juxtaposition of the two aesthetics helps us to understand The Double Hook as a meta-artistic gesture: how the text itself calls into question the shape of art, to use Watson's terminology, if it is to be instrumental in the organization of society. Watson, as mentioned, employs minimalism and expressionism to illustrate the

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<sup>1</sup> According to Altieri, "abstraction pursued at the price of concrete figuration seemed the least effective way to grapple with their [the modernist poets'] own marginalization" (257).

boundaries of this activity. One might recast this tension between the two art forms as the struggle between lucidity and lyricism. Indeed, Altieri considers modernism as a whole as an attempt to locate meaningful forms of lyricism in a culture that is itself hostile to lyricism.<sup>2</sup> Altieri links lucidity to empiricism and to third person claims of objectivity; lyricism, on the other hand, is characterized by first person claims to subjectivity (62). Whereas minimalism readily adopted the language of empiricism and clearly rejected lyrical aims, expressionism embraced lyricism at the expense of lucidity. The Double Hook points its reader to the dangers of either extreme. Watson's inscription of the two aesthetics into the novel suggests that she is well aware of the "fundamental tension between the claims of lucidity and the claims of lyricism—each posed as an absolute, yet each desperately needing some complement, if it is to avoid severe self-contradiction" (Altieri 62). Thus, Watson's text exemplifies the difficulties, and at the same time the necessity, of reconciling lyricism and lucidity in art.

The complex inscription of these two extremes of visual modernism into the text makes it clear that meaningful forms of art lie somewhere between these extremes of professed objectivity and subjectivity. On the one hand, the complete lack of gesture, the omission of the human element, and reductive strategies of minimalism are problematic for Watson. The rigid formalism at the expense of extraformal content is insufficient for Watson: a degree of referentiality (to something beyond the work itself) is required of art if it is to be a useful tool. On the other hand, lyricism, when it becomes self-indulgence

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<sup>2</sup> One of the fundamental concerns of modernism was the attempt to preserve "publicly significant the values in romance, or in the states made available by the lyric imagination, within a culture that grants intellectual authority only to a range of Enlightenment models developed as antagonists to all romance ideals" (Altieri 61).

on behalf of the individual artist, is equally problematic: art must refer to more than the tormented psyche of the artist (as is often the case in expressionist painting and literature).

Watson's interpretations and manipulations of expressionism and minimalism allow the two to work in conjunction with one another: the reader circles from expressionism to minimalism and back again, as the text makes the reader aware of Watson's constant search for balance and questioning of what is involved in community formation and cultural production. The text does not serve the ends of either the minimalist or expressionist aesthetic, a fact that is underscored by Watson's active stance in transforming these visual aesthetics. Both aesthetics appear vital to an understanding of what the text proposes without standing in necessary opposition to each other.

Coexistence is, therefore, a crucial term to a critical reading of the text which aims to resist 'totalization.' Visual aesthetics are, of course, only aspects of the modernism that fascinated and influenced Sheila Watson. Despite the significant impact of visual modernism on the novel, it nevertheless cannot account for many other 'essential' elements of The Double Hook. To read the novel solely as a response to visual modernism negates the vitality of other aspects of the Watson's novel and other valuable critical interpretations of the text that are not concerned with the painterly vocabulary.

The interartistic critic must always return to the fact that even "if we miss or distort what would engage painters, we might well be following precisely the tracks that

fascinated those whose business is words” (Altieri 9). The object we are contemplating is a form in language, and what “poets learn from visual artists is usually not what those artists see in one another’s work” (Altieri 9). Therefore, Altieri insists, “critics tempted to draw analogies between the verbal and visual arts need to be rather bold in their speculations” (9).

Indeed, any appeal to the convergence of the visual arts and a text, in this case The Double Hook, is based on metaphors and always, as Altieri has revealed, involves a degree of speculation. The value of interartistic analogies, however, can be disputed quite easily. Indeed, the metaphoric nature of interartistic criticism is a source of contention for many scholars. As Wendy Steiner indicates, as long as “the similarity [between painting and literature] is sufficiently striking, the differences can be pushed aside. But when the analogy is explored to the point where the dissimilarities become troublesome, the current formulation of the comparison is usually discredited as a mere ‘metaphoric’ similarity which the progress of thought has revealed as such” (2).

Steiner does however indicate that the “imperfect structural correspondence of painting to literature does not in fact preclude or even severely limit the comparison to the arts” (68). As Steiner points out,

What it does permit is an ever changing set of correlations by painters and writers, who are free to stress different elements of the structures of their arts in order to achieve this correspondence. An interartistic parallel thus is not dictated by the preexistent structures of the arts involved;



instead, it is an exploration of how these two structures can be aligned.

(68)

I would agree with Steiner that the process itself is rich in imaginative potential. Metaphors and analogies offer the critic the creative means to explore all possible relations between painting and literature.

Thus, I would argue that the metaphoricity so important to The Double Hook has a parallel in the interpretive activity. The critic's search for valid and imaginative metaphors between visual aesthetic and verbal text mirrors the figures' search for appropriate metaphors to describe their relation to the 'ground.' Interartistic comparisons, as Steiner notes, need to be subjected to the same process of renewal by critics as is warranted of the figures in the novel: "there can be no consensus about whether and how the two arts resemble each other, but only a growth in our awareness of the process of comparing them, of metaphoric generation and regeneration" (2). The interartistic critic, I would argue, resides on the same soft ground as the figures in the text.

The Double Hook has offered me an opportunity to explore this process of metaphoric generation in depth. Interartistic comparisons of expressionism and minimalism with Watson's novel allowed me to participate in an imaginative engagement with the larger modernist project and the various ways modernist artists have grappled with cultural formation. Indeed, Watson's novel attests to the powers of modernist experimentation in both language and the visual arts.

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